The Author of Fate

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Summary

AU RedQueen - Years after the events covered in "The Price of Destiny", fate conspires to lead Ruby back to the Enchanted Forest where she will learn more about her origins than she could have ever dreamed. Regina will also face a test of her own in keeping her family safe and sound through a series of revelations that threaten to tear their worlds apart. Everything is about to change. But will it be for the better?

Notes

Unless otherwise stated, all chapters beta'd by the magnificent UnfairestOfThemAll
Sometime Before the Breaking of the Dark Curse

Thomas Hatter wearily swiped at the sweat dotting his brow. Shuffling through the dense underbrush of Darkling Woods was no easy task and his journey had been long. He came to this realm flush with victory having procured the last item on his list: the heart of a Vile Harpy from Olympus. The quest was not without difficulty.

Olympus was a heavily guarded realm, its defenses only surpassed by those of Asgard, the most technologically advanced of the Nine Realms that made up their intergalactic planetary system. To any other procurer of rare goods the task would be nigh on impossible, but Thomas prided himself on stealth and subtlety and he had the benefit of employing many agents over many worlds who knew secret entryways to places mere mortals were prohibited from even approaching. The Strophades Islands were one such place.

Protected by the powerful goddess Iris, the island was a sanctuary to the wild elements of the wind. There, magic permeated every rock and every blade of grass, making for a treacherous place to journey. Were Thomas not constrained by an unbreakable contract of both duty and loyalty, he would rather preferred to avoid it. Seeing as how there were no alternatives for procuring a suitable heart and that he alone had been entrusted with the vital task, there was no choice to be made. He would not let the Master down.

It took a week to secure passage on a ship that was willing to anchor close enough to the island so that the last leg of the journey could be made upon a small dinghy. After rowing to shore, he'd donned the cloak gifted to him by his powerful benefactor, an item steeped in ancient magic that obscured him from view so long as he moved slowly. Time was of the essence but Thomas liked his
limbs and bowels in their current locations, so he was resigned to emphasizing safety over speed.

Dozens of tribes of harpies inhabited the island, and though a scant few were friendly to deal with most were vicious killers. They roamed the island in packs of three, never alone save in cases where the old or lame were left to fend for themselves, to hunt game and make sport of fighting or racing one another through the skies above. Occasionally the humans native to the planet would venture to the island to trap a specific species of bird whose gold-flecked feathers could be sold for healthy sums. These daring adventurers the harpies abducted, the males to procreate with – as there are no male harpies – and the females to enslave for menial labor. Those that were not fit for duty were slaughtered and eaten by the tribe to great fanfare. Live broiled human was a special delicacy to the most bloodthirsty tribes.

Thomas had not wanted to become another nameless victim, so he stuck to the coasts until he worked his way around to the northwestern edges of the island. Forests of exotic trees and plants dotted that area, providing cover through which to slip undetected past the harpies patrolling the coasts. Once inside the forest proper he knew he was safe. Harpies feared the forest and the savage beasts that lived within it. But Thomas did not fear the shadow. The cloak he had been provided enabled him to waltz through the dense foliage without regard for the things that inhabited the darkness. The Master owned the darkness and had taught Thomas how to utilize it to his own benefit.

The purpose of eluding the coastal harpies was to reach the heart of the island where the Temple of Isis was located. A grand building of white marble, it sat atop the highest peak of Mount Kerykeion which sat dead-center of the island, and it was frequented by the only tribe of harpies friendly to humans: the Stoutheart tribe. He had acquaintances among them who were expecting him, so he made his way there as efficiently as he could.

Once he reached the base of the mountain, his contact was waiting for him as arranged. Her name was Alieda and she was a specimen of immense beauty whose body was covered by a thin coat of downy white hair crested in blue about the shoulders.

Harpies were more humanoid than most mythologies depicted, though the tales were accurate to describe them as having birdlike feathers and wings. Their hands and feet were more human than bird, however, having fingers with opposable thumbs and toes, ten a piece just like humans except for the sharp talon-like nails at the tips. Also, they had hair rather than feathers on their head, though it was never of a color typically found in humans, for each tribe had a different color associated with it.

The face of a harpy was almost entirely human, although covered with a very fine hair that grew in patterns of distinct and intricate swirls and lines of colors appropriate to their tribe. Most harpies were exquisitely beautiful, which they used to great effect to entice human males away from their trapping groups. The allure of their melodic voices and exquisite curves was too much for any ordinary man.
to resist. Once in the harpy's clutches, the man would be used to sate their primal urges only to be killed and ritually consumed afterward.

For that reason, Thomas did not trust the species as a whole, even the friendly tribes that lived along the slopes of Mount Kerykeion where the benevolent goddess Iris’ influence was most keenly felt. Alieda, however, he did trust, but only because he had previously adventured with her to great satisfaction and learned her to be as reliable as she was kind. In many ways, Alieda was a better person than him, which Thomas took no shame in, as he was content with his choices in life and was far too hardened to feel such things anymore. His brother Jefferson was the only sentimental fool left in the family. Knowing that about Alieda served as reassurance that she was a dependable ally, though, which made the belief worth noting.

It was without second thought, then that Thomas allowed Alieda to lead him up a winding path that circled the mountain like a corkscrew and which ran at least ten miles in length. Nearly eight miles up, Alieda veered off the path into a secluded cavern whose entrance was neatly tucked into a crevice just below the northern slopes of the crest. Having escorted him deep within her den, she revealed the prize with little fanfare: a Vile Harpy, instantly recognizable by the inky black feathers decorated by dark purple cresting around her breasts. To his surprise, she was in chains and unconscious, ready to be divested of her heart.

Without prelude, Alieda handed him her knife and smiled. “For you,” she'd said, her voice airy like a nightingale’s heavenly ballad.

Thomas had been very confused. He'd thought the deal was she would lead him safely to the boundaries of the Vileheart tribe, from whence he would commence his work. He'd looked over at her with a furled brow to see her smiling beatifically.

“I don’t understand,” he said, then scratched at his itchy stubble. He was well past due for a shave. “This wasn't part of our deal.”

“No, it was not.” She brushed her shoulder against him, a strange look in her eyes. “I wish to amend the deal more to my liking. To that end, I’ve sweetened the pot.”

Thomas frowned deeply. Shrewd negotiation was not his forte. His area of expertise was more in the acquiring of things than the settling of terms determining where said things wound up going after he handed them off.

“How so?”
Alieda gestured toward the unresponsive harpy. “This one is quite a catch. She is the eldest daughter of the Chieftess Lemaria.”

That raised Thomas’ eyebrows. “Won’t such an act spark a war? I imagine this Lemaria won’t fancy her daughter's heart being cut out.”

“Quite so,” Alieda laughed, a trilling sound that was not at all unpleasant to his ears. “But no, there will be no war. She will be expecting retribution for having broken the sacred laws. She murdered a prominent member of our tribe and then consumed our slain sister's newly hatched brood of younglings.”

Making a face, Thomas shook his head. “Sounds like a lovely lady. I'm glad I have yet to make her acquaintance.”

“As you should be,” said Alieda, again eyeing him strangely. “She would no doubt enslave you many years to expand her own line.” She then leaned in and then gnashed her sharp teeth together, “And then eat you alive after she...milked you dry.” As Thomas’ eyes widened, Alieda laughed at him.

Long used to Alieda’s capricious nature, he ignoring her mirth at his expense. “That would have been most unpleasant,” he said, then grimaced at the thought of being drained in more ways than one.

“Quite so.” Again Alieda brushed her shoulder against his as she stepped in front of him. “Fortunately my offer is much more generous and much more...enjoyable.”

Thomas felt his face flush at her suggestive tone. “And what offer is that?” He didn't have to ask to know what she was going to say, but as a man of at least some honor he felt responsible for having the particulars laid out plainly.

Gazing warmly at him with her large blue eyes, she tugged at her bottom lip revealing a glimpse of perfectly white teeth, two of which were elongated fangs. She then glanced back toward the prisoner.

“In exchange for her heart, I would have you lie with me. I have delayed producing heirs long enough and I am now in season.” Shifting a bit, she ducked her head and he could tell by the way
her soft facial hair ruffled and shimmered that she was blushing. Looking at him through her lashes, she added, “And I am awfully fond of you, Thomas. You are the most interesting human I’ve ever met. And while I am aware that this may be the last time you visit our isle, I would have something to remember you by if you are amenable. Besides, I believe that you would father strong daughters for me – strong enough to perhaps promote me beyond my peers in the eyes of Iris. Who knows, should you return, you may even find me to be Chieftess of the Stoutheart clan.”

Thomas made no reply at first, merely stood dumbstruck like a foolish boy just turned of age who’d been tossed in front of his first whore without a manual to figure out how such things work. Alieda frowned at his perceived lack of interest.

“I was under the impression you fancied me as I do you,” she said, sounding hurt. “Is it really so awful a suggestion to mate with me?”

Thomas shrugged as if disaffected when in truth he cared for Alieda and would otherwise have granted her wish without question had equal measures of fear and respect of the Master not so long dominated his life. Affection was not a trait fancied by the Master nor was it to be indulged in by his servants outside of their unquestioning loyalty to him. There was no time for romance when one was helping to conquer not just a planet but an entire system of them.

What, Thomas wondered, would the Master do should he discover the care that had fermented between his most trusted servant and a being of a species held almost universally in low regard. According to the ancient sorcerer, Harpies were little more than ravenous savages whose voracious appetites for betrayal and carnage made them unfit for service. That opinion was not unique, which was why he had believed the same until he met Alieda and other members of her tribe.

The Stoutheart clan were honorable creatures, which Thomas found ironic seeing as how they trusted him, a man lacking almost all virtue. Yet Alieda and her kin saw past the cold pragmatism he practiced to the tiny sliver of humanity that remained inside his heart. They treated him with dignity and respect, and he both admired and loathed them for it. Feeling any kind of sympathy or affection was dangerous in his line of work.

“I don’t deny that I care for you,” he said but made no attempt to further expound upon his complicated feelings.

Alieda shuffled forward, the lush plumage along her arms glimmering in the firelight. “Why do you deny yourself then?” When still no reply was made, her eyes narrowed in accusation. “Is it because of...him?”
Alieda refused to speak the name of the Master, a practice characteristic of his servants, only her motivation was less of obedience than of distaste. Thomas did not approve of her opinion of his sovereign lord but he had stopped trying to correct her. In his experience women of any species were intractable once their minds were set and this one was too stubborn for her own good.

Sighing, Alieda reached out to grasp Thomas’ hand. He allowed their fingers to tangle together, enjoying the juxtaposition of his tanned skin and her own stark white, incredibly fine hair. The smooth softness of the hair covering her body never ceased to amaze him. It was much more pleasant to the touch than he’d ever imagined, different in texture than skin but not at all in a bad way.

“Take what you want for once, Thomas,” Alieda then said, stepping up until her prominently feminine frame was flush with his. Her eyes held an almost pleading quality as dangerously sharp teeth nibbled at a plump and entirely too kissable lower lip. “He has enough of you already. Let me have this one piece for myself. Let us have this moment. Please.”

Unable to hold himself back anymore, Thomas gave in to long-suppressed desires. Surging forward, he grasped at her face with both hands and plunged their lips together. A low moan rumbled through Alieda’s throat when he shifted the angle, her lips parting to allow him better access to her mouth. She tasted of wild honey and sweet strawberries.

As they kissed, Alieda worked at Thomas’ clothes and maneuvered them toward her carefully arranged nest of densely packed straw and feathers. By the time she had pushed him down onto it, he was bared to her, looking up to hungry blue eyes and kiss-swollen lips. No time after that was wasted on talk and that there was a captive if not conscious audience only made the experience all the more intense.

And that is how Thomas came to procure the heart. All in all, it was not only a successful quest, but a very enjoyable one as well, just as Alieda had promised it would be. If he lived to see the Master’s plan fulfilled, he would make sure to visit her once again, if only to witness her rise to power. She was a natural leader and as clever a tactician and strategist as he knew. He believed her to be worthy of such elevation. But for the present he was consumed by compulsion to fulfill the will of his all powerful benefactor.

After trudging another hour through the dense Albion forest, he at last reached the predesignated location, and there found his master waiting.

“Do you have it?” the Master asked, his face concealed by his hood. His voice was gravelly, deep, and lacked any discernible emotion.
Digging around in his pouch, Thomas procured the vessel containing the heart and presented it with a flourish. “As you requested, my Lord. The heart of a Vileheart harpy. Quite an extraordinary one, I might add. It belonged to the eldest daughter of their Chieftess.”

The Master smiled as he eyed the heart through the glass of the container. To any other it would have been a menacing look with the way his eyes darkened, but to Thomas the expression was welcome, for it meant the Master was pleased at his efforts.

“You have done well, my friend,” the Master said as he took the vessel. When he opened it, his smile intensified. “Very well.”

“Why the Vileheart?” With the Master in such a good mood, Thomas felt safe enough to risk satiating his curiosity. “There are many other tribes from which procuring a heart would have been more expedient.”

The Master’s smile faded but he did not seem displeased as his brows furrowed ever-so-slightly. “Did your feathered paramour not relate the story of their origin to you?”

Thomas gulped at the Master’s reference to Alieda as his lover. Fear for both himself and her flooded his mind that required great willpower to choke back. Being the Master’s most trusted lieutenant meant he was frequently exposed to fear, so he was able to quickly master his emotions and answer the posed question before the Master was given a reason to anger.

“No, my lord, she did not.”

As the Master glanced down to further study his prize, he began to relate a fascinating story that made Thomas forget all about his concerns regarding his dalliance with Alieda.

“It is very interesting tale,” the Master said. “Long ago, the Vileheart were not so vile at all. They were then the most beautiful and kindhearted of all harpies, known as the Goldenwing Tribe for their brilliant plumage. They alone were permitted into the Temple of Iris to bask in the glory of the goddess.

“But one day while their Chieftess and a cadre of attendants and priestesses were journeying to the mountain, they were waylaid by a rival tribe. You see, the Goldenwing did not indulge in the martial arts, for theirs was a way of peace. They stood no chance against a foe practiced in warfare. With no way to defend themselves, they were slain to the last.
“Overcome by sorrow and a desire for vengeance, the Chieftess’ eldest daughter besought Iris to intervene, but the goddess refused. Revenge, Iris claimed, was not the way to assuage grief. Feeling betrayed, the new Chieftess secluded herself and began to consort with dark magicks, calling upon Unis, the sister of Iris and goddess of shadows. One night under the light of a waning moon, Unis revealed herself and struck a bargain with the Chieftess.

“In exchange for the ability and proficiency to wield shadow magicks, the clan was to forever be in her service. The Chieftess, driven to the brink of madness by thoughts of revenge, agreed. But she did not know the true price of her bargain, for shadow magic does not like to be wielded by those not inclined to evil. It warped her mind and her heart, reshaped them into vessels of darkness that were soon filled to overflowing. The Chieftess used these new abilities to slaughter those responsible for the deaths of her mother and her sister, and then went on to burn down villages and sack dens, killing many innocents in the name of justice. Soon, intoxicated by the power she now possessed, her golden feathers turned onyx, and her once noble heart became black as the night.

“Under her influence the whole tribe fell to the shadow. It is this power that the heart yields when utilized in a well-crafted potion. Whatever emotion is strongest in a persons heart will consume them, swallowing them whole until nothing is left of the person that once existed.”

“I see,” Thomas said, understanding the significance of the tribe now. What he didn’t know was the Master’s purpose for the heart. “And what will the heart accomplish?”

The Master’s eyes flashed yellow. “Have you located the girl?”

“Of course, my lord.” Thomas bowed his head before raising his eyes to meet the Master’s penetrating gaze. He had come by that information shortly before departing for Olympus. “She dwells in the cursed realm of Queen Regina. They call it Storybrooke.”

“Excellent!” The Master’s sinister smile returned with a vengeance. “And the boy? The brother of the one she loved?”

Although confused by where all of this was going, Thomas nodded. “Joshua, my lord. He as well inhabits that land.”

“Yes, Joshua,” the Master drawled, appearing inordinately pleased. “Very well. To answer your question, I will use the heart to precipitate events upon which I have waited for a thousand years. And you, my faithful servant, are to play a vital role.”
Thomas basked in praise so rarely bestowed. He knew the events to which the Master was referring and felt privileged beyond compare to be trusted with bringing them to pass.

He bowed his head in respectful obeisance. “I am ever at your command, my Master.”

A large hand was laid upon his shoulder, and Thomas lifted his head to find the Master peering down at him fondly yet gravely.

“These are your instructions, my friend,” said the Master. “Complete them and along with riches more vast than you can comprehend, I will reward you with all the time you require to visit your lover and the daughters she will soon bear you. If it be your wish, I will even grant you permission to dwell with them so long as you remain at my disposal.”

The boon, which was as unexpected as it was incredible, thrilled Thomas so much that he almost burst with gratitude. He only just barely managed to restrain himself as the Master went on.

“When the Dark Curse is broken, you are to infiltrate the land currently occupied by the denizens of Misthaven. Do not concern yourself with the lack of magic there, however, for the Dark One will bring it with him. I know him well. He cannot live without it.”

As Thomas digested the instructions, he watched the Master crush the heart in his hand, grind it to dust, and then withdraw a vial from a pocket hidden within his robes. After removing the cork, he added the dust to the potion within the vial and then replaced the cork before shaking the vial in a circular motion that set the liquid inside swirling. Then he spoke a one word spell, which caused the opaque liquid to flash a variety of brilliant colors, crimson and jade and darkest onyx, until coalescing into a glowing violet.

The Master extended the vial for Thomas to take. “Once you have blended in,” he said as Thomas took the item, “simply slip this potion into the boy’s food or drink. He will fall prey to his rage and seek to exact vengeance on the one who took his brother away from him.”

When the ramifications of the effects suddenly dawned on Thomas, his eyes widened. “But won’t that mean the girl will be in danger? What if he kills her? I thought you needed her.”

Thomas winced at his impertinence. The praise had clearly gone to his head for him to so blithely ignore the Masters’ distaste for any questioning of his motivations. Out of an overly developed sense of self-preservation, he bowed his head slightly as he took the proffered vial, hoping the Master
would not take offense to the slight, however well meaning.

“I do,” the ancient sorcerer said plainly, no hint of anger in his voice, which was a great relief to Thomas. He seen the kinds of punishments the Master was capable of dishing out and wanted no part in experiencing them firsthand. “But I also require her to be strong,” the Master continued. “She must be strong enough to open the prison that contains my beloved or she is useless to me. Before that can happen, she must be tested.”

Thomas’ brows drew in tightly. He was still doubtful concerning this course of action, though he was wise enough to not give it voice. Lenience may have been extended toward him once but he was not about to press his luck.

“Do not fear, my loyal servant,” the Master said, having apparently picked up on Thomas’ doubts. “This course of action has been foreseen. I assure you that my method will produce exactly the results I wish. The girl will die but will then be resurrected more powerful than ever before. Only then will she be fit to accomplish my ends.”

Thomas nodded his acquiescence then tucked the potion into the pocket of his vest. “Your will be done, my Master. I will depart on the morrow.” He tipped his chin down in deference then turned to depart. Before he could even pivot, though, he was halted by the booming voice he had learned to obey out of both bone-deep fear and heart-felt respect.

“There is one last thing,” said the Master, eyes glinting in the low light of the forest. He extended out his hand, and in a swirl of magic silver-rimmed onyx in color, a gem appeared in his hand. Blood red and crescent shaped, the gem emanated an inky sort of energy which seeped out in rolling waves. A wave of the hand over it placed some sort of spell upon it, identifiable only by an aura that encompassed the surface for a split-second before fading from view. “Take this phylactery. It contains a portion of my power from which to draw energy. I have enchanted it to bear your touch without harming you.”

Thomas eyed the phylactery warily, almost afraid to make even the barest contact with an item of such insidious purpose even though he’d been assured of his safety. Fear and respect of his lord prompted him into obedience just the same. He took the phylactery in his hand, breath catching in his lungs as his skin made contact with the glowing container of more power than he could ever dream of possessing. His breath came back at once upon noting that it weighed in his hand as nothing more than an ordinary gemstone. Fears thus relieved, he fetched his pouch from his side to gingerly deposit the phylactery inside.

“Bury it among the wolf dens in this...Storybrooke,” the Master said after Thomas had secured the item for transit. “In indirect contact, it will corrupt the process of reproduction among the animals. They will dwindle to the point the girl will have to return to this land. When she does, I shall be
The pieces of the Master’s plan started to come together in Thomas’ mind, dim but discernible enough for him to understand how this girl named Ruby would be lured into the Master’s clutches. His eyes crinkled with delight at the ingenious plan.

He gave the man to whom he had pledged his life a deep bow. “As you wish, Master.” And then he set off for the city of Camelot. He had business to attend to before venturing to Storybrooke. Smile on his face, he strode into the thick underbrush, comfortably blending into the shadows once more, and slipped off into the darkness.

Some Years Later

Ruby jolted upright with a gasp, startled awake from the throes of an incredibly vivid dream. Chest heaving, she glanced over to find her wife laying on her side on facing the wall, still soundly sleeping. Relief washed through her as she came down from the heart-fluttering anxiety yet lingering from the dream. At least she hadn’t woken Regina.

Of late Regina had been working to finalize plans for upcoming city projects, which meant plenty of stress to go along with the brutally long hours. Ruby understood the importance of her wife’s job, really she did, but the past weeks had put a strain on the household that she was more than ready to be relieved. Currently Regina was hardly ever afforded an hour or two of free time at home before exhaustion set in and she was collapsing in bed immediately after tucking in the kiddos. As a consequence of the limits on her time, she was spending less time with the kids than she ever had in their lifetime, the reasons for which their twin five year olds were not capable of comprehending. And though Ruby tried her best to do so, no amount of reassurance could prevent the girls from missing their Mommy something fierce.

Sophia and Amelia were not the only members of Casa de Mills affected, either – their Mama missed her partner in life just as much. Ruby was generally an upbeat, persistently positive person but it was hard to stay chipper when she was sleeping less and fitfully when she did. The bed felt empty, cold, and uncomfortable without Regina’s presence beside her, without that weight in her arms or laying across her chest that reminded her of everything good and perfect about her life. Stress eating in grotesquely unhealthy amounts wasn’t helping Ruby’s mood, either. It was a good thing she was a werewolf or else she would have gained twenty pounds.

The stress for her came on two fronts: home and work. Keeping up with twin tornadoes named Sophie and Amie was an exercise in amused frustration even when the most awesome tag team partner ever, and on whom she could rely to give her a breather before she pulled her hair out by the roots, was present. But Regina wasn’t there. She was working crazy hours and too tired to be of
much assistance, which meant Ruby often felt as if she was carrying the weight of two parents upon her shoulders. And as if her hectic life at home lately wasn’t bad enough, there was an uptick in crime that had the five employee Sheriff’s station stretched perilously thin. Paperwork was piling up on her desk with each new case, and there was no end in sight to the mountain of it rapidly growing between patrol duty and active investigations with her unable to devote a slew of overtime to get caught up.

Thankfully the mad rush at Town Hall was nearing an end. Soon enough things would settle back to normal and Ruby could hardly wait. She needed Regina now more than ever, even though it made her feel selfish because the kids needed their Mommy just as much if not even moreso. It was just that the bleak situation with the native wolf population of Storybrooke was getting worse, worrying Ruby to the point of distraction on top of all her other responsibilities, and without Regina to anchor her, she felt her tether to composure beginning to fray at the edges.

Of course, there was no question in her mind that Regina would drop everything to help if made aware of the deepening crisis, but Ruby couldn’t bring herself to add that burden onto her wife’s already too-full plate. One overwrought parent was enough. The best thing for them both was for Regina to get through the current hectic situation at work as quickly and efficiently as possible. Paperwork at the station could wait and so could Ruby, even if that meant she had to hold in her almost constant anxiety for her four legged compatriots a while longer. The task was not going to be easy though, especially if she kept having such unsettling dreams.

With her heart rate back down to normal, Ruby laid back against her pillows then immediately shifted to her side so she could snuggle up behind Regina. Careful not to wake her wife, she gently rested her head next to Regina’s on the pillow as she slid her arm around the swell of a shapely hip to secure them more snugly together. The action disturbed Regina enough to elicit a tiny yet totally adorable squeak of protest as she ever-so-slightly readjusted her position. For a moment Ruby held her breath, afraid she’d messed up, but to her relief Regina stilled immediately thereafter. Ruby smiled, completely smitten by what many would consider an insignificant action. To her, though, and to be so bold as to quote The Police, “every little thing she does is magic.”

It was a virtual impossibility for Ruby to not be comfortable when so warm and surrounded so thoroughly by Regina’s grounding scent: coconuts from the lotion rubbed nightly into flawless legs, lavender from body wash and shampoo, and the uniquely tangy yet sweet apple smell of powerful magic. She closed her eyes, safe and secure and happy, and allowed her mind to wander back to the reason she’d been wrenched from blissful repose.

Unlike most of her dreams, she could remember this one with almost perfect clarity. For some unknown reason she found herself back in the Enchanted Forest, though she did not know exactly where. Curled up on a cot within a cozy little cabin she did not recognize, she’d felt a little strange, as if some familiar yet unnamed magic was presently swirling about within her body, creating a pleasant buzzing inside her abdomen. Dismissing the feeling as inconsequential, her eyes wandered over the cabin until halting at the hearth where a low fire was burning. A young man with a thick mop of raven hair was sitting in front of it. Dressed in peasant garb characterized by a blue shirt and
a peculiar red kerchief about his neck, he nonetheless projected an aura of authority that demanded her respect.

“Why aren’t you asleep?” he’d asked without looking back as he poked at the fire with a wrought iron poker.

Although she was taken aback that he had known she was watching him, she responded with a rather undignified snort. “I can’t. I’m too excited.”

She could see his shoulders shake as he chuckled. “That’s to be expected. It’s not every day that you find out you’re going to be a mother for the first time.”

Reaching down to rub her still-flat tummy, she sighed happily. “I didn’t plan this but I’m so glad it happened. I just hope she feels the same way.”

The man leveled a fond smile in her direction as he turned his attention to her, revealing an angular face, full lips, a long sloped nose, and prominent ears. His most remarkable attribute, however, were large, piercing blue eyes that bespoke a life experience incongruous with his apparent youth.

“Don’t you worry, little Eleni,” he said, eyes revealing a somewhat diluted merriment. “She will be thrilled. Of that I’ve no doubt.”

That Ruby didn’t object to being called by a different name in her dream was very weird in retrospect and why her mind chose such that name in particular was equally as mystifying. She was also confused as to the scene being something out of a sprawling, artsy, bucolic period movie – the kind Regina adored but she sort of loathed yet tolerated for the sake of her wife’s happiness. Perhaps, she supposed, her subconscious was prompting strange scenarios to process something she had repressed or was struggling with. If that was the case, she was ignorant of what message it was sending. Whatever the cause of the dream, it certainly seemed real enough, which was worrying on a whole new level.

“How do you know?” she’d then asked, worrying her lip.

“Because of who she was before she met you,” the man said with calm assurance that didn’t seem forced. “She was once a lonely, wretched creature who lived to inflict misery upon others. But you looked beyond the bitter woman she’d become and refused to accept that was all she could be. You saw promise where everyone else saw failure and redemption instead of condemnation even she
believed she deserved. Your kindness thawed her icy heart and your unconditional love inspired her to change. What’s happened to you now is proof of that. After all, this child is the first I know of to have been conceived by True Love.”

Ruby, as this Eleni, had hummed with approval at the explanation before quirking her head to the side. Eyes inquisitive, she posed, “Father...do you still think it wrong that I chose a person touched by the darkness as my mate?”

Ruby thought it shocking that she not only referred to a man who looked her own age as her father – and because she had no clue who her father really way – but at the turn in the conversation, as it resonated with her own choice in a mate. It was an undeniable fact that Regina was touched by darkness and they, too, had conceived with True Love. Perhaps that was the underlying cause of the dream, that it was some sort of rustic interpretation of the way her own daughters came into being. But even if that was true, she still couldn’t make sense of the presence of the yet unnamed man in her dream.

In response to her question, he shook his head before saying, “My misgivings were well founded but ultimately proven wrong. She has a long ways to go yet but I can see that she is trying, and not only for your sake. She truly wants to be a better person. How can I disapprove of her if that is so? Besides, I would be a hypocrite if I held her past against her or judged you for seeing the good in someone who had chose only evil beforehand – not when my own True Love was the most evil witch to ever live.”

Ruby’s imaginary self, this Eleni, had gaped in amazement at the mention of the man’s True Love. And she could clearly recall the quasi-fearful way she’d pressed in on the topic, her curiosity getting the best of her.

Eyes wide, she probed, “You never talk about her, and I stay silent out of respect. But in the spirit of happiness at the joy of this miracle in our lives, would you at least tell me why you never revealed your feelings to her?”

After a deep breath strained by memories that were obviously painful, her ‘father’ answered, “I thought it was impossible dream, really. Before her fall from grace, she was of high birth and I a lowly servant. And while I believe she felt the same, I couldn’t imagine it ever working between us. Our differences seemed insurmountable to an outlook as black and white as mine was at that time. Sadly that attitude wasn’t proven false when I found out she had magic like I did. By then I deemed it too late for anything beyond cordiality to exist between us. Another lamentable decision.”

He paused to wearily rake a hand over his face. “As for after her downfall...well, I felt too guilty to give voice to my feelings because of the role I played in it. But I never stopped loving her, even as I ultimately forced to end her life years later. Knowing what I do now, I hate myself for being such a
coward when I could have helped her harness the abilities that were so frightening to her, that lead her down dark paths best avoided. I could have been a source of guidance for her and taught her to use her magic for good as my own mentor did for me.”

Eyes distant, he inclined his head, lips turning up wistfully at the corners. “Perhaps we even could have had a chance to make a life together if she really did feel the same.” But then his dreamy expression soured and his expression turned regretful. “Had I to do it all over again, I would make many different decisions, my daughter, which is why I did not stop you from seeing Elaine. For even though she stepped into the shadows cast by her sisters, you saw through the evil she wrought in a way I could not to the pain beneath it which concealed a vast capacity for goodness.”

“Only thanks to you,” she had countered, feeling as sure of that point as she was the sun rising in the east. “You taught me to see a person as a whole for who they are, not just for what they do. That evil is not born but made.”

A tender expression overtook his features, his ageless and sagacious blue eyes softening with affection. “And to your credit, you learned it much better than I ever did,” he said as he deposited the poker next to the hearth and then stood. As he made his way over to the bed where she lay, he added, “I’m so proud of you for that. I should tell you more often.”

Heart full to bursting with love for her ‘father’, she reached out her hand. When he took it, she grasped onto his hand tightly. But just as she was about to say something else, someone burst through the front door.

Out of breath, face reddened through either exertion or cold (Ruby could see through the opening that it was snowing outside), the man looked at her and then her ‘father’ with such sorrow that her chest immediately constricted.

“Leon?” Black eye brows raised as her ‘father’ greeted the intruder. “What’s happened?”

Leon winced visibly, crestfallen and wary. “It’s Elaine,” he replied. “Something terrible has happened. We’ve taken her to the Physician’s chambers within the castle.”

In a panic, Ruby – or Eleni or whoever the hell the dream version of herself really was – sprung from the bed heedless of her condition and quickly threw on a thick hooded cloak that looked suspiciously like her famous red one. Against the explicit wishes of her ‘father’, she ventured out into the snow, breaking into a run the second her boots hit the earth. She moved at full tilt toward a picturesque Citadel looming in the near distance, crossing the span with speed that was impossible for a human being, which alerted her that her dream self was also a werewolf. Upon arriving at the Citadel, she
passed through the courtyard with precise movements as if she were intimately familiar with its layout. Once inside the castle itself, she then maneuvered through the maze of hallways and corridors to the Physician’s chambers.

Without bothering to knock she threw the door open and rushed inside only to stop cold at seeing Regina laying abed, her skin sallow, wan, and covered by a thin sheen of sweat. Tremors wracked her frame, which appeared even more tiny than normal under the low candle light. Deep circles were present under her eyes and her jaw was clenched tight, teeth grinding together against some phantom pain that medicine could not alleviate.

Even though Ruby was no healer, she knew the situation was grim. Her heart stopped as her eyes flooded with tears. A scream tore its way through her throat only for her to jerk awake with a strangled cry the second it passed her lips.

“What’s wrong?”

Regina’s voice was husky with sleep, even deeper than normal, and it did much to soothe Ruby’s frazzled nerves. She breathed in slowly and deeply to calm her racing heart, but let the air escape her nostrils in a succinct whoosh. Not wanting to worry Regina, she gave a reassuring rub to the silk covered stomach beneath her hand.

“Nothing’s wrong,” she said as she then tightened the arm around Regina’s waist. “Go back to sleep.” She lifted up to place a kiss to the smooth skin of a bare shoulder before returning her head to the pillow.

Regina hummed appreciatively at the kiss, then said, “You sure?”

“Mnhmm. I’m okay. Just a bad dream.” Ruby was glad Regina couldn’t her face, else those discerning brown eyes would have picked up on the lie.

“You’re not lying to me are you?”

Ruby stiffened in reflex for a microsecond on being called out. Damn the woman’s uncanny perceptiveness. To deflect suspicion, she put on a false humor. “Am I lying? Moi? Your innocent, wholesome wife?”
Regina chuckled in amusement and Ruby was relieved to hear the smile in her voice when she quipped back, “You weren’t all that wholesome a few hours ago.”

Ruby felt a shiver pass through Regina’s body at the memory of their intimate exertions. In response to a flare of heat shooting through her lower abdomen, Ruby pulled Regina closer against her body and nuzzled her nose into silken hair that smelled of spring lavender.

“And aren’t you the lucky beneficiary of it! I don’t seem to recall you being particularly insistent that I stop tanning your cheeks while I took you from behind.” Her tone was cheeky only because Regina was too drowsy from being woke up at the ungodly hour to get mad. Although she probably would have said it anyway because of how happy she was Regina had enough spare energy to make love before all but passing out.

“I’m going to have trouble sitting still tomorrow thanks to you,” Regina shot back, more prideful than annoyed, which was not at all surprising.

There was a purpose for why Ruby abstained from mentioning how Regina could easily remove the marks that were laid on her during their passion. For one, she didn’t want to provoke Regina to do just that when she liked the thought of her gorgeous, sexy, goddess of wife going to work bearing her handiwork about upon her body, hidden by clothing but there just the same. Marking Regina always gave Ruby a thrill. During Wolf’s Time, she often succumbed to the animalistic desires of her alter ego, which resulted in a tendency to bite during sex, sometimes hard enough to draw blood. The first time that happened she’d been scared witless Regina would overreact, but Regina surprised her by confessing that she’d enjoyed it. Now with years together under their belt, Ruby was much more free about expressing aggression in bed and Regina seemed especially appreciative of that aggression when Ruby was three fingers deep inside her working a rhythm more punishing than worshipful. Those orgasms were the ones that usually left Regina either boneless in near-delirium or provoked an equally violent response. Orgasmic violence was yet another shared proclivity that reinforced Ruby’s believe they were perfect for each other. Ruby bit her lip in satisfaction at the thought.

The other reason she didn’t mention Regina vanishing her love marks was her awareness of her wife’s undeclared plan to make a deliberate show at work in the morning of what Tink liked to call “a critical case of the Mayoral Sex Aches.” Being an ultra-competitive person, Regina was exactly the type to gloat about how much better her sex life was than her co-workers, particularly considering she was the working mother of twins. Ruby often got dirty looks when visiting Regina on days the mayor was being particularly obnoxious about rubbing the noses of her peers in their sad, sexless little lives. Reformed she may be, but Regina was still Regina, ever the condescending Queen with a superiority complex. But that was okay, ’cause Ruby liked her that way.

“Aww, I’m sowwy,” Ruby cooed as she nuzzled her nose into the skin at the base of Regina’s neck. “Want me to kiss it better?”
While Regina did not laugh outright, Ruby could feel her body shaking with humor at the poor turn of phrase. Around a muted fit of giggles, she said, “You want to literally kiss my ass?”

A bark of her own laughter escaped Ruby’s lips before she could stop it. She’d said what she did being playful and without thinking, resulting in contracting foot-in-mouth disease. It was a good thing, she thought, that wasn’t a real disease or else she would be the most frequently infected person in Storybrooke. Maybe even the world.

She shook her head, half-embarrassed and half-amused at herself. “I walked right into that one, didn’t I?”

“Head first,” said Regina, giggles having subsided but still sounding supremely amused. “It’s okay, though. I didn’t marry you for your remarkable ability to embarrass yourself.”

Mouth hanging open in mock offense even though Regina couldn’t see it, Ruby responded by firmly swatting Regina’s ass. The unexpected reprisal earned a yelp from Regina, whose rear was obviously still tender from the thorough attention it had received from Ruby’s palm.

“That was for insulting your wife,” she said, a bit cross but used to the insults after years of marriage to the queen of one-liners and put-downs. As a peace offering, she added, “But because I love you...” She trailed off, then immediately began to soothingly rub her Queen’s most famous feature.

Regina sighed in contentment, then after a moment enjoying the easy massage that told Ruby all was forgiven, said, “Ribbing aside, are you sure you’re okay? You normally don’t shout like that after nightmares.”

Regina was right about that. Normally Ruby jolted awake stiff as a board, eyes burning amber with the wolf crawling frenetically underneath her skin. Nightmares were par for the course for her since experiencing a real one up close and personal in a certain basement not very far from her house. This one, while strange, was unremarkable when juxtaposed to instances where she’d relived being electrocuted, having her fingers broken, being shot, hung from the ceiling like a slab of raw beef, stabbed over and over, burned, and whipped in no particular order. Comparatively speaking, the dream she’d had was a cake walk to deal with, so she was mostly unconcerned about how she’d come out of it.

“I’m sure,” she said in reply to Regina. And while she most certainly wasn’t okay, she also wasn’t going to tell Regina that. Best to reassure her worry-wort of a wife so they could both get some rest.
God knew they both needed it.

“Alright, then.” Regina sounded unconvinced but too tired to prod any further, which the loud yawn that followed confirmed. “Let’s get some sleep. The morning comes early.”

Although Ruby was surprised Regina didn’t press the issue, she took the win without question, glad they were on the same wavelength. Another handful of seconds passed during which she continued massaging Regina’s smarting rump, after which she snuggled up even closer so that they were pressed together from head to toes. Her nightmares seemed to plague her most often when she was out of physical contact with Regina while sleeping, and Ruby didn’t want a repeat of the mind-bending vision she’d just had. Besides, any excuse would do, really, if it meant she got to hold her wife in her arms, and she did so love being the big spoon.

After settling in, it took less than a minute for Ruby to succumb to the welcome bliss of repose. This time, she did not wake until morning.

Chapter End Notes

Well, I'm back again with another RedQueen offering! This story has been in production over a year and a half and now that the rough draft is getting very close to 100% complete, it's time to start posting. The hope is to have it posted in its entirety by the end of October this year. To meet that goal I'll be posting one chapter per week on Friday evenings, or if that doesn't work out, Saturday evening.

As for my usual lengthy notes at the end, this will be the longest, I think. I want to let imaginations run wild without providing additional info and explanations for choices made in the narrative through notes. That said, I am happy to discuss these things in the comments section if there is a nagging problem and I welcome any and all rampant speculation as to where this story is going. I have also given consideration to starting some kind of writers blog to post snippets of stuff I'm working on or drabbles that I need to purge from my system. I've even thought about doing something to give insight into the process of writing a story, such as posting early versions of a paragraph then showing how it evolved over time. If I decide to take that plunge, I'll be sure to let everyone know, as I love interacting with readers!

Anyway, I think everyone will be pleasantly surprised by some of the more meaningful developments in this story. I know I was! I went into production with only a base idea and something enormous and far more complicated than I intended sprang to life. There is a very real possibility this story will reach 300k words, something I NEVER EVER WANT TO DO AGAIN! =P

Lastly, I hope everyone enjoyed the prologue. Some very important info dumping and heavy foreshadowing there, so dig in. As always, thanks for reading! See you all next week!
A Dying Pack

Chapter Summary

After a grueling day at work and a Girl's Night out to blow off steam, Regina comes home to a quiet house where, unbeknownst to her at first, Ruby is distraught over a situation beyond her control.

*Edited 3/17/17 to reflect that there are, in fact, no wolves native to Maine*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was nearing one in the morning when Regina sluggishly dragged herself through the front door. Absolute exhaustion seemed steeped into every pore from a combination of another full day of tedious planning sessions with the city council followed by an impulsive round of drinks with Katherine, Ursula, Tinkerbelle, Sherri Khan, and a surprisingly rambunctious Mary Margaret.

Her friends had been on her case of late for a long overdue night on the town, so Regina finally caved and agreed to meet at them at the Rabbit Hole after work. That it just so happened to be Jazz Night was a pleasant bonus that meant there were only two details standing in the way of an otherwise perfectly fun night shooting the breeze with her friends. One was that Ruby was not scheduled to sing for another three weeks because of conflicts with her schedule at the Sheriff’s Station and the second being Maleficent’s absence, who had recently departed Storybrooke with her daughter, Lilly, so they could gallivant together about the wider world outside.

“It was high time for some belated mother-daughter bonding,” Mal had insisted before kissing both of Regina’s cheeks to bid adieu as per their old custom.

They were loitering outside Town Hall at lunch time and the mill of people around them had the air pleasantly buzzing with activity.

“Just try to keep yourself confined to arms and legs.” Regina smirked in amusement at her friend’s propensity to get both large and either rowdy or randy when inebriated. “For that matter, stay away from the vodka. The last thing this world needs is to be rudely informed that dragons are real because you got too much in you.”

When Mal winked devilishly back at her, Regina could tell what kind of response she’d set up before it even hit. “Oh, I’ll get too much in me,” said Maleficent, not bothering to conceal the innuendo even in public. “Just not vodka. I was thinking something tall, dark, and handsome...whatever gender
When Lilly, who was hovering nearby, protested loudly that she, “heard that, Mom, and just...ewww,” Maleficent gave Regina this little grin that said her daughter was about to get indoctrinated in living life to the fullest Maleficent style – a.k.a. indulging in debauchery on a scale not appropriate for frequent consumption. The last time Regina got dragged along on one of Mal’s benders was back in the Old World when she still had a shred of decency left, and even though she’d only taken a lover to bed on one those four days and nights, the revolving door of men and women, sometimes more than one at a time, Maleficent entertained to varying degrees of...enthusiasm all but obliterated it by the time the trip was over. For that reason alone, Regina was glad her oldest friend had decided to take her partying elsewhere, if for no other reason than she didn’t want to have to clean up after two drunken dragons who decided to torch the clock tower for a laugh or carouse with their respective partners rather shamelessly against the nearest available solid surface.

Regina did miss that devious mind, though. Outings of their little Villain’s Club were just not the same without Mal to guide conversations to risque territories, such as their fondest memories of past villainy or the favorite sexual kinks of their lovers. The latter topic in particular once landed Regina in hot water when she’d let something slip about Ruby that she shouldn’t have and the next day Ruby, while walking to the diner to get lunch, received a chorus of catcalls from a darkened alleyway referencing said act. It was bad enough that Ruby withheld sex for a week afterward but what made it worse was that she wouldn’t allow Regina to do that...thing...to her for two whole months. It was terrible having to endure being deprived of something she enjoyed probably far more than she should when just thinking about it made her blush to the roots of her hair. Damn Maleficent.

Anyway, Girl’s Night certainly wasn’t as interesting without Mal there to stoke the fires of the inappropriate, but thankfully another form of entertainment made itself available. It came in the oh-so-unexpected form of Snow White, whose painfully routine home life prompted condescension to commiserate with a handful of reformed villains – aside from Katherine, of course, who had been a princess back in the old world, after all, just one whose head was firmly removed from her posterior and was able to cut loose when warranted.

“Snow? What the hell are you doing here?” Regina’s eyes had bulged wide as saucers at seeing the pure as driven...well, snow...woman seated at the usual booth reserved for Regina and her morally ambiguous compatriots and already nursing a bottle of rather potent, mid-range scotch.

“I told David it’s Mom’s night to have some fun for a change and I meant it dammit!” The former bandit princess slammed her shot glass down to punctuate her greeting and then beckoned Regina to sit.

Come to find out the diminutive schoolteacher was already three drinks in and rosy cheeked from a low buzz. Aside from the surprise of seeing her former step-daughter haunting an establishment more the speed of non-soccer moms, Regina thought it was the most Snow-like she had seen the woman in
years, which was disconcerting for all of five seconds before Snow was chirping merrily away about how much fun they were going to have. And though Regina raised her brow dubiously at the minutely-slurred assertion, it proved to be accurate enough. When the rest of the crew arrived, drinks were downed, stories were told, laughs were shared, and much fun was, indeed, had. Regina hadn't realized how much she needed to unwind until the night was over and she was headed home, loose-limbed but far from drunk because, as Ruby would say, she was a woman “who can hold her liquor thank-you-very-much.”

With spring just around the corner and a glut of upcoming warm weather endeavors looming, her days as mayor had become hectic to say the least. There were project details to finalize and contracts to fastidiously scour so that the work could be done correctly and on time, all of which demanded her attention since her final approval was required for any such public work to commence. Being a control-oriented person meant that she wasn't the type to delegate what could be done herself, so she tended to be a very hands on type of manager. Unfortunately that meant she had her nose in nearly every upcoming development, which resulted in her pretty much being run ragged making sure every “i” was dotted and every “t” was crossed. It was time consuming and tedious work to be sure, requiring more twelve hour days the past two weeks than she had pulled in years. But that was the price of being mayor of a booming town that was growing at a more accelerated rate than could have been anticipated when she created it.

That's not to say that she was unhappy, though, when on the contrary she derived great satisfaction to see Storybrooke thriving. It was just that putting so much time in at the office was beginning to tax her beyond just her mental and physical state. Her duties were beginning to intrude upon her private life in a way they hadn't since well before she started dating Ruby, which was endlessly frustrating for a woman who'd become accustomed to a fulfilling home life.

Speaking of Ruby, it was near torturous spending so much time away from her wife. In some ways it felt as if karma were having a laugh at her expense, forcing her to walk a metaphorical mile in Ruby's shoes. Regina never had developed a taste for crow and she wasn't about to start, but she was at the very least beginning to sympathize with what Ruby went through while working herself to the bone to afford the gorgeous engagement ring that Regina still treasured to this day.

Remembering how hard it had been to endure the separation those five plus years ago also brought back feelings of guilt. At the tail end of that unfortunate episode she had been less than kind to her then-girlfriend, mostly because she had convinced herself that Ruby was cheating on her. While her behavior hadn't been malicious, it was cringe-worthy enough in retrospect that her irrational insecurities seemed exceedingly shameful. And although she couldn't have known why Ruby was working all the time and never home, she still felt regret for how she had acted. Hindsight was 20/20 in that way.

Thankfully, Ruby seemed to be doing a much better job handling an overworked wife than Regina had dealing with an overworked girlfriend. The inordinate amount of understanding Ruby was extending her way was undeserved but Regina was ever grateful for it. Yet despite her wife's grace in the situation, Regina was more than ready for these hectic days to be over so that she could get
back to a sense of normalcy.

Having finally stepped through the front door, Regina pushed it closed behind her and sighed in welcome relief. Home at last. There really was no place like it, though she would never repeat such a phrase aloud for fear her sister might somehow overhear. As Regina carefully secured the front door and then locked it, she snickered at the thought of Zelena’s colorful tirades regarding this world’s most famous adaptation of Baum’s hilariously inaccurate rendition of Oz. Oh, how Zelena hated that movie.

After pushing herself away from the door, Regina made her way up the short flight of stairs up to the landing and then on into the living room. She found it to be abandoned with no evident signs of recent activity, which was an uncommon occurrence. Since Ruby was a times a pushover-slash-enabler type of parent, there were typically at least a half a dozen dolls strewn about the room when she got home, mostly centered around the couch which served as a cushioned castle from which various Queens ruled. And if not those, then coloring books would line the coffee table along with a heaping pile of crayons of every color under the sun. The dolls could be an annoyance outside of the mess, as it wasn’t all that fun to come home after a long day at work and kick off one’s heels just to step on a sharp piece of plastic that could skewer a rabid boar. The coloring books, though, Regina honestly did not mind as she knew they meant she would be receiving a special present in the near future.

One of the things that the girls loved to do for her when she got home late from work was to present their Mommy with pictures they had colored just for her. And while it was always evident that there was a guiding hand behind the gestures, they were just so sweet that she couldn't help but feel like all of her daily travails were trivial in contrast the bubbling happiness that always accompanied those priceless drawings. In the light of crudely depicted representations of their home, stick figure mommies and daughters holding hands, big pink hearts, and “I love you, Mommy!” banners, it didn't matter all that much anymore that she was a person who prided herself on keeping an immaculate home. For her daughters, Regina was willing to endure almost anything, especially if it meant getting more material to display on the refrigerator or if accepting the gifts with a radiant smile would lead to being asked to play before bedtime by two cherubic faces simultaneously chiming, “pretty please, Mommy.” If that was the prize for cleaning up the most God-awful messes on earth, she felt comfortable asserting her willingness to do so in rags à la the twins’ aunt Ella.

Of course, things would be much different if she were the Regina of old. That woman would not have tolerated finding toys and coloring books on her living room floor after a hard day’s work – a fact Henry could attest to. But she was not that person anymore and hadn't been for what seemed like ages. Now, instead of finding the messes a nuisance, she thought of them as evidence of the privileged life she was currently living. A cluttered living room floor not only provided proof of the sometimes constructive and always fun activities her wife and daughters enjoyed that evening, but also served as a reminder that she had a family to come home to she loved more than life itself. As silly as it might be, Lego blocks and princess dolls and crayons had come to symbolize happiness.

However, there were no such messes tonight, which made Regina a trifle anxious. Almost instantly,
her mind began to flit back to the events of a little over five years ago, which was an all too common occurrence whenever she became worried about her family. That dreadful day still haunted her, provoking random nightmares that wrenched her from the soundest of sleeps, gasping out breaths and drenched in a cold sweat due to the grotesque images she'd relived of Ruby's mutilated body. As much as she was loathe to admit it, she would probably always be affected by those memories; the trauma that inscribed them etched too deeply into her brain to ever be fully expunged.

Shaking her head, she cleared those thoughts away. She was too tired and on edge as it was to be dredging up things she'd much rather forget.

With a deep breath, Regina deposited her overcoat on its hanger and then departed the living room to head upstairs. Although it was well past bed time, she needed to check on her children in their bedroom before retiring to her own for a restful night of sleep.

Still connected at the hip, the girls refused to sleep in separate rooms and had yet to concede to the suggestion that they sleep in separate beds. It was very sweet that they were so attached, and though some people quietly frowned upon the girls' mutual reliance, their unusual closeness was something both of their mothers were active in supporting. Their attachment didn’t seem like an unhealthy co-dependence and what’s more, neither she nor Ruby really cared about outside opinions when they had legitimate reasons for their acceptance.

Just as Ruby, Regina was raised as an only child, which was one of the things in her life that she most wished she could change. In the days after Zelena's ostensible death, she had spent a small but not insignificant amount of time contemplating how different things might have been if only her mother had made different choices. It would have been nice, she thought, to have a sibling to grow up with, to bicker with, to commiserate with and cuddle up with next to fire, if only so she wouldn’t have felt so lonely.

As a child, Regina had no one to run to for support save her father and his efforts were woefully lacking due to a healthy fear of his wife. Her life could have been so much better if she'd had her older sister to lean on, a belief only reinforced when a trip to the Underworld lead to both sisters recovering the memories Cora had stolen of their brief connection as adolescents. Although Zelena was flawed in many ways, Regina was convinced her sister would have proven a much better confidante and defender than most could give her credit for. The proof was in the way Zelena acted at present, always looking out for Regina whether asked for or not, and always ready and willing to defend her baby sister from those who still held a grudge for offenses that were nearing four decades in the past. But the sad fact of the matter was that Cora’s selfishness had kept them apart and both of them suffered for of it.

Having spoken to her sister many times about their woeful upbringings since Zelena's return from the dead, Regina learned that her sister's childhood was as bad as her own, not quite as awful in some ways while maybe even worse in others. Uncovering what happened to Zelena to turn her into the
bitter and envious woman she became was a step in helping Regina to forgive her elder sibling, and even though their relationship had gotten off to a most inauspicious start, they have since grown much closer. But however much progress they have made toward establishing a solid relationship, the what-could-have-beens would always haunt them.

Even as a child, Regina had always felt like there was something missing in her life, despite growing up as a privileged noble. There were those less fortunate than her, after all, who could not even go so far as to claim a father who loved her dearly and whom she loved just as much despite some notable deficiencies, and although her mother was cold and domineering, everything she had done – warped though it was – was ultimately to benefit her daughter. As far as materialistic provision went, Regina had never wanted for anything. Her belly was always full, she'd slept in an enormous and very soft bed, laid her head down upon downy pillows, and had silken sheets to cover her body. Luxuries most could only dream of were hers to enjoy at a whim. But even so that empty spot in her heart remained vacant.

It took letting Zelena into her life to fill that void of familial companionship that she had been lacking, and without being told, Regina knew that she did the same for her sister. That was why she sneered at even the slightest hints of disapproval from others about how close her girls were. Sisters needed each other and always would – even more so when they were twins, however unconventional their simultaneous conceptions were.

Her thoughts still ruminating upon the complex subject of sisterhood, Regina approached the girls bedroom. Upon reaching the door, she found it closed, so she turned the knob as quietly as she could then gingerly pushed it open. When there was a big enough gap for her to fit her head through, she peeked her head in.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. Once they did, they fell to the bed upon which both of the children were curled around each other and so soundly asleep that the covers were still neatly tucked around their shoulders. From her position at the door, Regina could hear their soft breathing, particularly from Sophia, whose exhales were accompanied by an adorable little whistle which meant Sophie was sleeping with her mouth open again. Regina rolled her eyes in tender affection. Amelia would be griping in the morning about the wet spot next to her head, and it was going to be very difficult for Mom to maintain a serious parental demeanor due to how much their comical bickering would invariably have her smothering laughter and trying not to look at Ruby so that Ruby’s own muted laughter wouldn’t set them both off.

For a moment she stood still and contented herself to listen to the peaceful, reassuring sound of her babies breathing. Ruby would joke about such behavior, saying that it was creepy (which was hypocritical considering how fond Ruby was of watching Regina sleep along with the fact that Ruby did the very same thing), but this was something she couldn’t help. The undeniable force of her love for her children compelled her to just watch them in awe, so that if it were possible she would stand in their doorway forever and soak in the picture of innocent trust presented by two perfect children resting in such glorious peace simply because they believed with all their hearts that they were safe, protected, and loved.
Unable to restrain herself any longer, Regina kicked off her heels and padded barefoot over to the bedside nearest the door, which was the direction the girls were facing. Gingerly, she crouched down upon her haunches, wincing as her ankles popped with the settling of her weight. She held her breath for a moment, waiting to see if the noise penetrated their slumber. When they remained blissfully unaware of her presence, she breathed a sigh of relief before settling down onto her knees.

Leaning over the bed, she took a moment to study their faces, so relaxed and serene that they appeared angelic under the soft light of the moon. She smiled affectionately. Though only one of them had inherited Ruby's physical traits, both seemed to possess her wife’s startling ability to transform under the light of the moon into a being of otherworldly beauty. If Regina hadn't believed Ruby at first when she informed her that both girls would be born werewolves, she certainly would have the first time she saw the change in them when bathed in the pale white hues of a full moon.

One warm summer night almost a year ago, Sophia had asked out of the blue to go outside to stargaze while the moon was at its peak. Figuring it to be childish curiosity, Regina hadn’t thought twice about the request. But as they stood on the patio out back, she’d watched something astonishing happen. As the moonlight hit their skin, both girls began to shimmer as if they were absorbing the light and then refracting it back in a softened glistening aura. Dumbstruck, Regina could only stare as seconds turned into minutes, until she then noticed that their eyes began to glow a very faint yellow. Startled, she forced herself to remain calm until after the kids were in bed but as soon as she closed the door to their room, she took off to confront Ruby.

After giving her supernatural wife quite the earful, Ruby was able to soothe her fears by explaining that Granny had warned her to expect little things like that when the girls were under the light of the full moon, that it was perfectly natural because she'd done the same when she was young. However, the effects were only seeming to grow more pronounced with time, so Regina was not quite so convinced. Her trust in the Granny with regards to lycanthropy was as close to definite as possible, yet she also knew that the girls were not ordinary werewolves by any stretch of the imagination. Not only were they born to two extraordinarily powerful women in their own rights, one of them a sorceress of inherent talent, but they were also products of True Love just as Emma was. Because of that, there was really no predicting how their alter egos would begin to manifest as they reached puberty, which in itself was a whole other can of worms Regina did not want to think about.

There was at least one thing she was sure of regarding her daughters coming of age, and that is if either of her them were anything like their brunette mother, she was going to have a problem on her hands of the boy kind. One night, when she and Ruby had been discussing what might happen once the girls reached puberty, the subject of boys had somehow cropped up. Not wanting to withhold relevant information, Regina confided that Daniel had been her first serious romantic interest due to having been somewhat cloistered for the majority of her childhood. She was seventeen years old when she met him, so she couldn't speak for herself concerning such experiences. The look on Ruby's face had spoken volumes, though.
“Yeah, I was a little boy crazy,” Ruby said, shrugging her shoulders. “Peter might have been my first love but he wasn’t my first boyfriend and he wasn’t even my first kiss. Granny tried to keep me away from other kids my age, but especially boys on account of my turning into a ravenous beast and all. She never could, though. I was headstrong and curious and a risk taker. Still am to some degree.”

“I can’t argue with that,” Regina said, externally smiling not only because she agreed but because she loved those traits in her spouse.

Internally, however, she was freaking out. The thought of her girls running around after boys at any time in the future made her want to panic in much the same way as it had when Henry started to develop an interest in girls. The only saving grace was that since she'd been through that first opposite-sex-craze with her elder child, she knew how to deal with it in the lives of her youngest children. Hopefully the crossing of that particular bridge yet lay many years in the future, though, so that for the foreseeable future she could just enjoy being their Mommy.

As gently as she could, Regina reached out to brush a raven curl of hair away from Amelia's forehead, smiling as her daughter's little nose wrinkled in response. With a gentle sigh, the sleeping child readjusted herself against her sister and fell still again.

It was little things like this that made Regina feel like her life was a success in spite of all that had happened to her. Her children were happy, content, safe, and secure with both of their parents and with each other, and that's more than she or Ruby ever had themselves. And wasn't that the goal of every parent after all? To make sure their child had what their parents had lacked in the hopes that they would have a better life? That was certainly what Regina wanted for her children, so it made her happy to know that she and Ruby were achieving that goal together.

Her thoughts straying to her wife, who was likely still waiting up for her, Regina very carefully leaned in to press a kiss against each of her daughters' heads, her lips making the barest of contact so as to not disturb their slumber.

“I love you, my sweet girls,” she whispered, repeating her nightly ritual. She looked down at the children with a reverential smile. “May dreams of dancing in the moonlight guide you toward the morning.”

After straightening up to stand, Regina backed away a pace and then turned softly toward the door so as to not disturb her sleeping children. Once she left the room, she eased the door shut behind her. Retrieving her discarded shoes from beside the door, she then made her way down the hallway to her bedroom. When she arrived, the door was propped open and a soft light was emanating from the far corner of the room, casting a pale shadow over the bedroom and into the darkened hallway. Upon stepping through the threshold her eyes sought out her wife.
She found Ruby on her side of the bed dressed in her typical night wear consisting of nothing more than an old, faded t-shirt only just long enough to cover a skimpy pair of panties. She was sitting silently with her bare legs crossed, staring into nothing and clutching a pillow tightly to her chest as tears leaked from her eyes in fat droplets that fell from her chin onto the pillow, staining the fabric dark. The sight set Regina immediately on edge.

As her heart plummeted into her stomach, she rushed over to Ruby's side of the bed and sat down directly in front of her obviously distraught wife. “What's wrong?” she asked as she rested her right hand on a smooth thigh and began to gently rub it.

Positively swimming with hurt, Ruby's green eyes turned up, and at seeing Regina her face twisted in distress.

“I went out tonight to check on the pack,” she began, her voice already rough from the strain of her distress.

Regina sat back, both startled and angry. “You left the girls here alone? Ruby! Why the hell would you do such an irresponsible thing?”

Eyes widening at the unexpectedly harsh tone, Ruby backtracked, stuttering out a weak protestation as her tears began to fall even faster. “I...I d-didn't!”

All of Ruby's earlier distress was suddenly replaced by fear, which visibly exacerbated her already emotional state. Regina knew her anger was disconcerting at the best of times, but when the kids were involved, she could be absolutely terrifying. Having lived together for over ten years now, one would think Ruby should be more accustomed to dealing with her volatile temper but Ruby still dreaded being the object upon which it was fixated. Part of it, Regina thought, was survival instinct; after all, many who had landed wrong end of her anger did not live to tell the tale. But Ruby also could take being criticized far too personally because of either insecurity issues rooted in her checkered past or her general sensitivity. Ruby was a people-pleaser, someone who prided herself on making the lives of those she loved easier and better and happier, so when she did something wrong that required chastening it was rather like she reverted into a puppy who’d been kicked for overzealously licking her human’s face. Which made it hard for Regina to stay mad. Those wounded eyes and pouty lips were her kryptonite.

“I didn't leave them alone, I swear!” Ruby then insisted, shaking her head as she sniffled. “I would never do that! I asked Emma earlier if she could come over to watch them while I went out, and even then I was only gone for about half an hour.”
Feeling herself blushing from shame due to her false assumption as well as the effect it had on Ruby, Regina bit her lip. “Well, I suppose I owe you an apology, then.” Looking recalcitrant, she moved her hand from Ruby's leg to rest it against a warm, tear stained cheek where she began wiping away the residual moisture tears had left behind. “I'm sorry, darling, I overreacted. It's just been a very long and difficult day. But that's not an excuse. I shouldn't have been so accusatory.”

At the earnestness of the apology, Ruby allowed her head to loll to the side in order to press more fully into Regina's hand. Her eyes slid closed as Regina's fingers spread out over the left side of her face.

“It's okay,” she mumbled understandingly. “I know you're just stressed out over work.”

“That I am,” nodded Regina, whose thumb had begun tracing the outline of Ruby's lower lip, “but that doesn’t excuse my tone. I hurt you.”

Shaking her head against Regina's hand, Ruby sniffled. “Nah, I'm okay, I promise. I just don't like it when you get upset with me.”

“I know,” Regina sighed, hanging her head for a brief moment. “And I know you would never put the girls in such needless danger. I let my exhaustion do the talking. So once again, I'm sorry. Hopefully this work situation will all be over soon and life can get back to normal around here.”

Humming appreciatively, Ruby looked up at Regina with hooded eyes, very much enjoying the sensation of her lips being so tenderly caressed. “I like normal. Normal is nice. Very nice. I’d like some normal right now, in fact.”

Chuckling at the suggestive tone in Ruby's voice, Regina grinned. “I bet you would and so would I,” she said and then allowed her grin to fade into a more serious expression. “But for now let's set that aside. I want to know why you were crying when I came in.”

As if the reminder of the subject had shattered a pleasant mirage, Ruby's face became anguished again.

“Like I said, I went out to check on the pack,” she explained, her voice heavy with emotion. “They lost another litter. This is the third already this year and I don't know how much more of this they can take. I'm afraid that we're going to lose them all if things don't change soon.”
This news deeply troubled Regina far beyond how it was effecting Ruby. After being decimated by Joshua Woods in his maniacal pursuit of revenge, the wolves imported to Storybrooke by the first curse had for some unknown reason been further reduced down to a single pack, which was an obviously unsustainable population. Regina reacted swiftly, unilaterally banning the hunting of wolves and placing them under her personal protection. She’d drawn the policy up based on measures that proved effective back in the Enchanted Forest when fascination with Snow’s little wolf prompted Regina to attempt currying favor with the what few pockets of werewolves remained native to her lands. But in Storybrooke the efforts proved woefully insufficient, not that hunting continued but that the malady afflicting the wolves continued unimpeded.

To the credit of the council, however, no one fought the initiative, nor did anyone oppose it counted among the heroic alignment. Instead, they seemed to form an unspoken agreement to rally in support of Ruby by lending their aid. Even the fairies pitched in to help Regina cast protective wards around the pack’s den and their hunting area, which was made into a restricted and heavily regulated reserve with the help of the council.

But the reaction went beyond what even Regina had expected. It hadn't been a week after she brought Ruby home from the hospital that she received a visitor one afternoon while her tired fiancée was napping. To her great surprise, it was Robin. Seeing him was always hard, especially with the whole Soul Mate thing Tinkerbelle kept on insisting she hadn’t got wrong leading Regina’s mind down brief paths of what might have been had fate not intervened. Things could have turned out very differently were it not for Zelena's meddling. But she had long since moved on from losing him and when she really stopped to consider how life panned out for her in his absence, the alternative seemed infinitely less desirable. Soul mates and pixie dust be damned, she decided, Robin was the past and Ruby was her True Love, a sentiment Robin surprisingly shared.

Upon moving back to Storybrooke unexpectedly, he paid Regina a visit to express his willingness to move past what she had done. Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, Regina accepted tacit forgiveness, though both she and her former lover mutually agreed to keep their distance for a while. Not only was he happy with his new wife, a woman he'd met in New York, but Regina had since moved on. Considering that agreement, she had not been expecting Robin's approach, especially since there was a subtle but detectable tension between him and Ruby whenever they occupied the same room (though the animosity was mostly on Ruby's part and tended only to surface when the wolf was at her most territorial).

The purpose of Robin's visit, he informed her, was to lend his aid in tending to the wolves. After he learned about what had happened, he said he felt honor bound to act. Good man that he was, he still felt a sense of responsibility where Regina was concerned, because he still cared about her, and though that was ample motivation, he confessed he had also felt guilty about what had happened to the wolf population of his adopted home. He and his Merry Men were often out and about in the forest yet were unable to help Ruby apprehend the culprit preying on them. That failure haunted Robin, Regina could see it in his eyes, and so when he had volunteered his services and that of his men as permanent stewards of the area, Regina had quickly agreed.
And so on her first official day back as Mayor post-sabbatical to care for a convalescing Ruby, Regina drafted a motion to establish a new department of the city government: the Storybrooke Department of Wildlife and Forestry. The motion passed unanimously and it was with great satisfaction that she appointed Robin as the first director of the new division. As she pinned the newly minted badge on his chest, she couldn't help but be overjoyed, because out of all they had been through and all they had lost, and out of the tragedy of what had happened to her and Ruby, something wonderful was born: a real friendship. Since that day, Regina had come to rely on Robin as a loyal friend and trusted adviser, and he went on to prove that her faith in him was well placed.

However, even though so many people had pitched in to secure the future welfare of the wolves, Ruby was not satisfied. She, more than anyone else, felt responsible for their plight, and thus as part of her recovery vowed to personally see to the restoration of a healthy wolf population to Storybrooke's forests. To that end, she had been spending much more of her time during the full moons with the pack. She poured herself and her energy into them, overseeing birthing seasons and helping to rear the pups that survived as best she could, few though they were. Such close interaction made the staggering losses they were enduring all the more hard for Ruby to cope with, and each birthing season wore increasingly on her mind.

Regina had spent many days and nights worrying about her wife's mental state, stressing herself over the perplexing mortality rate and the toll it was taking on the woman with whom she shared her heart in the most literal sense. The only reassurance she had was that after the first few seasons of total losses, the population seemed to settle into a fragile balance, neither growing nor shrinking but hovering dangerously at a stalemate between an optimistic recovery and plunging headlong into oblivion. Many litters were lost but enough pups survived into adulthood to replace the aging members of the pack that were dying of natural causes.

Over the years they tried everything they could think of to improve the survival rate, up to and including magical means and introducing wolves from the outside world into the pack. Nothing helped. Despite the best efforts of the brightest minds both Storybrooke and this world had to offer, the wolf population remained precariously perched up on the razor's edge.

This past year, though, things ominously precipitated. Not a single pup birthed during the year had lived more than a week and it felt almost as if the clock were turning back to those dark days after Ruby's abduction and recovery. If it felt that way for Regina, she couldn't begin to imagine how it felt for Ruby. Having endured heavy losses already this year, losing yet another whole litter in the most fertile season of the year was devastating for the future outlook of the wolves, and as such there was little wonder why Ruby was so distraught.

If the mortality rate of the litters did not improve dramatically, and soon, there would be no more wolves left in Storybrooke, and as unthinkable as that was for Regina, she was not a werewolf. She couldn't even begin to comprehend the bond that Ruby had formed with the pack that was fighting for its very existence in this world. In fact, no one could adequately relate aside from Granny, and
even her experiences with wild wolves paled in comparison to Ruby's, because unlike her grandmother who saw being a werewolf as something she settled for to be with the man she loved, Ruby had learned to embrace it as a part of herself. To Ruby, the wolf packs were part of her family, and though she hid it well, a near constant state of grief persisted over what seemed to be their doggedly imminent demise.

Unfortunately, if current trends held, there was no denying or avoiding the tragedy that was soon to follow. There would soon be no comrades left for Ruby to run with during Wolf’s Time, and at least until the girls came of age, she would be a lone wolf and an alpha without a pack. The isolation and pain of such a state would be excruciating to observe, so needless to say, if there was anything at all that she could do, it would have been done long ago.

Sadly Regina had long since exhausted her options, meaning this was one of those desperate situations in which she was powerless to help. She hated it. She wanted to fix what was hurting her wife so badly that it made her wish – and not for the first time – that she could bring Joshua back from the dead just to kill him again. But even if she couldn't fix the problem, she could at least provide an ameliorating influence of steadfast comfort and support as she helped Ruby pick up the pieces of her broken heart.

Drawing her hurting spouse gently into her arms, Regina nestled Ruby's head onto her shoulder, guiding it into the crook of her neck. As Ruby settled into the embrace, Regina felt rather than heard the resumption of her wife’s crying. Her chest constricted with emotion, tears biting at her lids.

“I'm so very sorry, my darling,” she cooed, brushing her fingers through her wife's thick brown locks. “I wish there was something I could do to help. You know that if I could, I would.”

“I know,” Ruby replied miserably, nodding against Regina’s shoulder and trembling as her sorrow intensified.

For a long time, Regina sat motionless, allowing Ruby to cry out her pain in the safety of her embrace. When at last Ruby’s distress seemed to be expended, she pulled back and cradled Ruby’s face between her hands.

“I love you,” she offered, wiping Ruby's tears away with the pads of her thumbs. Leaning forward, she then pressed a lingering kiss to her wife's forehead, then to the tip of her nose, and then to each cheek before lastly capturing her lips in a gentle but firm kiss. They melted together as that familiar stirring pulled at Regina’s heart, and when warm mouths opening up to taste one another, she allowed the present distress to be smoothed away and willed the same relief to Ruby via deep, leisurely kisses that left her wondering where she ended and where Ruby began.
When at last they parted, Ruby leaned her forehead against Regina's and sighed, her breath leaving her in shaky waves. She sniffled and then smiled crookedly. “How is it possible after all these years that kissing you still turns me to mush? If I didn't love those perfect lips of yours so damn much, I'd hate them.”

Chuckling, Regina replied, “Well, I'd apologize for my perfect lips but they do seem to get me what I want.” At that, she purposefully pursed her lips and then deliberately licked them, careful to linger over her scar, an action that she knew drove Ruby wild. She wasn't disappointed.

“Oh? And what's that?” Ruby asked, playing coy with a mostly composed voice. Only her blown pupils betrayed the true magnitude of her vested interest in taking things further.

Looking at Ruby through hooded eyes, Regina smirked. “I shouldn’t need to spell it out to you after all these years.”

Her eyes flitting down to Ruby's neck, Regina could see the pronounced veins there pulsing with desire and she knew it wouldn't be long until her hot-blooded werewolf pounced. A thrill shot through her body, settling low in her belly as her body began to thrum with arousal. Inches away, she could both hear the sounds of Ruby's increasingly heavy breathing and see the tensing of powerful muscles, indicating her entire body was coiled up as if ready to spring. Nostrils flaring, Regina closed her eyes when the barely veiled smell of mutual lust registered, and as the deliciously familiar scent engulfed her senses, she groaned wantonly. That singular sound was all it took.

In one swift motion, Ruby disentangled herself from Regina and hopped off the bed. Once upright, she held out her hands for Regina to take. Sliding her hands into her wife's, Regina allowed Ruby to guide her up until she was standing as well, and then without a word, Ruby let go of her hands and began unbuttoning Regina's blouse, making quick work of it with dexterous fingers. She then deliberately slid the blouse off of Regina's shoulders and pushed it down her arms until it fell to the floor. Knowing what was next, and due to the rather impatient look on Ruby's face, Regina brought her hands to the front of her slacks to divest herself of the garment only to have them quickly batted away.

“No, let me,” Ruby instructed, her eyes hooded and heavy.

Regina let her hands fall back to her side and nodded, taking in a deep, preparatory breath, which she then let out with a whoosh. “By all means.”

Smiling gently, Ruby lowered herself to her knees. Once settled, she placed her hands on the belt looped through Regina's slacks. With deft fingers, she unfastened it and slid it from the loops, tossing
it to the floor once she worked it free. She then lifted her hands to the button and as her fingers made contact with the bare skin just above the panty line, Regina sucked her bottom lip between her teeth.

Through heavy eyes, she watched as Ruby carefully popped the button out and began to unzip the front fly of the slacks. As Ruby methodically pulled down the zipper, she turned her head up to look at Regina and when she did, the moonlight caught in her eyes, making them shimmer a brilliant jade. The mesmerizing beauty of her wife and the intensity of Ruby's arousal only magnified the passion that was simmering in Regina's belly. Not once thereafter did she break eye contact until Ruby had successfully pulled the slacks down Regina's legs, leaving them puddled on the floor. Bracing her hands on Ruby's shoulders, Regina stepped out of them.

Turning her head back down, Ruby took a long, deep breath and then let it out with an appreciative sigh. “Mmmm. You smell so good.”

Groaning again, Regina worked her fingers into the hair at Ruby's temples. “Not half so good as you.”

Smiling lazily, Ruby gracefully stood. “Debatable,” was her succinct response as she worked herself upright in front of Regina and then proceeded to guide her back to the bed. Grinning wolfishly, she tilted her head toward the bedroom door. “You might wanna take care of the room, 'cause it's gonna get loud in here tonight.”

“Jesus, Ruby,” Regina replied, her levels of anticipation rising dangerously high. Having done so countless times before, she made quick work of spelling the room for silence, but before she could even recover from casting the simple spell, Ruby was effortlessly picking her up and tossing her down on the bed. She landed neatly in the center with an audible “oof”, her head resting against the pillows. As usual, her wife had perfect aim.

Giving Regina no chance to recover from the surprise move, Ruby climbed on top of her and immediately devoured her mouth in a frenzied kiss that made her toes curl. With a deep moan into Ruby's mouth, she grasped and tugged at her wife's shirt until compliance was given and Ruby separated long enough to hastily remove the offending garment, happy to find that as per usual Ruby was sans bra. Once it was flung haphazardly out of the way, Regina wrapped her arms around her wife's slim waist and then pulled Ruby back down on top of her so that their breasts, one set bare and another covered in lace, were pressed together.

Dipping her head back down, Ruby initiated another kiss, this one intimate, gentle, and slowly probing, the kind Regina hadn’t permitted before a stubborn werewolf broke down what remained of her walls and made her want the kind of connection with another soul that could only be conveyed through countless hours spent breathing each others air and speaking words of love and devotion solely through the embraces of lips through which no sound passed. Minutes passed languidly
floating upon that fluent, smoldering river of passion that only Ruby could transport her to. It was a place where only they existed and where their love reigned supreme. It was a place Regina never, ever wanted to leave.

After pulling away, overwhelmed by the smell and taste of the woman whose love made life inside her heart as well as her body, she gave a playful smile and then nudged herself up. Without breaking eye contact, she smoothed her hands down silken skin to the line of Ruby's panties. Lifting her head, she brushed her lips against her wife's plump, thoroughly kissed ones and then dipped her fingers beneath the silken fabric, allowing her hands to roam downward along the shapely curve of her wife's ass to cup it and then give it a forceful squeeze.

“Oh, God,” Ruby moaned in response, her mouth slack against Regina's smiling lips.

“Mmmmm, referring to me as God again,” she quipped, her voice husky. Teasing Ruby in such a way was an old standby of theirs. “While I’m flattered, how many times must I remind you?” As she spoke between taunting kisses of Ruby's bottom lip, Regina began slowly massaging the shapely muscles of her spouse’s rump. The actions prompted Ruby to buck roughly against her, and the sensation produced by contact caused Regina's eyes roll briefly up into their sockets. “My name...is...Regina. I can tell you again...if you didn't get that...the first time.” As the last words slipped out against the warmth of Ruby's mouth, Regina seized her wife's plump bottom lip with her teeth and then bit down hard enough to cause Ruby to flinch.

Her arms straining under her weight in their position on either side of Regina's head, Ruby growled; it was a low and rumbling sound that Regina could feel reverberate through the length of her body. Again, the moonlight caught her eyes, though this time, they began to glow in that mystical shade of yellow that belonged to the wolf. Regina had awakened the beast. If she had not been thoroughly turned on before, she certainly was now.

“If you're not careful,” Ruby said, her voice low in timbre but laced with unspeakable power, “I'll claw your real name into your back while I make you scream.”

With those loaded words, all of the air left Regina's body and she felt her legs begin to quiver. Heat and moisture pooled in tandem at the apex of her thighs. The words, though spoken in a more metaphorical sense, had awakened the darker parts of her psyche, which wanted nothing more than to bait Ruby into making good on her promise and to hell with the consequences.

So what if she wouldn't be able to sit straight the next day and so what if her co-workers blushed with indignation by just gazing upon her well-sexed expression and posture? It wasn't as if it would be the first time she dealt with the repercussions of her wife's impressive love bites at work, and if she had her druthers, it wouldn't be the last. Mixing sex with violence was one of her specialties that Ruby both understood and delightfully participated in. So to hell with what others thought: she was
feeling dark tonight and she was going to indulge herself.

Looking up at Ruby, she bit her lip in a tauntingly coquettish manner. “Is that so?” She spoke in a low tone, panting and clawing at Ruby's derriere while she rocked their hips together. Straining forward, she touched her lips against Ruby's once more. “Tell me then, my darling: what's my name?”

A long, almost feral growl echoed through the room from somewhere deep inside of Ruby's slim frame, and as it echoed through the darkness of the bedroom, she lowered herself on top of Regina until they were flush from head to toe. When their eyes met, Regina noticed that Ruby's eyes were now wholly overtaken by the wolf and were glowing a vibrant, pulsating yellow.

Opening her mouth, Ruby exhaled, her breath washing over Regina's face like a warm summer breeze. Although she spoke only one word, it was uttered with such absolute authority that it made Regina's entire body shudder. “Mine.”

As the dark warmth of her passion overwhelmed her, Regina grinned wickedly. “Yes, I am. The question is: what are you going to do about it?”

“This,” Ruby said, finding Regina's fingers and linking her hands together. She then brought them up over Regina's head, pressing their hands into the pillow. “And this,” she continued, dipping her head down to plunder Regina's waiting mouth in wet, open mouthed kisses. Ripping herself away after a handful of heated exchanges, Ruby lowered her mouth to the base of Regina's throat and gently nipped the skin there. “And this.” She then proceeded to alternate between gentle bites with her teeth and suckling the skin with lips and tongue.

Mewling, Regina squeezed her eyes shut and tilted her head to give Ruby better access, which her suddenly and hotly aggressive wife used to great effect. Kissing, biting, and licking her way up Regina's neck, Ruby made her way to Regina's earlobe and after paying careful attention to that sensitive piece of flesh, she made her way down a strong jawline before pausing at lushly swollen lips.

Lost in a haze of passion and desperately needing the warmth of Ruby's mouth back on her skin, Regina gazed up into her wife's hypnotic eyes, seeing the same intense desire reflected in them. This was going to be a night to remember. Whoever said marriage was boring was an idiot because Regina was about to have the time of her life.

“Enough talk, Ruby. I need you now. Show me how much you love me. And don’t hold back.”
A feral grin spread across Ruby’s lips. “With pleasure.” Eyes almost wholly given over to the aggression of the wolf, Ruby ground her thigh against Regina’s aching core, eliciting a prolonged groan that was soon swallowed up by a greedy mouth. Regina was suddenly glad of her domineering nature because Ruby went on to most dutifully and thoroughly perform her command.

Chapter End Notes

As my lovely beta, UnfairestOfThemAll, pointed out, our ladies need all the loving they can get with what lies ahead. Enjoy the warm, fuzzies. They won’t last.
The Librarian

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, our heroines engage in some post-coital conversation regarding the wolf situation and then Regina makes a phone call to put in a special request to a particular librarian.

Chapter Notes

Thanks as always to my beta, UnfairestOfThemAll, who might be unfair but is still totally awesome!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

An hour and some odd change later and now utterly exhausted, Regina and Ruby were laying tangled together under the sheets, Regina on her back while Ruby was snugly ensconced against her side. Regina sighed in contentment as she gazed down to take in the expression her wife was sporting. She grinned, smothering a laugh because of how preciously dopey Ruby looked, all half-dazed yet fully sated with lipstick smeared over half of her face.

The sight was fairly comical, though admittedly not altogether uncommon since Ruby overtly appreciated it when Regina was, as she liked to put it, “all dolled up and irresistible.” There had been many instances through the years in which Regina would be forced to readjust both of their appearances lest smudged make-up, ruffled hair, and lipstick stains broadcast what they’d just got up to in public. While such amorousness on Ruby's part could be annoying when they were on a deadline, tonight after a long afternoon of brain-blasting work followed up by an outing with friends fueled by inhibition-loosening alcohol, the release only Ruby could give her was precisely what the doctor ordered to put a lovely Red ribbon on the day.

Chuckling, she reached up to wipe some of the offending material off of Ruby's face where it had smudged particularly bad. “I’ve left you a mess. I'm sorry.”

Looking up to meet her gaze, Ruby smiled sweetly, eyes glimmering with affection. “Don't be. I'd proudly wear it in public if you'd let me.”

Shaking her head, Regina chuckled again. “Don't go getting any ideas because that will never happen. You know how I detest being made the center of attention. Remember how displeased I was when I discovered your little stunt in New York? And that wasn’t even directly involving me!”
Ruby gave a lopsided grin. “As if I could forget.”

It amazed Regina that Ruby could so easily dismiss the painful memories of their fight. Not that arguments were a rarity between them. They often had spats about little things that didn’t even really matter, though neither dwelt on their hurt feelings for too long because they both understood those minor rows were a consequence of their strong personalities clashing. Usually within an hour the instigator, which Regina had to admit was her more often than not, would swallow their pride to apologize, and even when the insults came hard and heavy and hit at sensitivities that incurred equally vitriolic responses, they never made it to bed without hashing out their troubles, whatever they were and whatever had caused them. After they both almost died to a lunatic’s misdirected rage, they had agreed as a couple to never to go to bed angry. But the night in question a notable exception for it had ended with Regina screaming in Ruby’s face to get the hell out of her house and Ruby doing just that while unable to suppress bitterly regretful tears.

It was only about two and a half years ago now that Ruby was sent to New York for a month long seminar headed up by the FBI. The trip was courtesy of Emma Swan, who was a former associate of the agent conducting the seminar. During Ruby’s stay in the City That Never Sleeps, she spent much time wandering about, taking in the sights and indulging her curious nature by interacting with the diverse array of personalities one could encounter on any random street corner. On one such excursion she was approached by a photographer who inquired after her availability to serve as the subject for a new series of photographs meant to promote the unique qualities of the city of New York. Since she was available on weekends and he promised the shoot would not last beyond the month – that not to mention the incredible offer of compensation for her time – Ruby agreed, but only on the condition that she be credited under a pseudonym to maintain both her privacy and that of her family and her town.

Little did Ruby know that the photographer who hired her was highly renowned and that the series of photographs would go on to produce several images that graced the covers of prominent fashion and art magazines through the following months. So to say the least, it had come as a violent shock when Regina was in line at the grocery store and glanced over at the shelf to peruse the magazines only to catch an eyeful of her wife on the cover of *Elle*. Dressed only in a bikini, Ruby was splayed out on the sand, looking into the camera with those sultry green eyes Regina only ever saw in the bedroom. The discovery had hit her right in the gut.

By the time Regina got home that evening, she’d been so incensed that she didn't even bother to unload the groceries. All reason suppressed by fury, she burst in to the house to confront her shell-shocked wife who didn’t even get a chance to defend herself. The one-sided screaming match that ensued was one that Regina often looked back on with intense shame. She had all but accused Ruby of endangering the town and throwing away their marriage to prostitute her body for the world to consume, and as if that had not been bad enough, her anger was so out of control by that time that she kicked Ruby out of the house, “for the rest of the night at least, and maybe for the foreseeable future.”
Regina would never forget the broken look on her wife's face as she walked out the front door, gazing back with swimming eyes so laden with forlorn disbelief and heartbreaking betrayal that it physically knocked the wind out of the sails Regina had considered to be hoisted by wholly righteous indignation. After Ruby sped out of the driveway in her Camaro, Regina somehow managed to scrape herself together enough to numbly go about the routine of unloading the groceries from her car. And that night as she cooked for the girls and herself, she silently cried, caught between crushing regret and an anger that while diminished was still simmering just beneath the surface.

Once dinner was over, she spent a couple of hours half-heartedly playing with her confused daughters before their bedtime. She could only take so many of their questions as to where their Mama was before she lost it again. But after she was absolutely certain the children were asleep, she barricaded herself in her bedroom then collapsed in a wretched heap upon the bed. It hadn’t helped that she landed on Ruby’s side and the pillows she burrowed her wet cheek into still smelled of pine and cherries and of a beautifully wild freedom.

The longer she lay there, though, the more she recovered her composure, and with that came the dreadful realization of just how badly she overreacted. She had broken their vow. In a panic to fix her mistake and ready to beg Ruby to come back home if that was what was necessary (which indicated how desperate she was because there was not another person on the planet to whom she would so condescend), she tried to call Ruby at least half a dozen times. But all of her attempts went unanswered. Regina spent the next hour relentlessly texting and leaving Ruby voicemails apologizing profusely for what she'd said – all to no avail. Were it not for the fact she had enough good sense to call Henry in order to talk things through with her incredibly wise son, she might have started pestering Ruby's friends, and if that didn’t work, threatening them.

All such thoughts fled when Henry assured her that he had spoken to Ruby, who he described as, “still confused and more than a little hurt at being cast out of her own home for an infraction she considers relatively minor. But she promised to come back home tomorrow to talk things through if you’re willing.”

“I am,” she had said insistently. “What she did was thoughtless and it did endanger the town. But I went too far, I know that now. I just want her back home, Henry. The rest we can work out. I just want her home.”

She could hear her son’s gentle smile of reassurance when he said, “Then she will be.”

True to that assurance, when Regina got home from an awful day at work the following afternoon, a very tentative, almost skittish looking Ruby was waiting for her in the living room. An emotional reunion followed during which both women apologized for their behavior. Things weren’t resolved by a long shot, but at the end of the night Regina was curled up in bed with Ruby in her arms, thanking every power that existed beyond the planes of earth that she had found so compassionate, forbearing, and forgiving a partner to share her life with.
But whereas that night still sometimes haunted Regina, Ruby never once mentioned it with a negative connotation. It was as if with Regina's apology the trying bump in their marriage was stricken from the record of her mind, never to be brought up again. That was just the kind of person Ruby was, and Regina felt humbled and so very grateful to be the one lucky enough to be the recipient of her love.

“But that doesn't mean you don't appreciate the sentiment,” Ruby continued, still wearing Regina's lipstick quite prettily.

“That's very true,” Regina replied, reaching out to clear off more of the smudging with her thumb. “I appreciate your pride in me so much more than you know.”

Ducking into the contact, Ruby looked up with playful eyes. “Aww, baby, are you gonna get all warm and fuzzy on me now?”

Regina laughed. “Fat chance of that, mi corazón.”

The only way Regina could ever make mention of the fact that Ruby was being kept alive by half of her own heart was by slipping them into such Spanish endearments. And even though she had taught Ruby to speak the language – which she was proud to say her wife had picked up quite adeptly – when masqueraded as a Spanish sobriquet, Ruby did not suspect an ulterior meaning.

Ruby still had no idea about what had really happened that day. Too scared to reveal the truth, Regina kept quiet about what she had done to revive her then-dead lover, and in the aftermath also swore the Charmings to secrecy. Outside of the three people already privy to the information, no one else knew, and that was the way she preferred it. If she had her way, Ruby would never find out, even though there was no doubt in her mind that keeping such a momentous secret carried the potential to blow up in her face. Even so, she believed it to be too great a risk for Ruby to ever learn that the span of their lives, however short or long, was now forever and inextricably bound together.

Ruby loved her job and was so good at it that both Regina and everyone else who worked with the metaphysically gifted werewolf thought her to be born for a career in law enforcement. Since joining the Storybrooke Sheriff's department, Ruby's partnership with Emma had been so productive that the general safety of the town was improved, and to such a dramatic degree that most citizens felt safe enough to freely mill about the streets at night. Criminals tended to think twice about breaking the law when they knew an incredibly powerful werewolf and an equally formidable Savior would be relentlessly pursuing them. Still, as would be obvious, the job had its pitfalls, particularly when magic was involved, so because of that, Regina believed it would torment Ruby too much to carry another life on top of her own into potentially deadly situations. Regina couldn't do that to Ruby, couldn't put
that leash on her no matter how much she wanted to be honest, for the truth in this instance amounted to little more than a well-meaning cage in which to suffocate Ruby’s personality.

Meanwhile, as Regina’s thoughts turned away from that momentous decision, Ruby shuddered at her deliberate use of the foreign language. She bit her lip with relish and peered at Regina through hooded eyes.

“God, you know how much I love it when you speak Spanish.”

It was at times like these when Regina felt most rewarded that she had learned it. Though there were distinct differences between Spanish and the tongue spoken by her father's people back in the Enchanted Forest, it was still similar enough that she had reconciled the two quickly. Much to her delight in the early stages of their relationship, she discovered Ruby’s affinity for being spoken to or serenaded in the lively Romantic language, a perk she often took advantage of. But since the girls were born and she wanted them to grow up bilingual, she had grown more accustomed to speaking to in Spanish with regularity.

“Claro,” Regina replied, grinning mischievously, “es por eso que lo hago. Me encanta complacerte.”

“Y lo haces muy bien,” Ruby retorted, fluttering her eyelashes.

Chuckling, Regina reached out to tuck a stray strand of hair behind Ruby's ear. “Thank you, dear.” She leaned down to place a tender kiss to her wife's lips, which Ruby gratefully accepted. After parting, Regina returned her head to the pillow, her eyes still locked with Ruby's. “So, not to put a damper on the mood, but I am still worried about you being upset earlier. What are you going to do about the pack?”

“Well...I had a thought. But you're not going to like it,” was Ruby's ominously vague reply.

Her brows raising, Regina looked at Ruby with concern. “What is it?” Worrying her lip for a second, Ruby wavered, looking tempted to deflect. “Come now. Don’t be so ambivalent. Spit it out. I promise I won’t bite unless you ask.” Regina wagged her brows a bit as Ruby was wont to do, but it didn’t seem to work as well coming from her.

Taking a deep breath, Ruby gave her a pleading look, edged with a projected innocence that Regina knew was intended to ease the shock of the coming statement. That didn’t work, either.
“I want to go back to the Enchanted Forest.”

Regina's eyes bulged into saucers at the unexpected and very unwelcome request. “I'm sorry. Come again? You can't have seriously said what I think you just did.”

“But I did,” Ruby said, eyes big and imploring. “I think it's the only solution. We've tried everything else, and I just can't watch them die out, Regina. I can't! I have to do something.”

By the end of the last sentence, tears were brimming in Ruby's eyes yet again, causing Regina's chest and throat to constrict. Her mind and heart warred with one another, one understanding how much Ruby needed to do this and the other painfully aware of the dangers posed by such an excursion. The Enchanted Forest was not a place to venture to lightly, for there were things that still lived there that were not to be trifled with. Snow and Emma had learned firsthand how treacherous it was during their trip there after the curse broke.

Yet despite how much Regina wanted to deny Ruby's request, she knew she couldn't. With the way things were going this year, if they didn't act now there would be no saving the wolves, and that was something that she just couldn't accept. She wouldn't be able to live with herself if she had denied her wife the last opportunity to save her kindred creatures because in doing so, she would be responsible for quite possibly breaking her.

It made Regina's stomach turn to imagine what dangers might await Ruby in the Enchanted Forest. But what was there to do about it? She couldn't go with Ruby even though she was desperate to do just that because the girls needed one of their parents at home with them. So even if Ruby was hypothetically of the mind to allow Regina on the expedition, there was no way she was going to abandon her children to go on such a potentially perilous quest, the success of which could be considered dubious at best.

Eyeing Ruby critically, Regina pondered aloud. “I know you're edging closer to forty. Is this some kind of mid-life crisis? If so, surely we can come up with a less dangerous way for you to reassert your youthfulness.”

“God, Regina, no. Just no!” Ruby protested with genuine offense. “You know me better than that.”

A rather adorable pout settled across Ruby's features, melting Regina's opposition. Sometimes she hated Ruby's ability to sway her with a simple expression, mainly when she was in a really nasty mood. Mostly, though, it just made her love her wife even more. Ruby really was infinitely lovable.
Nodding once in acquiescence, Regina reached out to rest her palm on a pale cheek, still flushed from recent exertions of an amorous nature. “You're right. I'm sorry.” She then heaved a dramatic sigh. “Alright. I suppose I can support your plan.”

In a near instant, Ruby's face transformed into one of her most beatific smiles, huge and toothy and replete with twinkling eyes.

“Thank you! Thank you!” Ruby gushed, surging up and forward to kiss Regina multiple times. Regina laughed between kisses then pushed Ruby's face away playfully after a few moments of enduring the not at all unpleasant assault.

“Yes, yes,” she drawled as she met Ruby's hovering face with a grin of her own. “Thank me all you want but there are stipulations to my concession.”

Quirking an eyebrow, Ruby’s pout returned in a diminished capacity. “Such as?”

This time Regina heroically resisted the power of her spouse’s magical bottom lip, which seemed to possess the singular ability of bending her to its will. “For one, I forbid you to go alone,” she said, conviction unwavering and quite proud of herself for not caving on her primary condition. When Ruby began to protest, Regina halted her with an index finger and a stern look. “No arguments. If you're going back there it's going to be with someone to keep you out of trouble since I won't be able to. I suggest Emma if she's willing.”

Breathing deeply, Ruby appeared to contemplate the demand for a moment before exhaling and nodding. “Okay. I can do that, I guess. I'll talk to her tomorrow. What else?”

“Once you arrive in the Enchanted Forest, you must make your way promptly to my castle and without deviation. I will provide you with a magical amulet that will guide you once you are inside. It will help you to bypass any wards that might remain there. In my chambers, there is a secret alcove behind my wardrobe. In it, I have a detailed map of my lands, including every known wolf den, as well as book of incantations hidden there that Miss Swan may find useful. It just won't do to have the mother of my children traipsing around that place without proper direction and protection, so you will acquire these items before setting out on your task. Now, we will discuss this further before you depart, but do you agree to these initial stipulations?”

“Yeah, I do. They sound reasonable actually.” Head tilting just a tad, Ruby’s smile turning tender. “You know, even though I am the Big Bad Wolf, I have to admit to loving it when you get all
protective over me.”

Regina chuckled, though she couldn’t hide the blush that spread up her neck and over her cheeks. Ruby wasn’t the only one who enjoyed her possessiveness when it gave her such immense satisfaction to intimidate any unfortunate fools who dared to stare too long at Ruby’s legs or ass or any other of her wife’s delectable assets. There was something so erotic, thrilling, and maybe a little bit wrong about staking a public claim on Ruby, especially given how much of a turn on it was to them both. In terms of the wolf, Ruby was all alpha, but outside of Wolf’s Time the woman had a special appreciation for being dominated, something Regina was more than happy to oblige however her partner wished.

Regina nibbled at her lip against a blush that only intensified at thoughts of tying a blindfolded Ruby up so they could play. Sadly, it was already too late for that kind of in depth activity. Maybe next time, though.

She cleared throat as she shook off the tantalizing pictures her imagination had already painted. “Yes, well, it’s only because I have a vested interest in your well-being.”

Echoing Regina’s laugh, Ruby lifted up and then shifted over to cover Regina with her body before dipping in for a kiss. As their mouths traded giving and receiving delving probes that involved lots of tongue, Regina slid her hands over the chiseled planes of Ruby’s back. As she did, she made contact with an area of pronounced scarring. Unbidden, an unpleasant memory from long ago drifted through her mind, causing her to momentarily stiffen. In response, Ruby broke away then pulled back to look down at her questioningly.

“What’s wrong?” asked Ruby through slightly labored breathing.

For a second, Regina froze, wide-eyed and afraid that her wife’s heightened senses might pick up on the source of her hesitation. Even though she had felt each and every scar on Ruby’s back on more occasions than she could count, it still jarred her to feel the few areas of welted tissue that refused to fully heal. It wasn’t that they disgusted her, either, but that they were a reminder of her failure to find a way to remove them.

In the weeks that followed Ruby being rescued, Regina had tried everything she could think of to do away with the persistent marks that marred her wife’s otherwise perfect flesh. She had even gone so far as to consult the Blue Fairy, swallowing her pride in the process of seeking an answer as to whether there might be a way to eliminate the scarring which obstinately remained.

Sadly, Blue had only confirmed that there was nothing that could be done about Ruby’s persistent
scar, and while ordinarily Regina would not have trusted the azure-hued insect further than she
could throw her, she could honestly say that Blue appeared deeply disappointed that she had been
unable to help. Still, there had been something Blue was holding back and when given the
opportunity to share, the powerful fairy refused to speak, looking so sorrowfully reluctant that
Regina's internal alarms began to sound.

“You're hiding something,” she had pressed, her voice lowering to a dangerous octave. “It's obvious
that your desire to help Ruby is genuine but I am easily not fooled by heartfelt apologies. You know
more than you're letting on, so tell me what it is. Now.”

Holding up her hands in a mollifying gesture, Blue shook her head. “I don't think you're a fool,
Regina,” the fairy had said, smiling sadly, “nor am I attempting to deliberately conceal information
from you. I only wish to spare Ruby – and you – further pain.” Upon seeing the hard expression
upon Regina's face, Blue had understood she was not about to be dissuaded and thus sighed in
surrender before proceeding to provide an explanation.

“As you are aware, magic is capable of producing great wonders,” Blue had said, eyes flashing for
a split second to Regina's stomach in reference to the miraculous conception of her children. “But
even though it can do seemingly impossible things, it does have limits. I believe in this case that the
magic utilized to heal Ruby's wounds was limited, if not altogether counteracted in some areas, by
her own mind. I've seen such things before. It speaks to a fundamental rule of magic that most aren’t
even aware of: it will not and cannot mend wounds which the mind refuses to let go of. Ruby’s scars
persist because they are not just on her body but in her mind as well, and though they may fade with
time, I'm afraid those kind never fully heal.”

Though Blue had been nothing but cordial, sympathetic, and helpful, Regina hadn't wanted to accept
the truthfulness of her explanation. She was, after all, someone who had dedicated much of the last
several decades to Regina's destruction. If she hadn't known better deep down in her heart, she might
have easily convinced herself that Blue was just making excuses, what with her being aware that
such visible reminders of what happened to Ruby would be a constant torment for Regina. Not only
would they serve as a daily reminder of the torture Ruby endured but Regina would also be forced to
pretend everything was okay to keep Ruby from getting suspicious or even more self-conscious than
she already was about her scarring.

But the more Regina thought about it, the more she realized that Blue had no valid reason to be
lying. Their feud had ended years ago and since then the head fairy rarely trifled in matters outside of
the nunnery unless called upon directly. Those occasions, though rare, saw no resumption of old
tensions. For the most part, Regina thought they actually worked pretty well together, which came as
much a surprise to Blue as it did to her.

And then, as if by the guidance of some unseen hand, Blue's deduction was proven true that very
night when Regina came home to find Ruby standing in front of their vanity mirror in tears, stripped
down to her bra and panties as her finger traced over the ugly, crescent-shaped remnants of the wound on her chest. Of all the scars Ruby retained from her abduction, the worst was that particularly horrid-looking one left by the scythe that had pierced her heart. The ragged, angry-looking silvery scar tissue left behind was almost as gruesome as the wound itself, which began halfway down the left side of her chest then curved to trace her left breast nearly halfway around to the bottom. In the weeks and months that followed, it had been a cause of great distress for Ruby, and even though those months eventually faded into years, there were still times that Regina would walk in on a similar scene of Ruby studying her chest in the mirror with a forlorn expression on her face or examining the criss-cross patterned expanse of puckered flesh on her back as tears rolled down her cheeks. It never got easier for Regina to deal with Ruby's lingering anguish and she knew it never would.

As if to rub her face in her inability to help her wife, the night after visiting Blue had been rough one for both women, particularly Ruby, who tossed and turned all night and was awakened several times by awful nightmares that tore her screaming from her the torment of her troubled subconscious. Despite being exhausted from worry and a lack of sleep, Regina left the house early the next morning to seek out her last resort: Rumplestiltskin. The need to know for sure, to confirm Blue's hypothesis with someone who distrusted the Fairy as much as she did, was too strong for her to deny.

As she relayed the Fairy's words to Rumple, he had listened intently, and after hearing her out a sympathetic look overtook his face. After confirming Blue’s diagnosis, he went on reemphasize that the trauma to Ruby's psyche was too extensive to erase all physical reminders of her ordeal and that, as a result, those scars which remained untouched by magic would likely never fade completely. They were now a permanent part of Ruby, and as such, Regina was just going to have to learn to live with them just like Ruby was. Rumple hadn't been rubbing salt in her wounds by any means but the blunt pronouncement stung just the same.

With all options now exhausted and with no evident solution to the dilemma, Regina was left with the heavy responsibility of informing her wife that she would have to live with the reminders of her hellish torment for the rest of her life. Instead of having an angry or sorrowful reaction as expected, Ruby seemed to shut down and promptly concluded any further conversation on the subject. For days, she outright refused to discuss what she was feeling. When she wasn’t at work or out on a run trying to punish the pain away through physical exhaustion she was brooding quietly in self-imposed isolation. It was only through much patience, love, and persistence that Regina was able to eventually get her to open up and talk about her new reality so that she could begin to move forward again.

There were setbacks, of course, on the road to recovery, but as time wore on, Ruby learned to at least accept the presence of her scars. Yet at the same time she never completely lost her disgust of them. Although Ruby could wear a mask with the best of them, Regina had long ago learned to decipher her emotions without a word being said, so whenever Ruby caught a glimpse of her back or stared too long at her chest in a mirror, she could never fully conceal the loathing that crossed her features or the pain that haunted her eyes.
It hurt to think that even so many years later, Ruby was still beleaguered by that day, and though the scars still triggered bad memories, Regina hoped that there might come a day when Ruby could learn to appreciate them as she did. To her, Ruby's scars were not ugly, but were beautiful reminders that the woman she loved was still here, still alive, still breathing, and still exactly where she belonged. Ruby had endured hell and survived somehow, both through an enormous inner fortitude and through the awe-inspiring power of the love they shared. From Regina's perspective then, the scars were a testament to the incredible strength of their relationship. Hell, they had overcome death itself to be together and that was something to be remembered and treasured in spite how unsightly their respective blemishes may be.

On most days Ruby believed but there were times that her memories or nightmares would send her reeling, and those were the days that inevitably left them both physically and emotionally drained.

But tonight was not going to be such an occasion if Regina had any say in the matter, so she set aside all negativity to focus all of her energy on her gorgeous and presently amorous wife.

Allowing a teasing smirk to spread across her face, she roughly raked her nails down the length of Ruby's spine, eliciting a hiss from Ruby, who arched into the contact.


As they stared at one another, a wave of molten desire passed between them, and Regina knew in that moment she was in for a very long and thoroughly enjoyable night. She was going to be sore and tired in the morning but with the way Ruby was looking at her right now she was more than happy to accommodate such discomfits.

With her face mere inches away, Ruby linked their hands together and lifted Regina's arms slowly upward to pin them above her head. Eyes smoldering, she pressed her hips down roughly then rolled them against Regina's suddenly throbbing core as she leaned in close so that their lips were brushing together.

Groaning as she was at her wife's heated wetness so intimately pressed against her, Regina was not even able to refute Ruby’s teasing rebuttal of, “Liar.” The solitary word was whispered so that Ruby’s lips were moving against Regina’s, the sensation making Regina ache with want that overrode any offense. Before she could even formulate a response, Ruby surged forward to claim a toe curling kiss that rapidly escalated into feverish petting. And when Ruby then began working her way down Regina’s torso, kissing and sucking and laving at still-barely-damp skin with her tongue, Regina lost all ability for cogent thought.

Consumed by a searing passion that never ceased to astonish her and sometimes even scare her,
Regina surrendered herself completely. Having ignited a flame not easily put out, they loved one another deep into the night.

The next morning Regina awoke to an empty space beside her where Ruby should have been. Groaning at the wonderful aches pervading her body from the night before, she pushed the covers away, slid out of bed, and then went about her morning ablutions. After enjoying a relaxing shower that managed to loosen up some of her sore muscles, she made quick work of getting ready for the day ahead. Once presentable, she made her way downstairs to find Ruby laboring at the stove with a fluffy and very delicious looking pancake sizzling in the skillet.

Ever the exhibitionist at home, Ruby was dressed in her typical morning attire consisting solely of the well worn t-shirt she’d slept in that had a collar so loose it hung off one of her shoulders, and which left almost the entire lengths of her bare legs on full display. With one of said limbs tucked behind the other at the ankle, she was leaning slightly to the side, her head tilted over as if lost in thought and her hair swirled up into a messy bun that left a plethora of brunette strands hanging loose. Seeing Ruby so at home in the kitchen of a morning, her pale skin glowing and her features highlighted by the nascent amber beams of the early morning sun, presented a familiar sight that Regina would never tire of.

When they first became intimate Regina was very surprised to find that her new lover was up-and-at-em at least an hour earlier than her. Seeing as she woke up no later than six am each morning, she hadn't expected Ruby, the much younger of them and a self-confessed night owl, to be such an early riser. But over coffee that morning, Ruby informed Regina that she couldn't remember a time that she'd required more than four hours of sleep. Anything beyond that, she insisted, was a luxury she did not often indulge in. In way of explanation, she posited that it was likely because of her wolf side, noting that when younger Granny also had not required much sleep. Although now that the elder Lucas was advancing in age, she was spending more and more time sleeping each night.

While the habit continued during the time they were dating, to be honest, Regina hadn't really expected it to persist once Ruby moved in, figuring that Ruby might relax into a domestic rhythm that would allow her to get a bit more rest. It was not to be so. Like clockwork, Ruby was up every morning at five, regardless of how late she'd been kept up by their more pleasurable nocturnal activities. To Regina, it seemed as if Ruby had an almost boundless source of energy that was, quite frankly, as enviable as it was impressive.

The perks of having a younger, ultra-active, and highly vivacious wife extended far beyond the bedroom. Every morning she woke to the invigorating, earthy smell of freshly brewing coffee and the sumptuous aroma of breakfast cooking on the stove. And it was even better on mornings when Ruby was feeling especially tactile or overly sentimental or had been swept away on the feathered wings of romance, which meant Regina waking to tender touches, softly whispered “I love you's,” bright green eyes overflowing with awed reverence or some irresistible combination of them all. Mornings with Ruby were never gloomy, always uplifting, and were the absolute best way for a generally cranky person like Regina to start the day.
Moving over to stand beside her incredibly gorgeous spouse, Regina gently slid a hand onto the small of Ruby's back. “Good morning,” she greeted warmly, and when Ruby looked over, she leaned up for a sweet, lingering kiss into which Ruby hummed appreciatively.

“Morning,” Ruby replied after they parted, a smile spreading across her lips from the kiss. “Sleep well?”

“Very,” said Regina, smiling back. After making love for God knows how long, they had both collapsed, sweaty and panting, only to be dragged under by exhaustion moments later. “I always sleep well after you've had your wicked way with me.” Reaching her hand down, Regina snatched a pinch of pancake from the skillet, then popped it playfully in her mouth.

“Thief! Can't you wait to get your own?” Ruby laughed, earning a swat to her rear that had her biting her bottom lip quite enticingly.

Not bothering to hide her own amusement, Regina ignored Ruby’s bedroom eyes as she made her way over to the little breakfast table she’d purchased once the girls were born. As she pulled out a chair to sit, she winked at her wife. “You know me, dear, impatient to the end.” Now seated with perfect posture, she primly crossed her legs.

“Isn't that the truth,” Ruby agreed wholeheartedly as she turned back to the stove, where she flipped the now cooked pancake onto a plate with another half dozen of them. Adding more batter to the skillet, she started another. “So,” she said over her shoulder, “I wanted to check and make sure we're still on the same page regarding what we talked about last night. Y'know, with me taking a trip back to the Enchanted Forest.”

Since Ruby was watching out of the far corner of her peripheral vision, Regina nodded. “We are. If you wish, you may speak with Emma about it today.” Realizing it sounded very much like Ruby needed her permission to do anything, Regina internally winced, though for whatever reason, she chose not to correct herself. “However, in the interest of full disclosure, I must admit that I intend to speak to Belle once more about intensifying her research into other possible cures for the wolf malady.”

After turning the pancake over with a spatula to cook the other side, Ruby shifted sideways enough to give Regina her full attention. Giving a contemplative hum, she then said, “I hadn't thought of that. Dunno why.” Directing a brilliant smile at Regina, she then exclaimed, “Good call, babe!”
“Why, thank you, my Little Red-Cap!” Regina returned equally enthusiastic though also having thrown a hint of sarcasm in for good measure. That particular term of endearment was not her favorite. She was neither an infant nor was she a talking piglet. But Ruby was too sweet to be cross at for such a minor infraction of propriety, so she had learned to live with the pet names so long as she got to sass out a few of her own. Such as the one referencing the Grimm fairy tale version of Red Riding Hood or by using a particular term that rhymed with “rich in wheat” when Ruby was feeling frisky. That one always got a growl in response.

“Watch it now, woman,” Ruby said, turning with the spatula wielded in her hand as if a sword which she then jokingly waved in Regina’s direction. “I have a deadly weapon and I’m not afraid to use it.”

Regina chuckled at Ruby’s adorably amusing antics. “Oh, you have a deadly weapon alright, but it ain’t that,” she then teased, looking dubiously at the spatula before allowing her gaze to travel southward down the long expanse of pale flesh jutting out from beneath Ruby’s t-shirt. “In fact, you seem to have two of them, and might I say, they are looking mighty dangerous this morning.”

“Down, girl,” Ruby purred, giving Regina a wolfish grin.

Regina's nose wrinkled at the stolen turn of phrase. “Isn't that supposed to be my line?”

“Har har.” Ruby stuck out her tongue at Regina before returning to tend to the now finished pancake. After flipping onto the plate with the others, she then poured yet another measure of batter into the skillet. “Instead of provoking me with dog references, why-don’t-cha go do something productive like wake the kiddos up.”

Though Ruby could not see it, Regina rolled her eyes out of reflex. Still, she couldn't restrain the stupidly happy smile she was wearing. Mornings with her wife really were the absolute best way to start the day.

“Alright, then. I suppose I can do that,” she said, deciding not to distract Ruby anymore. Once she pushed out her chair, she made her way toward the door, then lingered within the casing just long enough to say in parting, “I'll leave you in peace to construct your mountain of doughy heart attacks.”

Regina heard Ruby after her as she stepped out into the hallway, “Oh, my God! You are such a drama queen. They are not that unhealthy. And don’t think I won’t remember that dig when you’re savoring every last bite of these amazing pancakes that even Gran can’t beat!”
Laughing under her breath, Regina carried her good mood with her upstairs to wake her sleeping angels. Wrestling two six-year-old heathens through their morning rituals was no easy task but by now Regina was an old pro. She managed to corral her rambunctious little pups through the process of washing their faces and then brushing out their hair before ushering them downstairs to share an enjoyable breakfast as a family. Loathe as she was to admit it, the pancakes were delicious, something in which Ruby – who had managed to pull on a pair of snug leggings in the interim – took far too much satisfaction. After breakfast, Regina and Ruby split duty getting their daughters dressed for school. Once that somewhat hectic feat was accomplished, they made sure the girls had their books and lunches packed and ready, then headed out the door to wait with Sophie and Amie for the bus.

Unlike their more reserved and bashful older brother who Regina had driven to school each morning, the twins were gregarious children who loved interacting with their peers. For the first several weeks of kindergarten, Regina drove them as she had for Henry until the lamentable day arrived in which they begged to be allowed to ride the bus with all of their new friends. Seeing no reason to object, both their mothers had agreed, though Regina had to later confess to a slightly frustrated but mostly amused Ruby that she had made Emma do a thorough background check on the driver, a man who’d not been employed with the school system when Henry was attending, which included identities belonging to both worlds. With her children, she’d explained, she was not willing to take any chances.

With the girls gone to school, Regina and Ruby headed back inside, where upon entering and shutting the door, Regina was besieged by her wife's lips in a kiss so thorough that it smudged her lipstick. Giggling like a teenage girl, Ruby then disappeared up the stairs leaving Regina to fix her ruined lipstick with her magic. With the way Ruby behaved sometimes, it was hard to imagine that she was approaching forty. It didn't seem possible, yet it was true. What was even more unbelievable was that she was about to turn fifty-two herself when most days she still felt as if she were the same age as when the Curse had broken. Yet time did not lie or at least if had started to she was not made aware.

Unwilling to think about how old she was getting a second longer and with Ruby upstairs and out of earshot, Regina decided it was the perfect time to contact Belle. When she had fetched her phone from where she'd laid it on the coffee table, she scrolled through her list of contacts to find the kind librarian for whom Ruby held so much affection, and once it was located, she hovered her finger above the name.

For a moment, Regina was tempted to rethink her decision. Had Ruby not possessed such blind faith in Belle, Regina would have refrained from contacting the bookworm for the sole reason that she was Mrs. Gold. For even though her relationship with Rumplestiltskin was no longer contentious, she was still not ready to trust him just yet. Maybe she never would. That much sordid history was impossible to erase no matter how much white-out poured over the pages.
In the year since that strange day in the park on her fifth anniversary with Ruby, Rumple had gone out of his way to make sure Regina understood he was no longer a threat to her and that his offer to strive to reach a place of amicable interaction with her was indeed genuine. So far, he had done well to convince her of just that. Yet however much their once strained relationship had improved, the depth of hurt that existed between them was not one Regina could easily forget. Even all these years later, she still had bitter thoughts about how easily and cruelly she had been manipulated.

But even so, she knew it was irrational to hold Rumple's past against Belle when the woman had been nothing but kind and understanding over the years. If anyone in Storybrooke besides the obvious few had reason to hate Regina, it was Belle. What she had done to the girl after she found out Rumple cared for his pretty new maid was unforgivable. In many ways, Regina felt she'd been less kind to Belle than she had to Snow White, and that was just all kinds of wrong. If there was one thing about the aptly named woman that Regina was sure of, it was that was a true hero Belle at heart. After all, she loved a monster, which Regina supposed was half the reason Belle and Ruby made such good friends.

Resolved once and for all to trust Belle in so delicate a matter, Regina pressed down on the contact, which dialed the number attached to Belle's cell phone. After two rings, Belle answered.

“Good morning, Regina,” she greeted, her charming accent making her sound even more chipper. “What can I do for you?”

Regina couldn't imagine what could possibly be a cause for such happiness when living with a crotchety old man like Rumple, but she did not voice such opinions. Instead, she said, “I was wondering if you might do me a small favor in your free time.”

“Depends on what that favor is, I suppose,” answered Belle, seeming curious rather than suspicious.

Moving around the coffee table, Regina sat down on the sofa, nestling herself in the corner so that she could rest one elbow on the arm of it. After situating herself comfortably, she crossed her legs and replied, “I'm assuming Ruby has kept you informed about what's happening with the local wolf population.”

“She has,” Belle said, sadness creeping into her tone. “It's really been weighing on her lately.”

“Yes,” Regina sighed into the phone, “and now she's got it in her head that she needs to return to the Enchanted Forest to retrieve a pack of wolves to bring back. The theory she's operating under is that perhaps since the wolves here are indigenous to our old world, bringing more over might spur a population growth.”
“Makes sense. But what can I do to help? I'm not very good with animals, I'm afraid. Particularly wolves.” Regina could hear the tremor in Belle’s voice as the woman was obviously recalling some horrific scare with the beasts.

Regina shifted a bit on the couch as she played with the triangle-shaped ruby pendant of the necklace she'd chosen to wear that day. “Nor do you need to be. What I need is your expertise with research. Now, I am aware that you have conducted intensive searches in the past, but I can't help but hope that there might be some new information you can dig up in those old tomes you so love to read. More specifically, I'm seeking information about magical diseases that affect canids of any type.”

After a moment of silence, Belle replied. “Do you really think that whatever is happening to them is magical in nature?”

Nodding despite Belle not being able to see, Regina answered, “I do. Ruby is grasping at straws because she feels like she's responsible for this, so she needs to fix it. But I'm convinced that what's happening to the wolves is unrelated to...what happened back then. That...man may have been clever enough to bushwhack me and lure Ruby into his clutches, but he was no magician. Something else is going on with the wolves here and I can feel it in my bones that it's magical at the source.”

“Well,” Belle then said, “I'll see what I can dig up. I know of a few places to look already, and I just received delivery of a cache of tomes and scrolls the dwarves discovered in the mines that I've not had a chance to sift through yet. Perhaps there might be something of use in those.”

Regina had not heard of this discovery Belle was referring to, and while it should bother her that the mayor was not immediately made aware of the existence of something of such potential value, if Belle could use the material to solve the problem of whatever was killing the wolves of Storybrooke, she wasn't inclined to let it concern her.

“That would be most helpful,” Regina replied, hoping Belle could hear how grateful she really was. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome.” Regina could hear the pretty smile in the woman's voice. “I'm glad to be of help to Ruby or to you any time. I know we've never been exceptionally close, but I'm not just Ruby's friend, Regina. I'm yours, too.”

Feeling a pleasant warmth in her chest, Regina was surprised to find that she was actually happy to know that Belle considered her a friend. For much of the past ten years, she had just considered Belle
to be an acquaintance who just so happened to be Ruby's friend, but there was no denying the fact that Belle had never once turned down a call for help when Regina had needed her. During times when no one else was brave enough to do so, Belle would offer advice, particularly where Ruby was concerned, that had never steered Regina wrong. A quirky, extremely beautiful, and highly intelligent librarian she may be, but Belle was also one of the best human beings Regina had ever met, perhaps even the best outside of Ruby.

“That means a great deal to me, Belle,” she replied after a moment gathering herself. “And though I am not one to freely speak from the heart, I have to admit that I have come to consider you a friend as well. I can count you, and that’s something I can’t say for many other people.”

“Well, I'm glad to hear it! Anyway, I'm sure you have a lot to do this morning, so I'll let you get to it. And I will let you know if I find anything, alright?”

“That would be much appreciated. Thank you again, Belle.”

“Have a good morning, Regina.”

“The same to you,” she replied, and then took the phone away from her when she heard the call disconnect.

Sitting back heavily, Regina breathed in deeply and exhaled slowly. With any luck, Belle would be able to find something quickly enough to prevent Ruby having to make such a dangerous trip to the Enchanted Forest, but even though Belle was the most diligent and skillful researcher Regina had ever known, she doubted as to whether such information even existed. Regina considered herself to be well versed in magic and particularly in wolves, since after meeting Snow's bewitching werewolf companion named Red she had invested much time into procuring any and all information she could relating to werewolves and wolves in general.

In all her studies, Regina had never come across anything like what was currently happening to the wolves of Storybrooke and it had her worried. What she'd said to Belle was something she hadn't even confessed to Ruby, that there was something deeper at work to affect the animals in such a way, and whatever it was, she had a feeling in the pit of her stomach that it was not good. Hopefully she was wrong, but if the past was any indicator, she was unlikely to be so lucky, for after years of relative peace, Storybrooke was well past due for a disaster.
So, we have Ruby heading off to the Enchanted Forest, Regina fretting over it, and Belle researching whatever is going on with the wolves. Things are going to heat up in the coming weeks. Stay tuned!

Also, in fixing a bit of lore concerning the wolves for The Price of Destiny, I noticed some of the chapters are painfully long. I'd appreciate if anyone with an informed opinion would let me know in the comments or in a PM if anyone thinks that story would be more readable if I split some of those longer chapters up.

Hope y'all enjoyed the chapter!
Parting is Such Sweet Sorrow

Chapter Summary

Two weeks later, Regina says goodbye to Ruby, who is traveling with Emma to the Enchanted Forest.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to UnfairestOfThemAll for being a rad beta and not being afraid to tell me when stuff doesn't make sense!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was almost two weeks later when Regina found herself pacing anxiously in her office while waiting for a call from her wife. A flurry of last minute preparations demanded Ruby’s attention before the journey back to the Enchanted Forest, and in the interim she had convinced Regina to head into the office for a half day to keep her mind off their impending separation. The idea wasn’t without merit when Regina had been naught but a bundle of frayed nerves over the past twenty-four hours.

Very early that morning she woke from a dream she could not recall. Because it was four and Ruby was still sleeping, she laid in the bed staring at the ceiling for a while. Unable fall back asleep, frustrated and anxious over what lay ahead, she shifted onto her side. Her eyes fell upon a slumbering Ruby, who was sprawled out on her side of the bed, tummy down with a pillow encased in her arms upon which her head rested at a painful angle. How the woman slept in such a contorted way was a mystery to Regina, and even more so she wondered how it was possible Ruby rested so well and at the same time did not acquire a plethora of stiff muscles and kinked bones in her neck and shoulders. But her face was serene in repose – the lines of her cheeks and forehead smoothed out the same as when she was in her twenties and those utterly beguiling lips just barely turned up at the corners as though her dreams were sugar plum sweet and lovely as a fresh spring rose.

An ache balled up in Regina’s chest that proved impossible to dispel over the next twelve hours. No matter how long she spent drinking in the sight of Ruby so serene and beautiful in the soft rays of a nascent sun, that feeling of dread persisted. It seemed impervious to repeated self-reassurance that everything would be okay, that Ruby would come home safe and sound with the solution in hand for the crisis that drove her to such a drastic action as to risk magically traversing the vastness of space to visit a world no longer suitable for the modernized inhabitants of Storybrooke.

Dueling motivations of abject fear and overwhelming adoration kept Regina church mouse still and silent during that hour she held vigil over her wife. The only exception was when she braved feather-
light touches to a pale cheek or to paradoxically elegant fingers calloused over from hard labors inherent to an underprivileged youth, or to absently play with the hem of a well-worn t-shirt under the covers while remembering Ruby’s enchanting exuberance the day she bought it in that kitschy little store tucked in between the bakery and the laundromat. It hurt too much to realize that Ruby was going where she couldn’t follow. And though she hated that she was so inextricably tethered to Storybrooke by responsibilities she couldn’t escape, she hated herself even more for feeling that way because she loved her children more than she’d ever loved anything or anyone in the world with only one exception: their other mother. Ruby was half-literally her heart, essentially tangled with her soul, and her one True Love. Against every expectation they made something whole and perfect out of the scattered, fragmented messes of their lives, and Regina was having a hard time convincing herself the welds of love so artfully and carefully applied over the years would hold up to the stress of untold millions of miles that would soon stand between them.

Later that morning after Ruby woke up and they shared an extended good morning embrace that wasn’t nearly long enough, Regina tried to immerse herself in routine as a distraction from her mounting anxiety. While she started on breakfast, Ruby woke the girls up a little early to spend some quality time with them before she left. The raucous noise of their overly enthusiastic play set the rhythm to Regina’s motions about the kitchen. And as she cooked a hearty meal of featherbed eggs, turkey sausage links, and apple-cinnamon streusel pancake bars, she switched to autopilot so that she could absorb the sounds now characteristic to her of happiness. By the time all three of her girls came downstairs, red faced and laughing, she was surreptitiously brushing the wetness from her cheeks so that Ruby wouldn’t see she’d been crying.

Getting the girls to school was a chore once they were reminded their Mama would be leaving for a few days. They begged and pleaded for Ruby to stay, which didn’t help either Ruby or Regina in their efforts to process the reality of their pending separation. Genetically stubborn as they were, they only acquiesced to Regina’s insistence they attend school as normal after many tears and much persuasive convincing from their Mama. But still Sophia and Amelia clung to Ruby’s legs as they walked to the car as a family in the crisp yet frigid Maine air and, when they were dropped off at school, made Ruby escort them all the way to class. It took longer for Ruby to return to the car than it should have, and judging by the way Ruby kept her head tilted down the entire walk back, Regina knew it was because she also had been crying.

Upon arriving at the car, Ruby crossed over to the driver’s side door and gestured for Regina to roll the window down.

“I’m gonna walk to the station from here,” she’d said, voice tight with emotion. “I need the space to prepare myself for this.”

“Harder than you thought it would be, isn’t it?” Regina said, not meaning to sound accusatory though the words came out that way. “This isn’t like last time. You’re not going to New York where I can call you every afternoon and Skype you at night so the girls can see you before they go to bed. You’ll be in another world. Another world where I can’t reach you. I can’t come to the rescue this time, Ruby.”
A tight grimace further soured Ruby’s expression. “I know. But Emma will be there and I'll be careful. It’s just...” She paused to heave a labored breath and run a trembling hand through her hair. “I feel trapped. I feel like I'll drive myself crazy if I don’t fix this problem with the wolves but at the same time I don’t want to leave you or the girls.”

Seeing how much this was tearing at Ruby, Regina turned the car off and stepped out to wrap her fretting wife up in a hug that did little to calm her frazzled nerves but which seemed to help Ruby find a measure of peace again. Selflessness didn’t come easy for Regina but as a mother she’d learned to set her own issues aside and as a wife she’d learned to compromise in order to keep everyone happy and healthy. And besides, the last thing she wanted was for Ruby to step off into another world so conflicted that she couldn’t concentrate, or was distracted from either achieving her goal or treading carefully through a realm fraught with danger, or worse – both.

After pulling away, she rubbed at Ruby’s leather-bound arms then straightened out the slim black suede jacket her statuesque wife was wearing. “Listen to me. As much as I also don’t want you to go, I understand why you must. And what’s more, I trust you to get back to me, to us, safely. So chin up, my love. In a few days, all of this grief will be only an unhappy memory.”

Ruby was so relieved that she kissed Regina right there in the school parking lot, heedless of the other parents dropping their tykes off, most of whom stared in disapproval. Though the rebellious and naughty part of her reveled in their judgmental eyes boring into the back of her head, the more responsible part prompted her to break the kiss off short. She and Ruby parted after that with the promise of one last opportunity to properly say their goodbyes at the portal site.

Regina drove straight to work from Storybrooke Elementary, and to say engrossing herself in the duties inherent to being a mayor hadn't helped the situation was a gross understatement. For most of the morning she was so distracted that she took twice as long to read through reports and more than once underlined an important phrase in her notations until the tip of her pen wore through the page. Time wore by interminably as the loathsome moment of separation waxed ever closer. Soon enough words began to blur together until nothing she read made much sense to her at all.

Cursing her traitorous nerves, she stood and began to pace, hoping that a bit of physical activity might aid in quelling the unsettled state of her stomach. Thus far it hadn't helped much aside from blunting the urge to tear at her hair in agitation, which was admittedly a bonus, but not nearly enough relief when she was expecting Ruby's call any minute. And while she was glad that the terrible anticipation would soon be at an end, she was dreading the goodbye soon to follow.

After agreeing to support her spouse’s decision to return to the Enchanted Forest in search of a cure for whatever was ailing the wolves of Storybrooke, Regina spent the next day formulating a plan for Ruby to follow once she and Emma arrived on the other side. The first problem she was presented
with was how to get them there. Regina was a powerful sorceress, the most powerful alive that she knew of other than her sister, but even she lacked the absurd levels of power necessary to summon a portal via raw magic. Much to her chagrin, she realized she was going to need help of the sort that she was very leery of seeking: namely, that of the Dark One.

That conversation was awkward for Regina. It felt much like she was once again the hapless student, completely at the mercy of Rumple's vast stores of knowledge and power. As a woman far too proud for her own good, Regina hated subjecting herself to such a vulnerable position, but she’d felt there was no other choice. Rumple was the only person alive that could help her.

To make bearing that vulnerability easier, she reminded herself that she was doing this for her wife's sake and for the sake of her children's future. Without a wolf pack to run with, Ruby would suffer from an empty space in her life that all the human family in the world couldn’t fill up, and so would the girls once they came of age. While their family could technically be considered as Ruby’s pack, werewolves needed more than a pack of their own kind to thrive; they needed freedom to run through forest and meadow in glorious comradeship with their wild, undomesticated, unintelligent kin. Without the wolves native to the Storybrooke area to interact with, Ruby’s wolf would be deprived of a source of companionship necessary for her overall emotional well-being, resulting, Granny had once privately told Regina, in malaise and depression that could last for weeks at a time. That realization was what prompted Regina to swallow her pride to visit her old mentor.

Rumple, rather unexpectedly, had been very accommodating, which left Regina questioning his ulterior motives. Although he assured her his intentions for helping were pure, she was certain he was intentionally veiling his true motive. As he spoke of the potential side-effects of forcibly opening a portal with magic, she hearkened back to her anniversary a few years back. Upon approaching Regina, Rumple had acted so very out of character that Regina became convinced he was keeping some vital piece of information from her, and her gut was telling her that his willingness to advise her now was predicated upon that same secret. As equally curious and suspicious as she was, she nonetheless decided not to press the Dark One. Whatever secret he had alluded to that day in the park, she knew she was unprepared to confront it and wasn’t sure if she ever would be.

In any case, Rumple had gone on to tell her that the spell to power a portal back to the Enchanted Forest required an immense amount of power that no one person could manage alone. When she reminded him of how Snow and Charming screwed over Maleficent, he explained that the apprentice had only been able to power the portal because he himself was empowered by the Sorcerer, and of all magicians to ever live, the Sorcerer was the greatest of them all, his power exceeding that of even the Dark One.

“It would take the combined powers of every magician in Storybrooke, major and minor, to open a portal with such a brute force method,” he said, his brogue making the information even less palatable to Regina. “And should the effort succeed, the repercussions would be immense. Not even I can begin to predict the cost of such a spell, and as I value my life, I would not risk it for anything less than the very lives of those I hold most dear.”
Regina visibly deflated at the setback. Though a small, incredibly selfish part of her exulted in the news that Ruby might not get to take her trip after all.

“Perhaps you ought to pay a visit the bean fields,” Rumple then suggested, dashing that tiny sliver of selfishness.

Regina internally smacked herself. She had forgotten all about reading the latest progress report on Anton’s ambitious project to recreate the magical beans for which his people were famous. The fate of the first crop was something Regina was not proud of. She had still been enraged over her mother’s death and the gall of the Charming’s to plot to imprison her in Rumpelstiltskin’s enchanted cell should she elect to return to the Enchanted Forest rather than stay in Storybrooke after the first bean crop was harvested. But she was even more afraid of losing Henry at the time. Back then, her son’s trust in her was paper thin at best, and she’d been panicking over the possibility of being kept from him by force. Ever her own worst enemy, Regina burned the bean fields to ashes. She couldn’t have predicted that there would be need for them some ten years on and that the need would be one of a personal nature to her.

Still, castigating herself for a mistake a decade in the rear view mirror was not helping Ruby. Nor, for that matter, was lingering about the Pawn Shop listening to Rumple pontificate about the dangers awaiting Ruby back in the Old World – of which she was painfully aware. So, after thanking Rumple with only a smidgen of her usual snark, she paid a visit to the once gigantic man who had persistently continued his work to grow magic beans in Storybrooke.

After losing the first crop, Anton gave up on his family legacy for a time to settle into a normal life in town. But about a year and a half ago Belle came across an interesting entry in a tome containing the histories of the giants regarding the first iteration of the famed magic beans, which kick started the gentle giant’s interest all over again. With a new avenue to pursue, he resumed his work immediately and with the full weight of the Town Council behind the endeavor.

Upon arriving at the fields, Regina found that Anton, like Rumple, was eager to help. However, whereas Regina took Rumple’s assistance with a grain of salt, she trusted Anton as much as she did anyone outside of her inner circle. His kind heart did not allow for subterfuge, and thus when he’d stated his goals for continuing bean research to the Council (namely offering those who wanted to visit or return to the old lands an opportunity to do that with the bonus of restoring his people to glory), it did not even enter her mind to doubt him.

Exchanging pleasantries with the soft-spoken giant was a relief after the tense meeting with Rumple in the Pawn Shop. Anton was particularly jovial that day, having harvested a handful of beans from the first crop to bear viable fruit. When Regina explained the situation to him, he was more than glad to donate two beans to the cause, one for each leg of the journey.
With that task seen to, Regina next journeyed to Town Hall where she holed herself up in her office for the rest of the afternoon. Relying on her extensive knowledge of the area surrounding her castle, she magicked a detailed topographical map into being and set about marking out a route through the thick forests and mountains it was nestled in. It took a while longer than she thought it would, as it seemed her memory of the terrain was not quite so sharp as it once was being so many years removed from residence. Still, she could remember enough to devise a safe route, or at least safe enough for the Savior and an enormously powerful werewolf to traverse without much difficulty.

Having finished the map, she next set about making a tentative list of supplies that two women of Ruby and Emma's strength would be able to carry with them on their trek. Knowing both to be in the prime of their lives and in peak physical condition, she figured they could carry enough in their packs for at least three days, maybe more considering how unnaturally strong her wife was even in her human form. Three days was enough time for them to make it to her castle and back at least twice, and they would probably be able restock their supplies with non-perishable food items that Regina had kept readily on hand for the long journeys she was sometimes required to take as Queen. Besides, even if those supplies were no longer available, she also knew that Ruby was capable of foraging indefinitely and could easily make due for herself and her traveling companion.

The list complete, Regina ate a late lunch and then set about researching nearby stores that carried camping supplies and making the necessary phone calls to secure the items that she could not readily lay hands on in town, such as camping packs, freeze dried meals, MRE's, and emergency medical kits. After that, she spent the remainder of the afternoon working on a few pressing items for the council meeting set to hold session a week later. By the time the day was over, she had accomplished so much that she felt a great sense of satisfaction at her general efficiency.

That night, she and Ruby invited Emma over for dinner, and after eating, they spent some time with the girls, who took the opportunity to involve their Aunty Em in their intricately detailed tea parties and mock adventures. Both girls were angry at Regina for insisting they go to bed on schedule, but they were so tired from playing with Emma and their perpetually energetic werewolf of a mother that they put up a minimal fight. Once they were tucked in, the three women settled into the living room to talk through the trip.

Knowing that the simplest plans were the best, Regina had set a very concise plan of action that would be easy to follow for even the simplest of minds, which she said with a smirk in Emma's direction. Rolling her eyes, the Savior took the jibe with grace, chuckling as Ruby elbowed Regina playfully in the ribs. They all shared a laugh before a serious air descended over the room, each of them realizing just how dangerous the trip would be, despite how prepared they were going to be.

“Swear to me that you will both be careful,” Regina had said, eyeing them both with a grave expression. “The people may be gone from our old lands, but there are still creatures and powers that make their homes there that even I would not trifle with. I know that you're both strong and capable individuals, but no one can be truly safe there, not really.”
Nodding, Emma had looked at Regina with an earnestness in her eyes that was reassuring. “We'll be careful, Regina. Don't worry. I learned my lesson the hard way last time I was there. I know to expect the unexpected and to always be on guard. Besides, Ruby grew up there, so she knows what’s up. We'll take care of each other.”

“She's right, sweetie,” Ruby agree, clutching Regina's hand and bringing it up to her mouth to place a tender kiss on her knuckles. “We'll be okay. We won't linger longer than necessary. We should be able to locate a den without any problems. I never had trouble finding a pack before the curse because my wolf has a sixth sense about her fellow canines. So really, it'll just be a matter of convincing them to come along. But I think I can establish myself as Alpha quickly, and then all we have to do is lead them back to the portal location.”

A sable brow rose at Ruby’s unconcerned tone. “That’s all, you say?”

Turning on the sofa, Ruby's face had turned semi-worried as she looked at Regina. “Is there something you’re not telling me? Should I be worried?”

“No,” Regina sighed, giving Ruby’s and a squeeze. “I'm confident of your ability to defend yourselves. Both of you.” She glanced from Ruby to Emma and then back to Ruby again. “I simply don’t want you underestimating the danger you will be in.”

“Believe me I’m not,” said Ruby, assuring Regina with her eyes. “Like Emma said, we’ll watch out for each other.” She then cocked her head to the side curiously. “Say, did you figure out a way to get us there and back?”

The change of topic was welcome to Regina. Justifiable as her concerns were, she needed a break from the negativity, and if even she was exasperated with her nagging, Ruby and Emma were bound to be doubly so. Of course, Emma would ever fess up to such a thing, as the Savior still harbored a healthy respect for the ability of offensive remarks – even those made in jest – to sour Regina’s mood. Ruby, however, had been broadcasting her frustration via body language that was as easily translatable for Regina as her version of the Aeneid in the original Latin. That longsuffering smile could fool everyone else in Storybrooke, but Regina knew her wife almost better than she knew herself.

“Yes, I did as a matter of fact,” she said, measuring her tone to a more positive tint. She then leaned forward to fetch her purse off the coffee table, and after fishing around in for a minute to locate what she was looking for, presented it to the other occupants of the room. She smiled as both women looked at in awe upon the single bean that lay nestled in her palm.
“Is that what I think it is?” Emma appeared astonished, as if seeing but not quite believing just yet.

Regina nodded in confirmation, still grinning. “It is, indeed.”

“A magic bean,” said Ruby in wonderment before casting inquisitive eyes upon Regina. “But I thought they were all gone.”

“They were,” said Regina. “However, thanks to a fortuitous discovery by our industrious and intrepid librarian, Anton was able to start up his research again. He’s been working in secret for the past eighteen months. He even enlisted the help of the fairies in the project. Together, after much time and toil, they could produce a viable specimen. This is a product of their labor. A first fruit if you will.”

Taking a deep breath, Emma allowed it to escape slowly as she digested the information. “Are you going to tell the town?” she posed after a moment.

“Yes, I am,” Regina said, having anticipated the question. “I only just learned of the crop viability recently, mind you, so I’m still processing the news myself. However, I plan on speaking to the Council and your parents in the next few days. There is one more of these to get you two back home, but the rest of them are still being kept under lock and key. So be careful not to misplace them. I’ve already spoken to Rumple and should the need arise, we wouldn’t be able to manually open a portal. Even together we lack the power to accomplish such a feat.”

“It takes that much magic?” Ruby’s eyes were wide as if she was unable to imagine any kind of spell requiring such vast amounts of power that even the Evil Queen and the Dark One working in tandem could not cast it.

“Rumple assures me that is this case, and I happen to believe him,” Regina said. “He has no reason to lie to me about this.”

After studying Regina for a long moment, Ruby nodded in acceptance. “Alright. I guess he has been kind of well-behaved since...well...you know.” At that her eyes diverted to shield the pain of her memories from Regina.

Regina agreed, then gave Ruby’s hand another squeeze. Her wife turned and smiled, though it was weak and tired and a profound sorrow was peeking out from behind the false reassurance in her eyes. Heroic effort aside, there was no hiding from Regina that memories of that terrible day had
been dredged up, and that they were sapping Ruby of her normally abundant ebullience.

With Ruby’s mood degenerating and what with it being so late, Regina decided to put an end to the night. Soon after, Emma departed for her home, and once they saw the blonde out to the porch, they kept watch until Emma was safely driving away in that hideous lemon on wheels she called a car.

With the taillights of the Beetle disappearing over the cresting road, Regina lead Ruby back in by the hand, then guided them upstairs to their bedroom. Quick work was made of getting ready for bed so that within minutes Regina was lounging in the comfort of her ridiculously expensive and equally comfortable bed with her wife snugly asleep in her arms.

Unfortunately, rest did not come easily.

The next two weeks passed very quickly for Regina. Not two days after her visit to Anton, there was a leak regarding the pending availability of magic beans. The news created quite a stir in town. Many citizens had yet to surrender hope of returning to the Old World, if only for a brief visit, and of those a very vocal contingent converged upon Town Hall to express their displeasure in the Mayor having kept the project a secret. When the crowd refused all calls to disperse, Regina had to make a public appearance and give an impromptu speech explaining her decision to quell the outraged fervor of the electorate.

After returning to her office, she’d plopped down into her chair, steaming at the person she thought the most obvious suspect of the leak. But rather than making a scene of confronting said person and then rubbing their button nose in yet another lapse in secret keeping, she kept her anger confined to the four walls of her office. The truth of the matter was that she simply had no time to waste upon an unnecessary confrontation when her attention on an ordinary day would have been monopolized by a typical mayoral workload. That she’d been required to douse proverbial fires that sprouted up regarding the beans whilst continuing preparations for Ruby’s departure meant that she didn’t have a second to spare with which to castigate her former step-daughter for yet another slip of the tongue.

With her life a hectic mish-mash of work and home duties, time escaped through her fingers as if water through a colander pocked with gaping holes rather than tiny dots. All too soon, the day of Ruby's departure was at hand. And so, she found herself waiting on edge in her office for the phone call that would signal it was time.

Looking up at the clock, Regina noticed it was just past noon. She sighed. Ruby would be calling any time now and she braced herself for the onslaught of emotions that would soon begin and which would not dissipate for at least the next several days. Since they were married, Regina had only once
been apart from Ruby for more than a day, and that was when Ruby was in New York at the FBI training seminar. Since the girls were born the house not known silence, but in the quiet hours after Amelia and Sophia were in bed, it got unbearably lonely with Ruby away.

During that terribly long separation, Regina felt at a loss as to what to do with herself without Ruby’s penchant for theatrics to entertain her as they chatted on the sofa about their days; or her wife’s almost tangible warmth constantly hovering nearby; or the incessant chatter that sometimes preceded Ruby finally falling to sleep. To take the sting off missing her other, better half, she fell back into old patterns she relied on during the Curse, such as reading by firelight in the living room or working in her home office late into the night. Even those normally stimulating activities felt less fulfilling devoid of the uniquely enriching sunshine that was Ruby’s mere presence. The only bright spot other than quality time spent with the children was Ruby’s nightly calls, but those were pale imitations of the real thing. In the end, she made it through the bitterly lonely nights by sheer force of will and with the liberal usage of sleep aids.

She supposed this time might be easier with experience but wasn’t about to hold her breath. Misery was likely to be her only company in the wee hours of the morning. But at the very least she would have ample time to get caught up on some of the reading she fell behind on during the past two weeks of late nights spent with Ruby. Regina loved to read and while that would occupy her mind at night, her real fear was that she would be unable to sleep at all without Ruby beside her and again be forced to resort to medication, which she loathed. Due to her nightmares, it was hard enough to sleep some nights even with Ruby's preternatural heat enveloping her; she dreaded having to wake up in a cold sweat, panting, afraid, and very much alone as she had been during most of her adult life.

When she and Ruby first became a couple, Regina's generally poor sleeping habits were the one area of her life she had least expected to be impacted to any great degree. But to her great surprise, she found that she slept more soundly with Ruby close by. There was something magical about that woman that put Regina at ease in her sleep from the first night they shared a bed, as if Ruby was a human balm to troubles of the mind. And even when the nightmares did come, Ruby was always there to coax Regina down through loving kisses and softly spoken reassurances from that panicky state that always clings to a person afterward like sap weeping from a wounded tree.

Regina was a happier person with Ruby in large part because she was a better rested person. It was hard to quantify how profound an affect her improved sleep cycles had on her attitude. There was no alternative universe physicists could conjure up in which she could be described as a happy-go-lucky person, but at least now she had more emotional balance, which meant less vicious mood swings and a generally improved demeanor. Everyone liked her better since Ruby came along. Hell, Regina liked herself better. With Ruby going so far away, though, she couldn’t help but fear that was in jeopardy.

Clenching her eyes shut, Regina focused on regulating her breathing lest her anxiety turn her temper sour. She needed to be as hopeful and positive as possible when she saw Ruby off to the Enchanted Forest, because God forbid if something were to happen, she didn't want anything to sully the memory of their farewell.
As she took her time breathing, Regina felt herself reach a calm centered sense of steadiness, and as if on cue when she was at last calmed her cell phone rang.

Regina rolled her eyes at the ringtone that blared out into the enclosed office space. How Ruby managed to sneak into her phone again was a mystery, but somehow she had done just that. To beat it all, Ruby had changed the ringtone to a seventies Disco song by Tina Charles entitled, “I Love To Love (But My Baby Loves To Dance)”. The chorus, while annoying, was kind of catchy in an odd sort of way so that Regina found herself chuckling at her wife's oft questionable taste in music.

After pressing accept, she held the phone up to her ear. “Tina Charles, Ruby? Really?”

Hearing her wife's melodic laughter echo through the phone, Regina smiled. Ruby's laugh was one of her favorite sounds in the world. It never failed to bring a smile to her face and make her heart skip a beat.

“It’s fitting, though. C’mon, I dare you to deny it,” was Ruby's mirthful reply. Regina could hear the grin in her inflection.

Chuckling, Regina nodded despite the fact Ruby could not see her. “I suppose there is a kernel of relevance. The relevance of Miss Charles aside, are you ready to go?”

“I am,” Ruby answered, her voice now more muted and serious. “I just talked to Emma, too. Everyone is set to meet at the well in about fifteen minutes.”

Looking up at the clock out of instinct, Regina mentally calculated how long it would take her to drive there and decided that she had time. She wanted to preserve her stores of energy as much as possible for the taxing spell she was going to have to perform. “Very well, then. I'll leave now. It shouldn't take more than ten minutes to arrive.”

“Kay. I'll see you then, babe.”

Even though she rolled her eyes at the cliché sobriquet, Regina still smiled. It was just so Ruby that she could never quite bring herself to be offended or angry.
“I'll see you then, dear,” she said, and having heard Ruby disconnect the call, placed her phone in her purse on the desk then gathered up her things to leave.

Regina pulled her Benz into the parking area near the well right on time. Leaving her purse behind, she stepped out of the vehicle and straightened her blouse and dress coat. It was a mild and pleasant afternoon in late September, she hadn't needed her overcoat, but those days were long ahead. Once she had locked up her vehicle, she then made quick work of the short distance to the well, following the dirt trail that snaked its way through the woods there.

As she neared the clearing where the well was situated and the foliage cleared, she saw that she was the last to arrive. The rest of the tiny group was loitering around the well, conversing among themselves while they waited. Among them were Snow, David, Belle, Hook, and Zelena, the latter of which was there at Regina's request. She could tell that her sister was still uncomfortable being around the people she had done so much wrong to, and judging by the suspicious looks Zelena was getting from the others, particularly from Rumple and Belle, the discomfort was mutual. While Regina understood how they all felt, she needed her sister’s support. Regina trusted the Charming’s as much as was possible consider their lengthy and tempestuous pasts but the deep sense of trust she had built with Zelena post-resurrection trumped them all.

As her eyes moved toward the front of the well, she spotted Ruby and Emma side-by-side, crouched down next to their packs as they rechecked their supplies. They chatted as they did so, smiles on their faces. Regina's disquiet was somewhat alleviated by the fact that both appeared calm and confident. There wasn't even the barest hint of apprehension in their postures or expressions, rather the opposite, especially with Ruby, who appeared to be chomping at the bit to get started on the journey. Regina was not blind to Ruby’s hope for some grand and epic adventure, and though she didn’t begrudge Ruby that, she found herself hoping it would be relatively mundane as far as such things go.

When she at last stepped into the clearing, Ruby stood as if sensing her presence, turning on the spot to catch her eyes. A wide grin spread across her face as she jogged the short distance to meet Regina. As Ruby neared, Regina could feel her emotional control slipping. Being here at the well, seeing Ruby dressed for travel, made it all real and imminent and breathtakingly scary. Struggling to hold in her apprehension, she took in Ruby's appearance, from her khaki cargo pants and hiking boots, to the red and gray long sleeved flannel shirt left unbuttoned so that the white of a t-shirt peeking out from underneath. Her long brown hair was pulled up in a loose pony tail and it swung from side to side as she jogged. She looked beautiful. But then again, Ruby could make a burlap sack work to her favor.

“Hey, hon,” Ruby greeted once she was standing in front of Regina. Biting her lip, she stuffed her hands into her back pockets.

“Hello, my darling,” Regina replied with her own gentle smile, taking a moment to study her wife's
familiar face. Even with a minimal amount of make-up, her immense natural attractiveness was on full display, skin aglow and eyes gleaming with the anticipation of an exciting excursion. Her mouth was curved up in one of her signature smiles, toothy and wide and effervescent, with glossy pinks lips that begged to be kissed.

In that moment, Regina was having a hard time fathoming how she was going survive the next few days without being able to see Ruby's face or to kiss her or hold her. It seemed like her entire body was already aching from the absence of her True Love, and her chest tightened uncomfortably. In just a few minutes’ time, her wife was literally going to be a world away from her – literally. For a couple who hadn't seen more than three hundred miles between them in nearly a decade, being so far apart was going to be hell; and even though Ruby was excited for the trip, Regina knew that once the portal closed, the same heaviness she was feeling now would settle in for Ruby as well.

Overwhelmed, she stepped forward and looped her arms low around Ruby's waist, pulling her taller spouse close until their bodies were pressed together. She buried her face in the junction between Ruby's jaw and shoulder, deeply inhaling her wife's scent. As she settled into the embrace, Ruby responded by wrapping an arm around her shoulder and then lifted the other so that she could bury long fingers in the hair at the back of Regina's head. The warm, familiar feeling the action evoked clashed with her nerves, causing her stomach to flip-flop. Regina gritted her teeth to prevent nausea.

Feeling the prickling of tears already, she took a shaky breath. “I don't want you to go,” she said, words whispered against Ruby's neck. She felt her wife subtly tense in response to her words.

“I know.” Ruby's reply was choked with too emotions to discern them all, alerting Regina to how conflicted she still was. “And I wish for all the world I didn't have to, but I do. And I wish that you could come with me, but you can't. This is how it has to be.”

Nodding, Regina pulled back, giving Ruby a weak smile as her hand disentangled from Regina's hair. Reaching for Ruby's hands, she laced their fingers together, not caring that they had an audience, and then dipped her head to hide her own swirling emotions.

“You're right. That doesn't mean I don't I hate it,” she said, a tear breaking free from her lids and cascading down her cheek. “I feel like I'm back in that moment so long ago after I saved Snow, saying my farewells to Daniel in the stables. Only this time, I'm aware of the tragedy that might happen. I'm terrified, Ruby. I can't lose you. It almost undid me last time.”

“Hey, hey,” Ruby called, tipping Regina's chin up with her index finger. “You're not going to lose me. You're not.”
“You can’t know that!” Regina barked back, her chin trembling. “It’s impossible to predict what could happen. The variables are endless! We don’t even know what might be waiting for you on the other side of the portal. For all we know, the entire realm could have been obliterated or overrun by untold creatures that have made their way there. And what if you were to lose the bean? You would be stuck there for at least a month, Ruby, and God only knows what might happen in that time!”

Reaching up to cup Regina’s face, Ruby stroked away her tears with the pads of her thumbs. “All of that is true,” she said, “but you can’t focus on what might happen, you just have to believe. Believe in us, because we’ve come through way too much to lose each other now. And believe me when I say I’m going to come back, because I am. I swear! I don’t care what I have to do. If I have to steal, I will. If I have to kill, I will. If I have to scratch and claw on my hands and knees, I will. Hell, even if I have to fight my way through an army of ogres to do it, I will come back to you.”

Her tears now openly falling, Regina rushed forward and kissed Ruby with as much passion as she could muster, hoping that she could feel and taste just how much she was loved. Once they parted, she leaned their foreheads together and gave Ruby a tremulous smile.

“You better! Because if you’re don’t, I’ll come for you myself and you do not want to know what will happen next. So, if you know what’s good for you, you’ll keep your promise, Ruby Mills. No matter what it takes, you come home.”

Leaning in slowly, Ruby’s eyes were swimming with adoration as she closed the distance between their lips. “As you wish, my Queen,” she whispered and then kissed Regina one last time.

After the enjoyable yet bittersweet kiss ended, Ruby stepped away. As she worried at her bottom lip, still glistening from this kiss, she stuffed her hand into her pocket to produce a long golden chain, completely unadorned and very plain. Biting her lip, she then lifted her left hand and with watery eyes, gripped her wedding band between her fingers. For a moment, she stood silently, spinning the ring in place as she gazed down at the tangible symbol of the depth of their relationship.

Soon after, her fingers finally stilled, and with a deep breath, she removed the ring from her finger and then slid it over the golden chain. Looking up at Regina, her eyes held a gravity and a sadness that struck her speechless.

“When you gave me this ring, it was with the promise of forever,” said Ruby as she extended her arm out toward Regina, the necklace dangling from her fingers. “That’s what it symbolizes to me. I’m yours and you’re mine...forever. We made that promise to each other, Regina, and as much as it’s in my power, I intend to honor it. So, hold on to this for me and keep it close, that way wherever you are, I’ll be with you.”
As she took the necklace from Ruby with a shaking hand, Regina was vividly reminded of the day she'd slid the ring it held on her then-fiancée’s finger, officially sealing their union in front of their friends and family. Other than the day the girls were born, it was the happiest of her life. It was the culmination of a lifelong pursuit of happiness and proof that despite all of her disastrous mistakes and epic failures, happiness was not the unattainable goal it had once seemed to be. Happiness for Regina Mills had come at long last that day in the form of a tall, leggy, brunette werewolf who never ceased to take her breath away.

To Regina, Ruby had always been beautiful, but on their wedding day, she had been radiant like the sun, dressed in a strapless, simplistically elegant white satin gown which subtly flared as it transitioned into a modest train. Her face was left unveiled, make-up muted yet artfully applied to accentuate her striking features, and her lips were painted a deep shade of crimson befitting her famous moniker. In contrast to Ruby's pale skin and white dress, her dark brown hair was left flowing in loose curls around her shoulders and down her back, while a thick braid was woven about her crown, dotted with fresh starflowers that Snow had picked that very morning. Clutched tightly by both hands at her waist, she carried a bouquet of mixed moonflowers, some closed and some open.

Resplendent and ethereal, she seemed more a vision from heaven than a human being, an angel having descended to the plane of common mortals who then took shape as a woman, more beautiful and vibrant than any Regina had ever beheld. Yet by some miracle, that angel in white had chosen to love her and demonstrate the unconditional character of that love repeatedly. That same angel had been prepared to pledge her life to Regina, and because of that – and even though she did not believe in such nonsensical concepts as luck – she surely felt like the luckiest person on earth. She still did.

But now her angel was about to journey to a place where Regina could not follow. She trusted that Ruby had meant it when she promised to return but also knew that there were just some things beyond the limits of human control. As she had said, there was no telling what would be waiting on the other side of the portal, and even though Emma would be with Ruby, she could not wholly entrust Ruby's safety to anyone other than herself. But her children needed her and she was not about to abandon them, so she consigned herself to accepting the situation, however unpalatable it was. Not that it took.

Some minutes later as she watched Ruby disappear through the portal, Regina was left feeling helplessly torn between her love for her wife and her love for her children and utterly despondent that she’d been forced to choose. Now Ruby was in another world, totally out of reach so that all she could do was have faith that her wife would come back. The alternatives were simply too terrible to even briefly entertain.

Almost miraculously, Regina made it home in one piece. Having dragged herself inside, she then trudged up the stairs with leaden legs that only grudgingly complied to her will. But upon crossing the threshold into the bedroom she had shared with Ruby for nearly a decade, she could no longer contain the sorrow welling up from the depths of her heart.
*Half of a heart,* she corrected herself, which only compounded her turmoil because it reminded her that just as Snow and Charming did, she and Ruby shared a fate. The death of one, even a world away, would result in the death of the other. There would be no warning for her should the unthinkable happen. To borrow a phrase from the Bible, “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye,” it could all be over. Ruby could die in the Enchanted Forest causing Regina to die here on Earth, leaving their children orphans. It was an awful situation that she now regretted ever allowing to exist.

Missing her wife and more afraid than she’d been since she woke up in the hospital after being shot to find out Ruby was missing, Regina collapsed onto the bed and cried like she hadn't in years.

Chapter End Notes

Next week, Ruby and Emma’s adventure begins. See you then!
A New Branch in the Good Old Family Tree

Chapter Summary

On the first leg of their journey toward the Dark Palace, Ruby and Emma come face to face with a surprise linked to Regina's past.

Chapter Notes

Thanks as always to my beta, UnfairestOfThemAll!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ruby crashed into the hard earthen floor of the forest after being unceremoniously spat from the whirling portal. A few yards away, Emma made a similarly ungraceful landing near their packs, which had preceded their arrival in order to minimize the impact from being ejected out of an unpredictable magical vortex linking two disparate and vastly distant worlds. As Ruby tumbled to an abrupt stop within a hairs breadth from her own pack, she was very glad of Regina’s foresight. She hated to think how it would have felt to connect with the unforgiving ground with a hundred pounds of supplies on her back. But they were through relatively safely aside from her bruised rear end, and that was all that mattered.

Rolling over onto her back, Ruby groaned. To her right she heard Emma's very similar reaction, which prompted her to turn her head to get a look at her companion. Though a bit ruffled from their rough emergence, Emma appeared for all intents and purposes as unscathed as she was. Well, she ought to be, Ruby thought to herself, after going through two portals before this one.

“You okay, Em?” she said, needing to hear Emma's status from her own mouth regardless of what her eyes were telling her.

Emma winced as she stood then proceeded to brush the detritus of the forest floor from her pony tail and then her blue jeans. Eyeing said questionable choice in clothing, Ruby imperceptibly shook her head. She thought jeans an impractical selection considering the possible length of their journey but Emma obviously disagreed, having chosen to wear a gray, well-worn but light cable-knit sweater under her brown leather jacket and a pair of dark Levi’s. The only appropriate choice she'd made in Ruby's opinion was her hiking boots.

“All good here,” Emma said. “That landing was a bit more rough than the last two I had. Anton must’ve put a little extra kick in these beans. Never shoulda gotten him addicted to Thai food.” She
paused to sweep her eyes over Ruby's form in a subtle check for signs of injury. “What about you? You okay?”

After pushing herself up to sitting, Ruby craned her head up to look at Emma. “I’m fine.” When Emma continued to stare, she hoisted herself up in what she thought an impressive display of strength, if she did say so herself. Holding out her arms in the posturing manner of gymnast having just landed a difficult tumble, she grinned. “See?”


“And you're glad I am, too,” Ruby said after poking her tongue out. “Otherwise you'd still be stuck up in that tree.”

“Damn straight!” Emma’s playful grin made her eyes glitter in the narrow beam of sunlight she was standing in. “I may be the Savior, but I was raised in a jaded world, so I'm also a pragmatist. A bear can’t climb faster than I can poof onto a sturdy branch high enough to buy me some time. Besides, I had my gun. I was gonna win that fight one way or another.”

Ruby laughed at her friend's very unique way of viewing the world, half-hopeful and half-realistic but wholly unique, and she wouldn’t change it for anything. “I can’t really argue with that. Still wasn’t your finest moment.”

“It really wasn’t, was it? But it was funny. You certainly lorded it over me long enough.”

Ruby had done just that, which wasn’t anything new between them. Good-natured ribbing was a part what made their friendship so special. Ruby found out early on that Emma was a lot more mischievous beyond the cautious facade presented to folks who didn’t have her full trust. But once she delved past that tough outer shell, she discovered a wicked funny streak that often left her bent over at the waist, clutching her stomach against the pain of laughing too much and too hard as Emma recounted one of her many misadventures as a bailbondsperson. And one wouldn’t guess it from the princess curls, royal cheek bones, and pouty lips, but Emma had a special knack for reeling the unaware into intricate, and often bawdy, jokes with a perfect deadpan delivery that made the punchlines twice as effective. But the best part of Emma’s sense of humor was her ability to get herself into these absurd situations and then laugh about it right along with Ruby. The incident with Emma being treed by a bear and Ruby having to run to her rescue was one such situation.

After basking for a spell in that mirthful memory, Emma turned to look out over their surroundings. As she studied the thick, seemingly endless depths of the forest, her smile faded into an increasingly
worried frown.

“Well, I never thought I'd be back here so soon,” she said, “and to top it all off, it looks like we got dropped in the middle of nowhere.”

Upon surveying the scene with her own eyes, Ruby had to concede that Emma was right. They were dead in the middle of a dense forest with nothing but thick brush and tall trees all around them. Her inability to recognize the location immediately unsettled her as it meant they were, for all intents and purposes, lost.

At one time, Ruby had known these forests like the back of her own hand, but as it stood now she might has well have been in the Amazon for all of her sense of their current location. She was unsure whether that lack of recognition was because it had been so long since she was last in the world of her birth that her memories had faded or that the forest had radically changed in the thirty-five years she had been absent. The latter possibility was a particular cause for concern. Anything that could so alter the forests she had once haunted on a monthly could not be good. Whatever the case for her inability to orient herself within Misthaven, it was going to be very difficult to fumble through getting her bearings inside a forest with such dense undergrowth and a layered canopy of foliage so thick overhead that it almost completely blocked out the sun.

Yet again, Ruby was grateful for her wife's over-diligence. Regina had provided them with water-proof compasses. With no immediately available way to determine their direction, they were going to come in very handy.

“Looks that way,” Ruby said with a sigh as she stood. She then brushed a hand over her tied back hair to clean it of leaves and dirt. “The weather’s nice at least, so we got that going for us.” A minor stroke of luck but one not to be overlooked.

It felt very much to Ruby as if it were early spring when it was not yet hot but the marrow-penetrating cold of a proper Misthaven winter was mercifully over until the next winter. That meant game would be plentiful and so would water. The snow-capped mountains in the area surrounding Regina's castle would be melting in earnest now, and as a result, the rivers and streams in the valleys below would be glutted with a fresh supply of water. If their supplies dwindled, she would easily be able to sustain them by hunting and gathering. So, as far as the weather was concerned, they could not have been more fortunate, and hopefully, such an advantageous start to their journey would reflect how their journey would progress in the days to come.

“It would have really sucked if it was the middle of winter here,” Ruby continued her commentary as she took a moment to drink in the sights and smells of the forest. Struck by memories of the past, she closed her eyes. “God, I hated the winter time. Maine is cold enough but back here it was bitter and seemingly endless. When I was growing up, we didn't have the conveniences of the modern world,
just primitive wooden stoves.

“Granny provided for me and all, don't get me wrong. I was fed and clothed. But there were a couple of really bad winters when I was young that even the heat from the stove didn't help. I can remember huddling around it curled up in Granny's lap to try and stay warm. I always wondered why she didn’t suffer like I did. Come to find out the cold doesn’t affect werewolves like it does normal people. But back then I was a kid who didn’t know what she was, only that those nights seemed to last forever.”

When Ruby trailed off from speaking, she turned to look at Emma, who was regarding her with a new appreciation and level of understanding. Ruby was well-aware of how difficult Emma's childhood was, but even though she'd bounced around the foster care system, she'd never had to endure a winter in a cold and poorly sealed log cabin, shivering in her grandmother's arms because their wood supply had run out during an unexpected blizzard and it was snowing so hard they couldn't risk venturing outside to gather more. Most people in the world they lived in now were incapable of understanding the hardships the denizens of the Enchanted Forest had dealt with on a daily basis, and Emma was among them. So even as bad as her childhood had been, to Ruby, Emma was in some ways quite privileged.

From Emma's perspective, though she respected what Ruby had lived through and had gained a new level of insight into her best friend, mostly she was just happy that Ruby felt comfortable enough around her to share such things. With so many years of acquaintance between them, she had always known some of Ruby's story, but in the years since Ruby was abducted, their friendship had grown and blossomed into something precious to her. She didn't have many true friends, never had really, so to have a friend like Ruby in her life was an irrereplaceable luxury.

Emma implicitly trusted Ruby more than anyone outside of her immediate family and had come to rely on the brunette’s steady demeanor and ready ear. It hadn't been an easy road, nor a brief one, but over time, she and Ruby had arrived at that deep level of friendship where they could openly share their pasts with each other, which was something Emma never had before. Ruby was just the kind of person who made you feel like you could tell her anything without fear of judgment, so it made her the type of friend that Emma could share things with that she couldn't with anyone else.

It was because of that aspect of Ruby's personality that she'd understood why Henry had quickly developed such a close bond with his mother's new partner. Regina had been bothered by it at first, Emma could read it in her eyes and posture when Ruby wasn't looking, and it had taken Emma explaining her own situation to Regina for her son's mother to finally understand. In the end, Regina had come to appreciate what Ruby had to offer to Henry and Emma was glad of it, because it made the former Queen more understanding of her own profound connection with Ruby.

It was that same connection which prompted her to accompany Ruby to the Enchanted Forest, a place full of bad memories not only for herself, but also for her best friend, as she had just heard.
“I'm sorry, Rubes,” she offered, smiling sympathetically as she reached out to grasp Ruby's hand. She gave it a supportive squeeze.

Ruby returned the smile. “Don't be,” said Ruby, shaking her head gently. “Hard as it was, my past made me who I am. Anyway, it could have been much worse. I mean, we didn't have much and Granny could be a real taskmaster sometimes – she and I certainly had our fair share of fights – but if I hadn't had her, I don't know what might have happened to me. My mother didn't want me and I don't even know who my father is, so she's the only family I've got. She didn't have to, but she took me in and raised me the best she could, and if she hadn't...well, I'm pretty sure I would have wound up dead.”

Taking a deep breath, she exhaled, feeling some relief at finally excising some of the lingering tensions of her past from her subconscious. She felt her expression soften. “So, yes, things were tough but I can't complain. I'd rather have the childhood I did than what Regina went through. At least I knew Granny loved me, and we might not have had much but we had each other.”

“Yeah, that's true,” Emma agreed, tilting her head slightly. “My childhood was crappy as you know, but I'm in agreement there. Out of all of us, I think Regina really got the short end of the stick with Cora. But in the end, things worked out for her, didn't they? I think we all came out for the better.”

Now smiling fully, Ruby was grateful for Emma's words as they reminded her of her true motivations. She was now firmly re-anchored in the present. “Yes, we did.” After sharing a moment of happiness with Emma, Ruby cleared her throat and returned a squeeze to Emma's hand before stepping away. She returned her gaze to the forest. “We should get moving. There's still daylight coming through the trees, so I'd like to get oriented while we still can.”

After nodding her assent, Emma took a moment to finish brushing off her clothing, which Ruby did also, and after they were sufficiently tidy, Ruby stretched out her limbs and back. As she bent and rotated her back, she felt and heard a few relieving crackles and pops in her joints, and she grunted with the relief they brought with them. Once all the kinks were worked out of her body, she and Emma moved over to where their packs were laying on the ground.

While Emma was busy slinging her pack back on and then readjusting the straps to keep her comfortable, Ruby crouched down to dig through her own for her compass. She found it in one of the long side pockets, nestled next to a sheathed knife, a Buck 119 Special that would make quick work of field dressing any animal worth eating. Her eyes glinted. She really, really loved her wife. Taking out both items, she strapped the sheathed weapon to her left thigh and then slid the compass into one of the pockets of her cargo pants.
After standing, she made quick work of securing her own pack as Emma stood waiting patiently. It didn’t take her long, and once her pack was settled in place, she retrieved her compass out of her pocket and looked at Emma expectantly.

“Ready?”

“Yep,” Emma said, her lips popping on the final consonant. With one hand grasping one of the straps of her pack, she indicated toward Ruby with her other. “After you.”

Before beginning the first leg of their journey, Ruby flipped open the lid of the compass and got their heading. They were currently facing south, and though she couldn’t pinpoint why, something in her gut was telling her they needed to head toward the north, so she turned until the needle was pointing in that direction. smiled at her friend.

“This way,” she said, smiling at her friend before setting off at a fairly quick pace through the underbrush.

Ruby could have made this trip much faster on her own, but with Emma tagging along, she knew she needed to pace herself in consideration for her friend’s limitations. There was no denying that Emma was a person who prided herself on staying in peak physical condition, and for a relatively normal person, Ruby was sure the naturally athletic woman would probably outpace most if not all her peers. Ruby, however, was not a normal person. Her wolf gave her vastly increased strength and stamina, so even when she was not shifted, she was accustomed to traveling up to sixty miles in an eight-hour window. As it was, she figured they would do well to cover thirty miles if both time and the terrain were in their favor, but those were variable for which it was impossible to account.

Still, even though she was somewhat hampered by having to throttle down her pace, she was glad for the company. Without companionship, the loneliness would have eaten away at her. She was a person but she was also a wolf, and wolves worked best in a pack. As Emma was an integral part of hers, it was pretty awesome to be out on an adventure together. She only hoped that she hadn’t indirectly put Emma in danger because of her irrational need to fix the wolf problem in Storybrooke. If the unthinkable were to happen on this trip and Emma get hurt, she would never be able to forgive herself. Determination not to let that happen sharpened Ruby’s senses, and she lead them through the maze of thickets, brambles, and well-aged tree trunks, she swore to herself that she would protect her best friend at all costs. Regina would just have to understand.

As much as Ruby knew her wife would be angry were she to wind up having to risk herself for Emma’s sake, Ruby felt she had no choice. Being a protector was an integral part of her nature that started with Snow, who she had selflessly guarded for years during their travels. Snow had been so naive and uneducated in the harsh realities of the world that she’d been blind to its dangers and had needed almost constant supervision, which Ruby had oftentimes provided without the then-innocent
young woman even knowing it. During the course of their many journeys, Ruby had fought for Snow, bled for her and killed for her – all because she loved her. And now she would do the same for Emma. So while she knew Regina would not approve, she would rather face her wife's fury than live knowing she could have prevented harm from coming to someone she loved and chose not to act in order to save herself.

Whilst mulling over these things, Ruby kept trying to decipher their location from their surroundings. What sparse sunlight managed to penetrate the vast canopy of leaves over their head proved insufficient to adequately illuminate much more than ten feet at a time. Limited view distance combined with an increasingly strangely pervasive odor that reminded Ruby of dark magic added up to all kinds of confusion. She still didn't recognize where they were and nothing seemed to be triggering her memories of her previous life in the Enchanted Forest. Being so disoriented made her stomach uneasy but in order to keep Emma from picking up on it, she forced her expression and body language to remain relaxed.

Finally, after what seemed like two hours of walking with very little conversation and no rest at all, they came to an area of the forest that appeared to be thinning into some kind of clearing just ahead. Taking off into a run, Ruby rushed through the underbrush, leaving Emma yelling from behind her to hold up. After passing about a hundred yards, she burst through the treeline into a small clearing in the midst of which a tiny cottage was situated.

Peering up into the blue sky now visible overhead, Ruby noted that the sun was beginning to settle into the western quadrant of the sky, indicating it was on its way to setting. Time was of the essence if they wanted to cover more ground today.

"Jesus, Ruby," panted the Savior as she came to a halt beside Ruby just inside the small, grassy meadow. "Don't take off on me like that. Unlike some people I know, I don't have an infallible sense of direction or super senses."

"Sorry," Ruby replied, blushing at the justified reproval. "I got a little excited I guess, and with good reason." Pointing toward the cottage, she smiled as Emma's eyes widened and took in the sight.

Nestled almost dead center of the circular clearing, the tiny home was constructed from roughly-hewn logs that were inexpertly but effectively stacked together and sealed with some kind of clay mixture. It had a thatched roof which was slanted in a very shallow and simplistic A-frame, giving it a very cobbled together feel. Whoever had built it had done so quickly and in the recent past, judging by how fresh the straw and heather which constituted the roof was.

As well as being recently built, Ruby could tell by the footpath that was worn into the grass leading up to the door that it was also occupied. She started at the realization. How was it possible that someone was living in the Enchanted Forest again when the second curse had swept away the entire
realm, including those that had been protected from the first? If anyone was living here, it should be
on the extreme fringes, and only then by those who were brave enough to leave their own realms to
settle in the land that had been cursed twice over. There certainly shouldn't be anyone living so close
to the epicenter of where those curses were cast.

The possibilities were perplexing, and Ruby felt her earlier excitement fade away as it was overtaken
by concern. She hadn't expected to encounter any humans at all during the trip, and now that she
knew that there were people living here, the situation had become more perilous.

With hard eyes, Ruby set her jaw against apprehension. They needed more information and there
was only one way to get it. She turned to Emma again. “Let's have a look, maybe there's something
inside we can use to get an idea of where we are.”

“All right.” Emma appeared a bit concerned herself as she studied the same fresh footpath that had
lead Ruby to draw so troubling a conclusion that she evidently shared. “Be careful though. Never
know what might be lurking inside.”

Chuckling, Ruby swatted Emma's arm playfully in order to diffuse some of the building tension.
Emma gave her a dirty look. “What's the matter, Em? Afraid of the boogeyman?”

Crossing her arms over her chest, Emma mustered up an impressive, though obviously fake, glare.
“You can be such a brat sometimes, you know that?”

Ruby grinned. “Takes one to know one.”

Although Emma rolled her eyes, she also chuckled a bit. “Just shut up and let's do this.”

Giving her friend a mocking salute, Ruby chirped, “Right away, Sheriff Swan!”

“Oh, my God you're impossible,” Emma groaned and then moved forward toward the cottage,
without bothering to return Ruby's sarcasm.

Still grinning, Ruby fell into step behind her friend, and in no time they were standing in front of the
simple wooden door. Emma rapped on the door a few times in a solid and steady manner. When no
one responded, she knocked again, this time a bit more loudly. Ruby strained her ears to catch any
movement that might be going on inside but again there was no reply.
“No one's here,” Emma said, glancing at Ruby over her shoulder. “What do you wanna do now?”

Gesturing toward the nob on the door, Ruby indicated with her head in the same direction. “See if they left it unlocked.”

Emma's eyes widened. “Seriously? You want to break in?”

“We didn't come all this way for nothing, Emma,” Ruby said, “or at least, I didn't. We need to figure out where we are or we're going to get lost, ’cause I don't recognize this part of the forest. It's changed since the curse. There might be a map in there or something that I can use to orient us. We need to get inside that house. I don't think we have a choice.”

Emma turned back to the door with an audible sigh. “Okay, fine,” she said in resigned acceptance, and then turned the rudimentary looking cast iron knob. When she pushed on the door with her shoulder, it abruptly flew open accompanied by a loud creaking of hinges. Having expected it to be locked, Emma tripped forward as the door swung wide but recovered before she fell on her face. “Not a word,” she called out behind her as she walked into the cottage.

Chuckling under her breath at the near mishap, Ruby followed Emma and once inside took in the interior of the house. It was very confined, having only one room with a small, uncomfortable looking bed in the corner. The sparse furniture looked to be as recently built as the house, though it was much more artistically crafted than the framework.

As her eyes swept over to the other side of the cottage, she noticed a table against wall with a smattering of papers strewn about its surface. Without signaling Emma, she approached and began rifling through the papers, hoping to find a map or something useful, maybe even a letter that might indicate where in the Enchanted Forest they were. When a hasty search proved fruitless, she slammed her hand down on the table top in frustration.

“Dammit!”

“What?” Emma asked as she sidled over to where Ruby was standing. “What's wrong?”

“There's nothing here,” Ruby said, sweeping a hand in the air over the papers scattered upon the table. “No maps, no letters, just blank pages of nothing.”
“That’s because I only arrived here two days ago,” came a heavily accented voice from the doorway.

Startled, both women turned to meet the source of a voice, a woman in her early thirties standing tense and broad-shouldered with her hands balled in fists on her hips. She looked very much put out at their intrusion, which Ruby assumed was because she was the owner of the home they were rifling through. Having been caught red-handed (pun intended) made Ruby feel like a teenager once again facing the harsh, unyielding judgment of her austere grandmother.

But this woman was very much not Granny, youthful as she was and dressed in a rich navy blue skirt topped by a black leather vest atop a white cotton blouse accented by flared, lacy cuffs. Poking out from her skirt was a pair of sharply pointed high heeled boots that Ruby thought appropriately suited for Regina’s closet. A red silken sash was tied about the woman’s slim waist, knotted a bit askew to the left in such a way as to leave two strips of fabric dangling down, and from it hung an ornately gilded rapier.

Studying the woman’s posture and features, Ruby instantly concluded she was someone not to be trifled with. The stranger had an air of danger lurking about her, though it was tempered by self-control and patience, which was made evident by her lack of sharp words or actions and the expectant look in dark eyes which revealed a willingness to await explanation. Taking in the woman’s features, Ruby was surprised to note rich raven hair tumbling down her shoulders, framing a perfectly symmetrical face. A strong yet feminine jawline, high cheek bones, dimpled chin, and rich olive complexion lent her a very exotic appearance. Whoever she was and wherever she was from, it was evident she had traveled from afar.

Clearing her throat, Ruby had the grace to look sheepish before the strikingly beautiful woman. “I’m so sorry about this,” she set about explaining, “but we’ve come here from a land far, far away and we’re kinda lost.”

At that, Emma snickered, which prompted Ruby to elbow her sharply in the side. “Ow!” she complained, swatting back at Ruby with the back of her hand.

“As I was saying,” Ruby began again, noting that the woman's lips had quirked up at Emma's childishness. It gave her some measure of relief to know the stranger at least had a sense of humor. “Since time is of the essence on our journey, we were hoping to find something here that might orient us so we can get where we're going quickly.”

“I see,” the woman said as she moved to stand in front of them. When she spoke those two syllables, it was as if a puzzle came together in Ruby's mind and she was able to place the accent. If they were back home, she would characterize it as sounding Hispanic, which made sense considering her
appearance, but was an otherwise strange correlation considering the Enchanted Forest was literally on another planet and quite possibly in another galaxy. Yet another mystery to add to the pile concerning their world. “As rude as your actions are, I suppose I can let them pass considering your dilemma. Where then, might I ask, are you headed?”

Breathing a sigh of relief from beside Ruby, Emma took the opportunity to speak up. “To the only castle that's in this general vicinity. The one that was formerly occupied by Queen Regina.”

The stranger's eyes widened and she appeared to grow hesitantly excited. “You're here for Queen Regina? What a coincidence! Seeking her out was what brought me to this land.”

Taken aback by this information, Ruby's protective instincts flared. She narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest as she glowered. “What do you want with Regina?”

“Ruby!” Emma chastised, reaching over to place a placating hand on Ruby's arm. Stepping in front of her defensive friend, Emma shot an apologetic smile at the woman whose home they had so rudely invaded. “Sorry about my friend,” she said in a placating manner, “but she's just overprotective. Queen Regina is her wife, you see.”

“Her wife?” the exotic woman parroted, eyes big as saucers. After processing the information in what seemed like milliseconds, the woman's expression shifted and before either Ruby or Emma could process what was happening, she suddenly dropped to her knees before Ruby.

“A thousand pardons, your Majesty,” she said, head bowed in deference and her voice tight with nervousness as she clenched her hands together. “I meant no disrespect to you. I did not know you were the Queen Consort or I would have welcomed you most graciously. I have shamed myself.”

Shocked at the completely unexpected behavior, it took Ruby a few moments to gather her wits. She was not used to be treated as the royal she technically was, and as such almost preferred the woman's former standoffish suspicion. It made her extremely uncomfortable to have anyone showing subservience toward her, seeing as she herself had grown up a peasant. Being married to a Queen, albeit one without a kingdom, had not changed how she viewed herself, and she was not about to let it change how anyone else viewed her either.

“Hey,” she intoned gently to the kneeling woman, “you don't have to do that. You can stand.” When the raven haired beauty made no move to do so, Ruby crouched down to her level, wanting to show her she thought herself no better or more important. With her right hand, she reached forward and tipped the woman's chin up so that their eyes met. The expressive brown eyes looking back at her caught her off-guard with their familiarity; they were the exact same shade as Regina's, down to the
flecks of gold embedded within chocolate irises. Shaking her thoughts away, she smiled warmly at
the woman. “What's your name?”

“Esperanza, your Majesty,” was the guarded reply. “Esperanza Molinero of Ciudad de los Ríos. I
hail from the Realm of Xander, son of Xavier.”

Sighing, Ruby shook her head. “You don't have to address me by a title, Esperanza,” she said with a
gentle smile, then took Esperanza by the hand and pushed up off her haunches to stand, guiding
Esperanza back to her feet as well. “I'm not royalty. Regina's not a queen anymore, and even if she
was, I still wouldn't allow it.”

“I don't understand,” Esperanza replied, her dark eyebrows drawn in confusion. “She renounced her
throne?”

Biting her lip against a grin, Ruby nodded in response to the question. It was true that Regina had
indeed given up her crown and title, but she had not surrendered her power or authority. “Something
like that.”

Tilting her head curiously, Esperanza shook her head. “How strange,” she commented, her accented
voice drawling over the consonants. “I heard tale that Queen Regina desired power above all else,
much like her mother. I suppose those tales were false.”

“No quite,” was Ruby's reply, as she glanced over to Emma out of the corner of her eyes. Her friend
appeared to be studying Esperanza closely, looking for any hints as to what the woman might want.
Emma was a cynical person by nature, so it was not surprising she was searching for an angle, but
something told Ruby that Esperanza could be trusted, and her instincts rarely lead her astray. “There
was a time she was very much as you said. She spent many years tutoring under the Dark One,
learning magic and killing indiscriminately in her quest for vengeance. That's what ultimately lead to
this kingdom being uninhabited. Tell me, have you heard of the Dark Curse?”

Gasping, Esperanza covered her mouth with her hand, her face draining of color as she backed away
a pace. “Por los dioses. Don't speak of such things.”

“I take it you have,” Emma spoke up, smirking drolly as she picked up the explanation. “Well,
Regina was the one who cast it, and it sent everyone in the Enchanted Forest to a different world.
One without magic.”
For the third time, Esperanza's eyes widened, this time almost comically. “There is such a place as a world with no magic?”

Nodding again, Ruby replied, “There is. Ironically enough, that's where we came from.” It amused Ruby to see such wonder in Esperanza's eyes at knowing there was a world where magic did not exist but it was tempered by her desire for an explanation. “That aside, I still need to know why you’re looking for Regina.”

When Esperanza's dark eyes found Ruby's again, they were swimming with emotion.

“After a plague struck my village, I was one of the few who survived,” she explained, rubbing her hands together nervously. “I have magic, you see, though I had to hide it all my life. After Princess Cora's failed coup, it was banned, and practitioners that refused to renounce it were rounded up and executed at King Xavier's command.

“When I came of age and started to display...tendencies, my parents were understandably upset, as was I. They made me swear to never show anyone what I could do, and so I grew up both loathing and fearing myself. But when the scourge hit, my magic protected me, though my family was not so lucky. Left with no immediate kin, I knew of only one person I could turn to. I departed the kingdom at once, though for many long years, I could not find my way here.”

Looking at Esperanza sympathetically, Ruby bit her lip. She hated that the woman had gone through such an ordeal. She, more than most, understood what it was like to lose family or to run off in search of them. Blood ties were stronger than most were willing to admit, could compel a person to do things they normally never would, even up to the point of leaving everything and everyone they ever knew behind. Ruby had left her entire life in Granny’s little cabin for the chance to see the world and for the infinitesimally slim possibility of running across someone or some scrap of information that might lead her to her mother. That it all ended so tragically only made her more sympathetic toward Esperanza’s plight.

Even so, with Regina’s safety on the line, the offered explanation was not enough. “I'm sorry that happened to you but I need more than that,” she said gently but firmly. “Why are you looking specifically for Regina?”

If granted a thousand lifetimes and a million guesses, Ruby could not have anticipated the words that would next be uttered. Considering all that had happened in her life, she should have been used to the unexpected, but she wasn't. She was shocked beyond measure and judging by the way the blonde standing next to her went rigid, so was Emma.
“I am her cousin.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm early. Yay, me! Hope this little adventurous chapter was enjoyable. There will be lots more Enchanted Forest stuff in the coming weeks. Sadly we won't see Regina again for a while, but rest assured, she's got her own stuff to deal with in Storybrooke that will be revealed soon enough. Have a good weekend, y'all!
Ruby and Emma find out more from Esperanza about her relation to Regina and they gain Esperanza's trust in an unconventional manner.

Ruby gasped aloud. With Esperanza’s anvil of a revelation reverberating through her brain, she forgot that Emma was standing beside her until a hand clamping around her forearm startled her, causing her to flinch. She turned to find her best friend looking at her as if silently communicating, “did she just say what I think she said?”

Wondering the same, Ruby returned her attention to Esperanza. “Come again?” she asked, expression surely mirroring Emma’s bald astonishment.

“I am Queen Regina’s cousin,” said the woman, her tone a bit more cautious in the face of Ruby and Emma’s ambiguous reactions to her claim.

Ruby’s brow scrunched in genuine confusion. As far as she was aware, Regina had no near blood kin left living outside of their children. Her grandfather, King Xavier, had died some years before she became Queen, and in between the time of her coronation and her father’s death, all of her uncles perished in the game of thrones that was royal family politics. Purge after purge had rendered the Royal House all but extinct. Last Regina had heard, the kingdom was ruled by the highest ranking general loyal to King Xavier, who then took the king’s name for his own after forcibly taking the crown. With Henry dead as well, Regina had figured herself to be the last of her father’s line.

That tragic belief was what made their Immaculate Conception – or so called by those in the know as to how the girls were conceived – all the more miraculous to Regina. Until then she had thought her paternal bloodline would end with her. To find out it would live on through their daughters was a relief that Ruby could tell shamed her wife even though it was completely natural. In the weeks that followed Amelia and Sophia being born, Ruby often caught a muted look of distress pass over Regina’s features as she nursed one of the girls; or was rocking them back to sleep in the totally cool, insanely smooth and comfortable rocker Geppetto hand-built for them; or was merely studying their features as they slept between their mother’s bodies because neither could bear to be so far from them as another room away. Those flashes of guilt didn’t happen often, but when they did, Ruby knew what they meant. Adoption had fulfilled Regina’s maternal urges, but biology was more powerful than she’d anticipated, and it disturbed her to think that she might in any way be differentiating between Henry, who for so long was the apple of her eye, and his newborn sisters.
Of course, Ruby tried and tried to reassure Regina that her feelings were legitimate and that they didn’t mean she loved the girls more than their older brother. Stubborn woman wouldn’t listen, though, just kept brushing Ruby off, saying she was okay and that her troubles would pass in time. They didn’t. The girls were nearly six months old when Ruby had enough and approached her stepson about what was going on. Henry wasted no time in sitting his mother down to explain that, adopted or not, he would always be her Little Prince and that he was proud to carry on the family name. But at the same time he understood the very human desire to pass on one’s genetic history to the next generation.

“How can I judge you for feeling that way when I’m proud to be proof that my dad was here, that he was real, and he was loved,” Henry had said as he patted his mother’s hand and gave her a reassuring smile. “Whenever I get down over the crappy cards life dealt him or get angry about him being taken away from me before I could really even get to know him, I remind myself that he lives on inside of me, in my blood and my marrow, down to the strands of my DNA. I carry him around with me everywhere I go, and nothing or no one can take that away from me. When you and Ruby are gone, the girls will be able to say the same, and I’ll also know that a part of you is still physically here with me. That’s a blessing, Mom, not something to feel bad about.”

Ruby agreed with Henry’s mothers: the kid really was far too wise for his age. But he was also right, and his understanding helped Regina to stop beating herself up over her relief that the bloodline would not end with her and that what both she and Ruby hoped were the best part of her deceased parents would live on after her death.

Family was everything to Regina Mills. That’s why Ruby wasn’t about to take a stranger’s word as bond that there were yet undiscovered branches of her wife’s family tree lurking about in the world.

“How is that possible?” she asked, trying not to sound too disrespectful.

Shrugging, Esperanza gestured to her left toward the sole table in the compact home. “Shall we sit before I attempt to elaborate?”

Out of a subconscious need for support, Ruby glanced at Emma to judge her friend’s take on the situation. A nearly imperceptible movement of Emma’s head indicated she thought it a good idea to hear what their new acquaintance had to say.

“Alright,” Ruby said, and then moved to sit in the chair opposite of the door. Emma took the seat to her left while Esperanza moved directly across from her.
The raven-haired beauty paused before sitting and looked at her two guests. “Forgive my manners. Would you like some tea or water before we begin?”

“No, thank you.” Ruby smiled politely, then indicated toward her blonde companion. “How ‘bout you, Em?”

Leaning back into her chair, Emma shook her head. “Nah, I'm good. Thanks, though.”

“Very well,” Esperanza responded, and then pulled out the chair and seated herself gracefully. Taking a deep breath, she launched into her explanation. “In my home city, there are three rivers which converge, giving it its name. It made it a very valuable and lucrative trading hub, but also a perfect place for watermills. That is what my family have done for centuries.”

“Wait a sec,” Emma interrupted, looking at Ruby questioningly. “Wasn't Cora...”

“A miller's daughter,” Ruby supplied. “Yes, she was.”

“Si,” Esperanza echoed, her face saddened by mention of Cora. “Cora was indeed a miller's daughter, for she hailed from Ciudad de los Ríos as well, though she did everything in her power to erase her impoverished past. You see, Cora was not her given name. She was born Corazón Molinero to my great-grandmother, Lucita.”

Ruby slumped against the back of the chair to digest the information. If all of this was true, then Esperanza was very much related to Regina by blood although somewhat distant a cousin, and also represented a beacon that could shine light upon a heavily shadowed past, one which had haunted Regina for many years. Esperanza was a living piece of Regina's mother that might help both her and Zelena finally get some closure where the complex woman who became the universally feared Queen of Hearts was concerned.

Seeing as how infinitesimally small the odds were that they would encounter one of her wife's living relatives on this trip, Ruby couldn't help but feel that the hands of fate were at work. To what end, she could not say. Whatever it was, Esperanza was here for a reason, just like she and Emma were, and she couldn’t quite pinpoint how to feel about that.

“That's amazing,” Ruby said, and it was. Though uncertain about the reasons, she was in awe of the confluence of events that had led to this moment. At the other end of the table, Esperanza was looking pleased that what she had revealed was being received so positively, and wanting to keep that
positive vibe going, Ruby gave her one of her signature grins. “So Cora is your great aunt?”

“Correct.”

“You know, for a long time, Regina thought she was all that was left of her family, then she found her sister, Zelena. And now come to find out she has you, too? She’ll be absolutely thrilled.”

Smiling bashfully, Esperanza worried her full bottom lip with her teeth. “You really think so?”

“I really do,” Ruby reinforced, still smiling.

“Definitely,” Emma injected. “If there's one thing Regina values above all else, it's family.”

“There was a time I felt the same,” Esperanza nodded, her pleased demeanor slipping as she leaned over the table on her elbow, her hands flattened palms down in the center of the table. “But my family was forced to disown me. I had nowhere else to go, so I decided to seek out my closest relative outside of my kingdom, one I knew would not hate me for who I was.”

Reaching out to take Esperanza's hands, Ruby gave them an encouraging squeeze. The woman's eyes met her, swimming with hurt yet gleaming with what appeared to be a stubborn streak of hope.

“I promise you, Esperanza,” she said, addressing that hopeful part, “if you come back with us, you'll find a home. You won't be judged for having magic or for being different. Hell, our town is chock full of different, right Em?”

Emma chuckled, smiling crookedly. “Oh yeah. Starting with me.”

“You have magic as well?” Esperanza asked, gazing at Emma with a half-starved expression. Ruby could sense that the woman had felt isolated for so long, she was desperate to know that she wasn’t alone. Thus it was impossible to conceal the hunger for a belonging that was cruelly ripped away from her just because she was born with an ability others could not understand. Ruby knew very well what that was like.

“Of course, she does,” Ruby said, letting pride for her friend’s abilities shine through. “She’s the
freakin' Savior! You should see some of the stuff she can do. It would knock your socks off.”

Esperanza, brow creased in total confusion, peered at Ruby. “I don't understand. What does removing my stockings have to do with anything?”

“Oh, God, she's adorable!” Ruby couldn’t help but gush in Emma’s direction. There was this thread of innocence woven into the complex tapestry that was Esperanza, and it made Ruby want to hug the woman her so tightly that she couldn’t breathe. She only restrained the urge out of a desire to make sure the first impression she made upon new family member was not an attempted smothering via hug.

“She is, isn’t she?” Emma said, eyes crinkled at the edges with humor. “Can we keep her?”

After sharing a laugh, they looked back at Esperanza, who was still just as confused as she had been, only now she was looking at them as if they were speaking another language altogether.

“Sorry,” said Ruby after sobering up to clear her throat. “What I meant is that Emma is really powerful.”

“And Ruby's not just your ordinary, average gal either,” Emma then offered, gesturing toward Ruby with her hand. Not comfortable bearing all the praise, she did what she did best and deflected, even though Ruby was staring at her sharply. “She's very special.”

“Oh?” Esperanza shifted her focus to Ruby just as Emma had intended, which had Ruby gritting her teeth in frustration.

When both women whose names began with the letter E kept staring, one with rapt interest and the other with a smug expression Ruby wanted to wipe off, she heaved a sigh of surrender. She made sure to shoot a glare at Emma before pinching the bridge of her nose, which only inflamed Emma’s amusement at her discomfort.

Deciding to ignore her friend for a while, Ruby caught Esperanza's eyes and asked, “Have you ever heard of a Child of the Moon?”

“You are referring to a werewolf. ¿Sí?” As soon as the word passed Esperanza’s lips, her eyes widened in recognition. Ruby hadn’t needed to acknowledge the question at all. Standing up abruptly, she backed away from the table, taking on a defensive posture. “Por los dioses. You are a werewolf?”
The fear in Esperanza’s voice was not at all unexpected. Ruby deflated as she clenched her eyes shut. It seemed that the reputation her kind had acquired was never going to be erased and would follow her for the rest of her life. Even after decades in another world and being all but certain her kind no longer inhabited the Enchanted Forest, the stigma of being a werewolf was still present. Truth be told, she should be long used to such reactions by now, but it stung nonetheless and only served to reiterate that old belief that she was a pariah among pariahs and probably always would be.

In Storybrooke there were townsfolk who still gave Ruby a wide berth during Wolf’s Time. It had been years since she lost control, but people still remembered the carnage she’d visited upon the town on the first full moon after the Curse broke. Granny’s wasn’t the only establishment the wolf had torn up. Various shops had windows broken, doors clawed in twain, and she’d even chewed a telephone pole in half. The worst part of it was that she’d somehow got into the pet shop and wreaked absolute mayhem. The owner had been so irate over the loss of his inventory, both living and not, that he’d threatened to sue Ruby until David talked him down. Several strays and pets fell victim to her blood lust as well.

A number of families still didn’t leave their dogs outside when the moon waxed full for fear of a potential lapse, and Ruby didn’t blame then one bit. Not when the wolf was bigger and stronger than ever. And even though she had total control, Joshua Woods had all but proven that was something that could be taken away against her will and utterly without warning. In addition to her old fears that she never totally conquered, all of these things added up to explain why she’d been so reticent to have children of her own. Ruby could only pray that by the time Amelia and Sophia came of age, attitudes will have at long last changed, including her own.

Still, Esperanza did not need to know how much she still struggled with her identity. So to put the woman at ease, Ruby presented her hands and stayed very still.

“Yes, I am a werewolf,” she said, making sure to use a calm, even tone. “But I swear I won't hurt you. I have full control of myself even when I'm shifted. Ask Emma.”

As Esperanza's eyes darted over to Emma, the blonde stood and carefully made her way over to where the raven-haired woman was standing, tensed for battle.

“She's telling the truth,” Emma affirmed, her voice calm and steady, posture relaxed, relying on her instincts that had served her so well in diffusing difficult situations. “I've spent plenty of time around Ruby while she's shifted. She's not dangerous. If she was, Regina wouldn't let their kids anywhere near her when the moon’s full. And if that doesn't help, I’m sure she’d be willing to show you. You know, to prove it.” In a show of good faith and with a hesitant movement and, Esperanza nodded her approval which made Emma smile. “Ruby,” looking over, Emma silently communicated a plea for Ruby’s indulgence, “would you mind giving our new friend a demonstration?”
Though she was somewhat doubtful as to the wisdom of shifting in front Esperanza, whose wariness regarding werewolves was painfully evident and who had also admitted to having magical abilities, Ruby trusted Emma's instincts implicitly. But living with Regina for over a decade had taught Ruby that in some cases words were insufficient to prove trustworthiness. Words had failed Regina miserably. Snow White gave an oath and broke it, resulting in Daniel's death. Henry had lavished his daughter with praise and often secretly insisted he was on Regina’s side on issues with Cora only to fold like a cheap card at the first harsh glare from his wife. And Cora herself had time and again insisted she loved Regina and wanted what was best for her only to abuse her and eventually force her into a marriage she didn’t want with a man she didn’t love and in which she’d been forced to give up a precious part of herself that she could never get back. For people like Regina who had been burned by broken promises, sometimes believing required seeing. So while Ruby wasn’t keen on turning in front of a woman she had just met, she was willing to make a concession, if only because, as stated, her trust in Emma was unshakable.

Standing up slowly from her chair, Ruby cautiously maneuvered over to where Emma and Esperanza were standing. As she approached, she could see the woman's posture and facial muscles tense as if readying to defend herself. Instantly aware that the proximity of the tiny cottage was only exacerbating Esperanza's stress levels, she decided that the best course of action was to demonstrate her control over the wolf in a more open area.

Instead of stopping as she moved closer to Esperanza, she made her way to the door of the cottage, and once there, turned her head to look back over her shoulder. “Let's take this outside. I need a little room to work with. That okay?” As she spoke, her eyes sought out Esperanza's dark ones, and she was pleased to note an immediate relief of tension in them. As she turned back toward the door, Ruby allowed herself to relax, and as she did a smile naturally appeared.

Once outside, Ruby noticed that the sun was now much lower in the sky than it was before, which was strange, because it hadn't seemed like that much time had passed. Her animalistic side itched to just take off in whatever direction seemed most suitable, but her reasonable one reminded her that gaining Esperanza's trust was a necessity that took precedence over baser impulses. There were no other viable options open to garner information with which to see them safely to the castle. As such, she had no choice but to go through with what was known back home as a dog and pony show, which was an unfortunate albeit apt colloquialism.

She marched about thirty or so yards away from the cottage before turning back toward the tiny home Esperanza occupied. She swirled around to see said woman standing beside Emma very close to the doorway, close enough, Ruby realized, to escape inside were the worst to happen. As relieved as Esperanza had been at putting some distance between herself and what she perceived as a potential threat, she remained wisely cautious. Ruby just hoped this brief exhibition of the wolf would prove once and for all that she was not a threat.

“Alright,” she called out, not wanting to just transform without notifying the obviously skittish
Esperanza. “I'm going to shift now. Try not to be alarmed! It'll still be me...just a different form of me.” Shaking out her limbs to loosen herself up, Ruby spared one last glance at Esperanza before she called on the ancient magic that flowed through her veins. “I need to ask, just to be sure. Are you okay with this, Esperanza? I don't want to scare you, but I need you to trust me, so I'll do whatever you want.”

Taking a deep breath, Esperanza drew herself up to her full height and then nodded firmly. “I'm certain,” she called out in reply.

With a deep breath of her own, Ruby returned the gesture and then closed her eyes as she allowed the surge of bestial magic to overwhelm her. In a rush of sensation, she felt the change come on. As the familiar agony of her bones and muscles and vital organs rearranging themselves settled over her, Ruby fell to her knees in a swirl of pale smoke. Skin became fur, a nose became a snout, ears tapered into triangular shapes, teeth sharpened into deadly weapons, and feet became paws.

Although it seemed like the transition took minutes, experience told Ruby it had only been seconds. Losing track of time happened every time she shifted, but she had never learned how to stay aware of its passage. Whenever the magic of the wolf took over, she lost the ability to process anything else other than the all-encompassing torment that accompanied her body being literally torn apart and reassembled into a completely different species. She'd long ago adapted to the pain, but when emerging from the transformation, having lost one’s conception of time could be jarring even for a seasoned werewolf.

As Ruby came back to awareness, she shook her head to clear it of the latent effects the transformation had on her mind, her ears flapping loudly with the movement. Her having done so kicked up a small amount of dust from her coat which got into her nose and caused her to sneeze. From next to the cottage, she heard Emma chuckle.

Looking up, she was met by a large grin from her friend and a wide-eyed expression from Esperanza which was a strange mixture of awe, disbelief, and fear. As Ruby began to amble her way toward them, Esperanza startled, but Emma reacted quickly by grabbing the nervous woman's hand to anchor her to the spot.

“It's alright,” Emma said in a comforting tone, gently smiling as Ruby arrived in front of them and then sat in her most dignified pose. “She's not gonna hurt you. She's still Ruby, just a little bit more hairy.”

Annoyed at the comment, Ruby snorted and yipped at her best friend, whose smile widened to showcase those enviable cheekbones. Emma loved taking advantage of Ruby’s inability to talk while shifted and took every opportunity to get as many wisecracks and sarcastic comments as she could – most of them canine in reference. Logic in this case did not apply to the Savior, who should rightly
be yet was not even the least bit deterred from provoking Ruby even though she could quite literally eat Emma for breakfast. One of these days, Ruby was going to give in to the urge to tackle her friend and slobber all over her as payback. Maybe that would teach her. Probably not.

Meanwhile next to Emma, Esperanza stood motionless, and for her part Ruby remained still as well to permit the frightened woman set the pace of their interaction. Instead of prompting Esperanza, she let her eyes to do the talking for her, softly conveying that she was still in complete control and all was well. After a few moments of silently and carefully studying Ruby's enormous lupine stature, Esperanza seemed to conclude that all she and Emma had been saying was indeed correct.

“Is it really you, your Majesty?” she asked, not expecting a response, and in her nervous amazement reverting to her earlier formality.

Nodding her head once, Ruby softly barked. The noise, though tempered, caused Esperanza to jump. To set the woman back at ease again, Ruby wagged her tongue, panting happily in as close of an approximation to a smile as she could muster in her fur.

Letting out a delighted laugh, Esperanza extended her hand over Ruby's head, slowly and gently setting it down upon the soft fur on her crown, all the while maintaining eye contact. As Esperanza's hand came to rest on Ruby's head, her fingers spread and began stroking through her fur. Pleased and very much enjoying the feeling, Ruby leaned upward into Esperanza's hand, encouraging her to continue her ministrations.

“It really is you,” breathed Esperanza as she lowered herself to her haunches to look Ruby face to face. Ruby saw in them only warmth and a new excitement, all fear having fled away. Trust shone brightly in dark eyes, and though the reason for obtaining it was to aid her quest, it still made her feel good to know she had it, better than she would ever have thought it would in fact. The quick change of opinion also confirmed what she had almost immediately suspected: that Esperanza was herself worthy of trust.

Still stroking her hand through the fur at the top of Ruby's head, Esperanza allowed it to fall down her neck and back up before scratching delicately behind her ear. Ruby's eyes slid closed at the wonderful sensation. Esperanza chuckled at her dazed expression of total satisfaction.

“It's very strange,” she said, “you are still you. I can see it in your eyes. Yet you are also very much a wolf, wild and powerful and so very beautiful. I have to say, if all werewolves are like you, I wish I'd met one much sooner.”

“Unfortunately, we don't really know a whole lot about the race as a whole,” said Emma from next
to Esperanza, and as she spoke, the latter woman's head craned up to the look at the former. “I’ve asked both Regina and Ruby about it before and was told that werewolves were rare, even in the Enchanted Forest. Apparently, there were very few packs left at the time of the Curse, and those tended to be insular. No one that's living can really say much about what they're like in general terms. Just in specific examples, like Ruby or her grandmother.”

At the explanation, Esperanza frowned, though she continued her gentle brushing of Ruby's black fur. “I had heard that at one time there were many such creatures in Misthaven,” she said. “I suppose our information could be outdated. I wonder what happened to so dwindle their numbers?’”

For her part, Ruby was content to sit and listen, taking the opportunity to study Esperanza as she conversed with Emma. The incredibly beautiful lady was curious and well-informed seemingly in spite her humble origins, which spoke to the strength of her character. What's more, she seemed genuinely interested in the plight of the werewolves, and considering her earlier fear, her ability to sympathize with someone or something she didn't fully understand set Ruby even further at ease.

Emma seemed to be getting the same vibe, for she had relaxed into an eased posture, though her head tilted at the unexpected question. “According to Regina, werewolves were mostly extinct by the time she cast the Curse, and we know of no others in Storybrooke besides Ruby and Granny. They're the only werewolves I've ever met. Ruby did tell me that back before the curse, she lived with a pack for a very brief period, and she learned a lot about her kind during that time. But they weren't the nicest people, so things went down that left her sour on her fellow werewolves. If you ask me, though, Ruby is just special. She's sort of one of a kind, so comparing anyone else to her is a little unfair.”

Emma's kind words sparked a warmth in Ruby's chest, an occurrence that often happened when she found herself the object of her friend's praise. Not a person to freely give out compliments, whenever Emma did bestow them upon someone, they were to be treasured.

“Well then,” Esperanza said in response, “I'm glad that it was you I met and not a lesser representative of your race. Very well. You have my trust. I will help you in your endeavor to reach Queen Regina's castle.”

With one last scratch, Esperanza stood and then looked down at Ruby with big, expressive eyes that were so much like Regina's that she was taken aback. Before, when Esperanza had claimed she was Regina's cousin, Ruby was initially skeptical. But even if she hadn't been convinced by the ensuing explanation, she would have been at that moment. It really was undeniable. The familial resemblance was strong, not only in the eyes, but in the shape of Esperanza's face and the crease of her cheeks and down to the texture of her raven hair, all very much consistent with Regina’s features. This woman was most her wife’s relative (which incidentally made her Ruby's as well), and she was not going to let the opportunity go to waste to reunite Regina with a piece of the mysterious puzzle that was her family she hadn't even known was missing.
Having done what she set out to do, Ruby shifted back, and in a moment's time, she was standing on two legs again, looking down at Esperanza due to their height difference. Unable to help herself, she gathered her newly found family member into her arms.

“Thank you, Esperanza,” she breathed, allowing her gratitude to color her tone. “You won't regret this.” Ruby felt the woman nod against her shoulder in response.

“You're welcome.”

Pulling away, Ruby allowed her hands to remain on Esperanza's shoulders. “So,” she said, “I have a couple of questions first: what time is it and how far is it to Regina's castle?”

Esperanza took a moment to consider the questions before responding. “If you're thinking about making the journey today, I would advise against it.” When Ruby started to object, Esperanza cut her off. “It is a half-day's journey from here to the castle and some of the terrain is very difficult to traverse. Also, evening is almost upon us and it will grow dark very soon. In the short time I've been here, I have noticed that time behaves strangely. For what reason I am uncertain, but it would be much more sensible for the two of you to lodge with me tonight and set out in the morning.”

Ruby couldn't argue with the woman's logic, and what's more, the revelation about the curious way time seemed to be passing here worried her. Glancing down at her watch, Ruby was startled to find the tiny hands stuttering in place between bouts of erratic movement. A deep feeling of unease settled into her gut. Something very bad was happening in Misthaven and whatever it was, it seemed to be tampering with not only their modern devices but with time itself.

With no way now to properly gauge the passage of time, there was no telling how much or how little of it had passed since they arrived in the Enchanted Forest. It could far more than the handful of hours she had internally kept track of. Maybe even days. If that was the case, she knew that before long, Regina would get anxious, and the last thing Ruby wanted was for her wife to come here on a rescue mission that would only serve to get her embroiled in the same situation.

With very little in the way of options, they were going to have to abide by Esperanza's suggestion. Regardless of happened the next day, though, they were going to have to complete their quest more rapidity than she had anticipated. Much more. Ruby felt as if they literally had no time to, as Regina would put it, “dawdle about.”

“Are you okay with that?” Emma's question startled Ruby out of her thoughts, and she looked over
to see a concerned expression on her friend's face.

Ruby nodded as she took a steadying breath. “Looks like we don't have much of a choice.” Indicating toward the door, she gestured for Emma and Esperanza to enter. “After you, ladies.”

Following closely behind them, Ruby stepped back through the threshold of the door. But before closing it behind her, she gazed back out over the still blue sky, fretting to herself – and not for the first time – over the increasing likelihood this trip was going to turn out to be a colossal mistake.

Two hours later after a meal of power bars washed down with water and sharing scant conversation with her companions, Ruby spread out a blanket across the floor to sleep. Once having divested herself of her pants and stripped her torso down to her tank-top, she settled down onto her right side. Eyes unburdened with sleep, she studied the wall across from her and at once noticed the moonlight peering through shoddy, half-closed drapes hanging dolefully down from a window frame. The subtle yellow tint of the light made her long for home.

How many nights had she sat upon the perch beneath the grand bay window in her bedroom back home, content to allow her lunar guide to comfort her with its mere existence? Many nights she sat there alone into the wee hours of the morning, unable to sleep and needing to sort her troubled thoughts. Memories persisted of that dreadful day her life had changed for the worse and for the better, taunting her with recollections of Regina's wan complexion as she lay in the hospital bed, torturing her with reminders of the lines of flame that lit up her back and thighs with every crack of the whip. The only thing that made those memories tolerable was the fact that it was also the day she'd discovered she was to at long last become a mother.

There were special nights, though, during which she had a constant, faithful companion to see her through those dark hours. Often only alerted to Regina's presence by the depression of the cushions lining the little perch or by the gentle touch of familiar arms winding their way about her waist, Ruby would flinch out of silent contemplation, then upon regaining her senses, attempt to convince her wife back to bed, knowing she would be wasting precious minutes and hours she could be resting.

Being the mayor was a hard job that Regina never got enough credit for, and it required long, exhausting hours of intensive paperwork and planning. Though a recovering workaholic, Regina still like to head into the office early and would on occasion only cut out in time for dinner. With the fact that there were also two kids eagerly waiting to occupy Mommy's time and consume Regina's attention when she got home each evening, sleep was at a premium.

But deep down inside, Ruby's chastisement was only ever half-hearted. Regina was the only one who could chase away her demons, that could anchor her back to a reality that was too sweet, too fulfilling to ever risk getting dangerously disconnected from. Those nights her infinitely-better-half joined her at the bay window made tolerable those awful memories that kept her up to all hours and
the nightmares that prevented her from reentering any meaningful rest.

While enjoying their late night time together, Regina often insisted that the moonlight made Ruby glow as if she were some sort of unearthly being, an angel perhaps who had condescended from the heights of the heavens to live among mortals and who had then selflessly expended her precious love on so lowly a creature as a reformed villainess. The sentiments were meant as praise, but to Ruby they sounded too much like self-loathing, like she didn’t deserve Ruby’s love, a false assumption Ruby had been endeavoring to destroy since they became lovers. After tenderly admonishing the self-deprecating comments, Ruby would in turn explain that the reverse was true for her, which it was, because to her Regina was the most beautiful woman in the whole world— in any world, really. That lengthy, heartfelt kisses always followed those reassurances never factored into Ruby’s motivation to speak them; they were a nice bonus, though!

Now, however, Ruby was far, far away from home. She was far away from her steadfast friends, her beloved Granny, her perfect babies, and her wife, the other half of her immortal soul. All the people that made her life worth living were literally another world away, and she had no one to blame but herself. No one had forced her into this decision. No one had intimidated her into making this trip. Though Regina had given her approval, her true feelings of opposition were never beyond Ruby’s perception. Even so she had walked away from her wife and children. And for what? To go on some half-baked expedition to a world chock full of crazy magic and terrible monsters that would give the children of earth a taste of true nightmares.

At that moment, missing her family like crazy and feeling lonely despite the comfort of two other people around her (one of whom was her very best friend), Ruby felt rather less of a hero out to save her animal kin from annihilation, and more like a woman who had put the things that matter the most to her in jeopardy for what might amount to little more than a fool’s errand.

Looking forlornly at the dim moonlight filtering through the dusty glass, Ruby wondered whether Regina was sitting in their spot at the very moment, studying the moon from the window in their bedroom and thinking of her as she was Regina. With her eyes closed she could see the moonlight streaming in through the opaque panes of glass, casting a soft yellow aura over a figure so well-proportioned as to be out of a dream. How she longed to be close to her wife again, to feel that smooth olive skin against the work-roughened pads of her fingers, to smell the coconut shampoo in raven hair of a silky texture to be envied by the gods. Regina was Ruby’s incarnate deity, a goddess she deemed worth worshiping on a daily basis without reserve or hesitation, whom she willingly served and upon whom she wished to lavish every ounce of her energy and attention. It was only by some miracle of the universe that all of the love she so recklessly spent on her beloved Queen was so handsomely returned. For all of that infinitely precious blessing, Ruby had callously walked away from the love of her life. And although she promised to return, the words were only just that: words. In life there were no guarantees. She had died on Regina once, and now in her ignorant stubbornness had walked headlong toward danger again, putting Regina at risk of being widowed for the second time in five years. It was unconscionable, and that night with a million or a billion or even many more miles between them, Ruby hated herself.
And then there were the children, who were almost certain to be asleep by now, tightly tucked together beneath a nest of covers, their little faces so pure and innocent and angelic in repose. Ruby’s chest tightened at the mere thought of them, and of how she loved them with more ferocity than she previously thought possible for a human body to contain. Becoming a mother was her proudest and most humbling experience, and yet she had abandoned the most perfect beings that ever existed beneath the stars, one of whom grew safely ensconced inside her own body until nine months later Amelia came into the world through her mother’s unimaginable pain, a screaming pink thing with a shock of ebony hair and eyes the color of rich, pristine earth. And while Sophia was not the fruit of Ruby’s body, she was every bit as much her pride and joy as Amelia. There was nothing she wouldn’t do for her girls, up to and including walking through a fiery Babylonian furnace heated up seven times what was normal. But another world away from her babies, Ruby couldn’t help but feel she had diminished the sacred bond and duty of motherhood by her selfish actions.

Nearby she could hear Emma breathing, but Ruby had never felt quite so alone. Recalling a movie she loved, one that never failed to make her bawl like a child watching Bambi for the first time, the words of a song it is famous for sprung to life in her mind. Yearning for her family and isolated as she was from them, she couldn’t help but sympathize with the plight of Fievel Mousekewitz.

“Somewhere out there,” she began to softly sing, inspired by Fievel’s emotional song. The room fell into total silence as if spell had come over all. “Beneath the pale moonlight,” her voice caught just as Fievel’s did but for much different reasons, “someone's thinking of me, and loving me tonight.” Ruby could not help but feel foolish as she serenaded her wife from a million miles away, but she went on, hoping the lyrics found resonance somewhere in the universe, and that Regina could feel her love even so far away.

“Somewhere out there,” she continued, her voice picking up as she imagined Regina singing Tanya’s part while bathed in the soft luminescence of the earth's celestial satellite. To her great surprise, Emma picked up the tune, singing along slightly off-key but with equally heartfelt inflection, “someone's saying a prayer, that we'll find one another, in that big somewhere out there.”

“And even though I know how very far apart we are, it helps to think we might be wishing on the same bright star. And when the night wind starts to sing a lonesome lullaby, it helps to think we're sleeping underneath the same big sky!”

“Somewhere out there, if love can see us through, then we'll be together, somewhere out there, out where dreams come true.”

As their voices petered out at the ending of the last chorus, Ruby rolled onto her other side.

“Goodnight, Rubes,” Emma said, and though her salutation was meant to be encouraging, it was clear to Ruby by the hitching in her voice that she was feeling the separation from her loved ones as
badly as Ruby was. Yet another thing for her to feel guilty about.

Clenching her eyes shut, she replied, “Night, Em.” Following that, with the faces that mattered most to her clear in mind, she whispered in near silence so that no one could hear her, “‘night, my babies, and ‘night my love.” With a heavy heart, Ruby surrendered to a flood of latent emotions, and when she finally fell into a restless slumber an hour later, there were still bitter tears rolling slowly down her cheeks.

Chapter End Notes

Click here for the song Ruby sang! It's a favorite from my childhood.
An Early Morning Conversation

Chapter Summary

Ruby and Esperanza have a talk in which information is dropped about Cora and they bond a little bit over family.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning Ruby awoke to a very pleasant smell wafting through the tiny cottage, and the promise of a meal had her alert very quickly. As her stomach began to growl, she sat up in the floor, her blanket pooling in her lap. A jaw-popping yawn tore loose and she stretched her arms over her head to work the kinks out of her sore muscles and bones. The last time she'd slept in the floor was when the girls got the flu a little over a year ago and in the Enchanted Forest before that. Her body was unused to the hard surface for sleeping, so she'd been a bit uncomfortable, but it could have been worse if not for the rather plush bearskin rug underneath her. Considering the large size of the pelt and its apparent age, she mused about the skill of whatever hunter had made the cottage his or her abode before Esperanza stumbled upon it.

Now reoriented into wakefulness, Ruby glanced over at Emma, who at Ruby’s insistence had taken the small but cushioned sofa arranged somewhat haphazardly in the middle of the room. Completely dead to the world, Emma was splayed out on her back with one of her arms flung over her eyes and the other hanging off the couch, mouth hanging open slightly as she snored. In moments like this, Ruby envied her friend’s ability to sleep soundly no matter where they were or what was going on. Hell, if she had to, Ruby was fairly certain the woman could sleep on a rock.

Chuckling at the comical and incredibly endearing sight, she tossed her blanket aside and then moved to stand as quietly as she could. There was really no need to do so when Emma slept like the dead, but Regina was a frighteningly light sleeper, so it became ingrained habit to move about stealthily to avoid waking her wife on nights when she had to get up to use the bathroom or needed to wander downstairs so she could pace off some restless energy.

Once upright, Ruby discreetly shimmied into her pants and then snuck outside to relieve herself in the woods without alerting Esperanza, who was gaily humming a tune as she cooked. Ruby could make the delicious scent of bacon being fried, and if her memory served her correctly, her nose was also detecting the presence of midnight mushrooms, a delicacy in these parts of the Enchanted Forest due to their scarcity and the extreme effort it took to procure them. Her mouth began to water at the prospect of such an unexpectedly delightful treat, so she made haste taking care of her business.

Ruby was careful to be quiet opening the door but didn’t bother to conceal her steps inside as she
crossed over the short distance to the little pot-bellied stove being utilized to prepare breakfast.

“Good morning,” she said as she sidled up to stand next to Esperanza. Their host looked refreshed and beautiful buttoned up in a pair of tan leather breeches and a white cotton tunic. Her raven hair was unfettered and cascaded in waves down her back, reaching nearly to her waist. Ruby leaned in close to the woman’s shoulder and gave a prolonged sniff, followed by a groan of anticipation. “Smells heavenly.”

Esperanza turned and smiled at Ruby’s greeting. “Good morning,” she said, dark eyes twinkling in the early morning light that strained through the dusty glass of an old window framed into the wall nearby. “I hope you slept well considering the circumstances.”

Humming, Ruby nodding absentmindedly, completely distracted by the tantalizing odors emanating from the food being cooked in front of her. Temptation mounted to snatch a piece of bacon as she would were she at home. But she wasn’t at home – by choice – so she restrained the urge. However much Esperanza reminded her of Regina, she was not Regina, and Ruby didn’t want to offend the woman when she’d already been so courteous and gracious to two complete strangers.

Esperanza chuckled at the glazed, almost lustful expression on Ruby’s face while watching breakfast simmering in the cast iron skillet. The warm, throaty sound of amusement snapped Ruby out of her momentary captivation. She responded after a chagrined smile.

“I did. Or as well as could be expected, I guess,” she said. “I’m all full of energy because of this trip, so I probably wasn't going to sleep much anyway. I made due, though – got a couple hours. You?”

“I slept very well, thank you,” Esperanza said, sounding truly grateful for being asked. “I'm sorry you could not sleep more, but I understand how difficult it is to rest in a foreign land, especially when so far away from loved ones. I didn’t catch a wink for the first two days after I departed my homeland. The prospect of adventure has that effect, I think, no matter the impetus.”

Leaning against the counter, Ruby allowed her head to loll against her shoulder, her face growing solemn. “I can’t argue with that. But even if I wasn't all amped up, I still wouldn't have slept much. After almost ten years sharing a bed with someone, it's hard to sleep alone, specially when that person has come to feel like a vital part of your person. While I'm here, it's like I'm missing half of myself. That I am likely billions of miles from home just makes it worse.”

Biting her lip, Esperanza flipped the sizzling bacon before grabbing a handful of midnight mushrooms from the little container on the sparse counter space against the wall. As she started to chop them up, she said, “I've never been in love before, so I can't say I know how you're feeling.
But I'm sure you'll be back home to your family soon enough.”

Rather than respond, Ruby only nodded, hoping very much Esperanza was right. Her eyes slid closed as her mind drifted. More than anything else at that moment, she longed for home, to be back with Regina and the kids sitting around the breakfast table on a mundane morning and taking comfort in going through their everyday rituals. She wanted to see the sunlight cascading through the window over the sink in thin rays and watch the way it framed Regina's features and shimmered in those rich brown eyes while she was lost in thought. She wanted to glance up from taking a giant bite of pancakes just in time to see her wife's half-adoring, half-disgusted smirk from across the table, and to hear Amie and Sophie chirping at each other in conversation as they deftly answered their mothers' questions without breaking their train of thought. She wanted to drink her orange juice straight out of the carton and get a firm but playful swat on the ass for committing so cardinal a sin within the sacred confines of the Queen’s kitchen. These were only a few of the many little things that she experienced with wonderful regularity, and even though they might seem silly or inconsequential to some, they were the day in and day out foundation of Ruby’s life.

As these thoughts flitted through her mind, Ruby found herself wondering what Regina was doing right at that moment. Maybe, she thought, it was still nighttime in Storybrooke and Regina was lying awake on her side of the bed, thinking about her just as Ruby had been Regina last night. Or it could be daytime, the sun having already risen long ago so that Regina was at work, sitting alone in her office and worrying endlessly while managing to complete every single task set for herself without fail. Ruby honestly hoped neither was the case. The one thing that made the separation bearable was her belief that Regina would go on with her life regardless of what might happen. Ruby needed to know that to keep pressing forward, because she simply couldn't stomach the thought of causing Regina more pain after being the source of so much already.

It had been more than seven years since Regina was stabbed by Joshua and since Ruby was herself abducted, but the scars of that ordeal still lingered. When the pain was still fresh, Regina had not hidden her anguish, knowing that Ruby had needed to know someone understood, on at least some level, what she was going through, which Regina did. Not only had she endured her own trauma that day, she'd lived through things that would break most people; and though not without error, she'd made it through stronger and more resilient for the perseverance. So on those nights when Ruby would wake up screaming and manically clawing at her chest, Regina would put her own pain on display so that she'd know the comfort offered was not from pity but from sympathy. Ruby was not alone in her nightmares. Over the years she'd had to reciprocate Regina's comfort many times when her wife would awake from the throes of her own repercussive terrors. Those nights were the worst for Ruby. She didn't consider it exaggeration to posit that she would prefer suffering alone through a thousand vivid re-imaginings of being tortured, mutilated, and killed than to see Regina's torment over the very same events. Despite the fact she knew it was irrational, Ruby felt responsible for that pain, for even though she knew Joshua was insane, it had been her actions that set him on his murderous path. Regina had been an innocent bystander in the matter, was merely collateral damage in Joshua's rabid pursuit of revenge on Ruby. For that, she would never forgive herself.
Of course, she never would have known the truth of what was plaguing Regina's dreams if the stubbornly reticent woman's subconscious hadn't betrayed her. At first, Regina had tried to play her nightmares off as having stemmed from her stabbing or from old memories of her days as the Queen that she didn't want to dredge up any further. But one night she woke Ruby thrashing and moaning, and before Ruby could even wake her up, Regina nearly launched out of the bed crying out her name and reaching out for her. It was then she had understood that Regina was reliving the moment she'd been discovered dangling from the ceiling of that accursed basement, and it made her feel miserably wretched.

Being a protector meant taking the pain of others onto herself, and Ruby had always seen herself as just that: a protector. But in that case there was nothing she could do to alleviate the suffering of the one person who meant more to her than anyone else in the universe. Being the cause of that pain only added to her woe. There were times even now so many years removed that Regina had nightmares about that night, and it had yet to get easier for her endure knowing what she was ultimately responsible for. And if she was being brutally, painfully honest with herself, she didn't think it ever would.

“Are you alright?” Esperanza's asked, snapping Ruby out of her morose contemplation.

“Yeah,” she said, hoping Esperanza was not as good at detecting lies as Emma was. “Nothing to worry over. Just thinking about stuff.”

Glancing over to Ruby, Esperanza was wearing a hesitantly curious expression. “About your family?”

Nodding, Ruby bit her lip. “Mmhmm. Just kinda missing them and wondering what they're doing right now.”

“Missing you I am sure,” Esperanza replied with a gentle smile, “just as much as you are them.”

At that, she turned her attention to preparing breakfast by removing the bacon to a tray on her right and then cracking open a half-dozen modest sized eggs and dumping them into the skillet. Every so often as she passed the flat wooden ladle through the eggs to keep them from burning, her eyes would cut over to Ruby, sneaking in a glance as if there was something lingering on her mind. After the fifth time, Ruby chuckled, drawing the woman's attention.

“Is there something you wanted to ask me?”
Looking a bit uncomfortable at being caught and called out, Esperanza paused in her deft movements and turned a fraction toward Ruby. Her expression hovered over the border between open apology and hesitant curiosity.

“I do,” she said, “and I hope I’m not overstepping my bounds. But as you know, I came to this land to seek out Queen Regina, so I’m obviously very curious about her. And who better to ask than her spouse? So, I was wondering...what is she like?”

Ruby grinned, not even the slightest bit offended. She had been expecting questions about Regina from the moment she had learned Esperanza was Regina's cousin, particularly considering Emma told the woman that she was Regina's wife. Normally Ruby would exercise caution discussing her family with someone she had just met the day before, but this morning she was more than willing to indulge Esperanza's curiosity because Regina was her favorite topic and one upon which she could expound to near infinity.

“Regina is...amazing,” Ruby said, her voice taking on that besotted inflection that it did whenever she was speaking about her wife. “And I'm being perfectly honest...that's not just my admittedly substantial bias talking. She's my wife now, so I'm kinda obligated to gush about her. But the truth is, I admired her long before we were together. I mean, there's just so much to be in awe of.”

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“She's strong and intelligent and sassy and beautiful, kind when warranted and severe when deserved. She can be stubborn as a mule, but I can't really complain about that 'cause I'm almost as bad.” At that, the women shared a laugh, but then Ruby's tone turned wistful again. “Most importantly, she's a wonderful mother, which isn't really a surprise, because she's already raised one amazing kid. Still, she always knows what to say and what to do whenever the girls get in trouble. I can be a push-over at times, but somehow Regina manages to be strict without oppressing them. At the same time, she can be so much fun. We really do have the best time when it's just us and the girls. So I guess if I had to sum up Regina the mom, I would say that she's both the kind that you want and the kind that you need, which is rare, I think.

“As far as Regina the woman, most people wouldn't believe it because of her previous life and her reputation, but she can be really sweet and thoughtful, which is something that I honestly did not expect when we first got together. Just as an example, I can't tell you the times I've come home from work exhausted, quite literally beaten and battered, and had a warm meal and warm bath waiting for me 'cause she'd called in to check on me and found out how crappy my day was. Sometimes she does that even when she's had as bad a day as I have, and she never expects anything in return. She’s also super intense emotionally. Regina feels more deeply than anyone I’ve ever known. When she hates she hates with the fires of hell but when she loves it’s with the awesome intensity of heaven. And she’s so smart! Like, the kind of smart that is scary. She memorized an entire textbook on municipal law just because I started dropping hints she should run for a seat in the state government. It’s my dream to get her to become Governor of Maine, and it’s my personal opinion that she would be the best damn Governor the state’s ever seen, but that’s neither here nor there.”
Sighing, Ruby leaned her elbow on the counter-top and rested her cheek in her palm. “God, I could just go on forever, but I won't, because that’s just the tip of the iceberg. Truthfully she's indescribable. Being her wife makes me the luckiest girl in the world.”

Smiling tenderly as if deeply affected by Ruby's words, Esperanza gave her own little sigh. Removing the pan from the oven, she scraped the perfectly cooked eggs onto a large dish and then sat the pan back down. “If she is half as amazing as you say she is,” she said as she worked, “I can't wait to meet her.”

“Oh!” Ruby jumped a little at her own exclamation. Esperanza's words had triggered a thought, and she suddenly remembered the phone in her pocket she had brought along with her. “I forgot! I brought my phone with me in case we needed to document anything while we're here. If you want, I can show you some pictures.”

“That would be wonderful,” Esperanza said, nodding enthusiastically, though there was some confusion evident in her expression. “But may I ask, what is a...phone?”

Chuckling at the woman’s adorable befuddlement, Ruby produced the phone from her pocket and showed it to Esperanza, whose eyes widened dramatically as she took in what had to be to her a very strange device. The look on her face grew even more amusing when Ruby powered the phone up and its screen flickered to life.

Gasping, Esperanza glanced up at Ruby with eyes wide as saucers. “This is like no magic I've ever seen! I thought you said you come from a world where there is none?”

“We did. This isn't magic.” Ruby indicated toward the phone with her head. “It's just technology. Science has progressed a great deal further in that world than in this one. I assure you, it's harmless. Watch.”

As Esperanza observed with rapt attention, Ruby proceeded to unlock the phone, open her photography app, and then load the family album. She then sifted through the thumbnails until she landed on a picture of Regina giving a speech to the rapt audience of the town council. This particular photo had been taken a mere week ago, and in it the mayor was particularly impassioned in her expression, lips slanted upward in excitement, her eyes alight with that fiery passion that Ruby loved so much.

She showed the picture to Esperanza. “This is Regina. She's not the Queen anymore since there are none of those in the land we now live in, but she is the mayor, or leader, of our town and she is very good at it. In fact, I took this picture at a town council meeting where she was giving a speech about
some growth initiatives she's been pushing them to adopt. As you can tell, she might not be a queen, but she can still command a room.”

“She appears very impressive, indeed,” was Esperanza's awed reply. “And every bit as beautiful as the stories say.” Leaning in, she studied the picture more closely, squinting her eyes to take in finer details. “And if I'm not mistaken, I can see some of my grandmother in her.”

“Really?” Ruby asked, intrigued. “Cause I met Regina's mother once or twice, and I didn't think they looked anything alike. I always figured she favored her father.”

Esperanza made an interested noise in the back of her throat. “That is fascinating. I suppose it could be because my grandmother and Cora had different fathers. Cora was the eldest, you see, and her father was a traveling merchant from the White Kingdom. He caught the Red Fever and died when Cora was an infant. Some years later, her mother, my grandmother, remarried to my grandfather. Everything else, as they say, is history.”

Considering Esperanza's explanation, Ruby had to concede that it made sense. If nothing else, it certainly presented a possible explanation as to why Cora had moved away from her homeland to the White Kingdom, where she fell into the unfortunate circumstances that resulted in Zelena's birth. It was possible that she had been trying to connect with a part of herself that was missing due to growing up without her father. Ruby could sympathize. As someone who had grown up not knowing who her father was, she had wrestled for years with the longing produced by knowing only half of where she came from, and even though Granny was more than Ruby could have ever asked for in a parent, the void in her heart that formed from the absence of such a key piece of who she was never filled. To this day she still struggled with that empty space in her history despite the ever-increasing likelihood that it would remain as it was, a forever open wound.

“I guess that makes sense,” Ruby said. “So, Regina favors your Gran, huh? She'll be tickled to hear that. One time when I commented on how beautiful she is, she just blushed and shrugged her shoulders. 'God only knows where they came from,' she said, 'but thank you anyway, dear.' I could tell by the far away look on her face she was thinking about her mother. I think she'll appreciate knowing that there is something else she got from Cora she can be proud of.”

“She should be proud,” Esperanza added, smiling. “My abuela was a wonderful woman, and if what I'm told is true, very beautiful, just as her daughter Cora was, and now her granddaughter, Regina.” Pausing, Esperanza looked at Ruby, a frown marring her pretty features. “You know, she rarely spoke of Cora, but when she did it was with such longing that it made me angry at my aunt, even though I never met her. She turned her back on her family without a second thought. I think my grandmother lived far longer than she might have after my grandfather's death, just hoping that her daughter might come back home. It never happened, obviously, but it helps to know that Cora did not completely waste her life. If what you have told me is true, she has done at least one thing right.”
“She admitted as much before she died,” Ruby said, biting her lip as she looked down at the picture of Regina on her phone. “After spending all of her life in fear of Cora, it meant so much to Regina to hear from her mother's own lips that she really did love her and was proud of her, despite all of her mistakes.” Lifting her finger, Ruby lovingly ran it along the surface of the phone that displayed Regina's face. Her voice took on an absent tone. “She's been through so much in her life. All she ever wanted was to love and to be loved. When we first got together, she had made so much progress all on her own, but the pain and loneliness she carried around since childhood was still there. I made it my job to make her feel loved and wanted and needed every single day, because I don't ever want her to doubt whether or not she's worthy of love and happiness, which is the way her mother made her feel.

“Having said that, I wouldn't want to change anything in the past that lead us to where we are today, and I know that she feels the same. Would she love to have grown up with a mother who had a heart and was capable of the kind of love that a child deserves? Sure. But doing that would change everything. Regina wouldn't be Regina anymore. She wouldn't be the love of my life anymore. We wouldn't have our family anymore. And while her heritage is important to her, as it is to me, I believe I can safely speak for her when I say that what we have together is much more important.”

Sighing dramatically, Esperanza leaned her hip into the counter, a dreamy look on her face. “When you talk about Regina, it makes me want to find what you have. I want that kind of love in my life. I want someone who will accept me for who I am and to whom I can return that privileged affection. Sometimes, though, it feels as far away as the stars.”

“I know what you mean,” said Ruby, reaching out to grasp Esperanza's hand and when she did, Esperanza returned a grateful expression. “I felt that way for a long, long time. So did Regina. Neither of us were looking for love when we started spending time together. We both just needed a friend who could understand our pain. We found that in each other, and in the end we were rewarded with so much more. If what happened with us has taught me anything, it's that if you look for love, you won't find it, or at least not in its truest form. Real love – True Love – finds you, not the other way around, and it does so when you least expect it.” Smiling at Esperanza, she gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “Be patient, Esperanza. Love will find you in due time. You're a beautiful and kind young woman, and even though I've not known you for very long, I'm a very good judge of character. Hell, maybe us meeting like this is fate or kismet or some crap like that guiding you to where you need to be, here and now, with me and Emma.”

Ducking her head to hide her blush, Esperanza glanced up a Ruby through her lashes. “Do you really believe that?”

Along with sporting her signature grin, Ruby nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, I do. It happened for me, and if it happened for me, it certainly can for you.”
Esperanza gave Ruby's hand a grateful tug. “Thank you. Your words mean a great deal to me.” After releasing Ruby's hand, she shook her head. “But enough about me, show me another image of your family.”

Ruby beamed. She didn’t need to be told twice. “I'd love to!”

Lifting the phone back up, she began sifting through pictures until landing on one of Regina sitting at her desk in her home office, her reading glasses firmly in place as she worked. The girls were drawing in their own notebooks on either side of their mother, almost perfectly mimicking her intense concentration.

“I love this one,” she commented as she lovingly stared at the picture. “Regina can be a little bit of a workaholic but she always makes time for the kids. And they love to pretend to be mayor just like their Mommy and often volunteer to ‘help’ with the paperwork. Of course, Regina eats it up. It makes her so proud that they want to be just like her when they grow up.”

Sparing a glance at Esperanza, she noted that the woman appeared to be even more enchanted by the photograph Ruby had showed her than she had been by the technological wonder that was the cell phone. She couldn't help but grin. Her family had that kind of effect on people.

“You have such a beautiful family,” Esperanza said, eyes drinking in the picture with reverence mixed with what looked an awful lot like longing.

“They are, aren't they?” Ruby said, pride of her family suffusing her chest even though she felt a little bad over it. Esperanza had been estranged from her home and her loved ones far longer, and that not by choice, while Ruby had only been gone from home one day. As much as she was missing Regina and the girls, she couldn’t imagine being without her family. Just maybe, Ruby thought, things were about to change for her new friend. The seeds of an idea began to sprout in her mind that might soon enough provide Esperanza with a new family that would accept her for who she was.

“You've seen Regina, of course,” she said, now bursting at the seams to introduce Regina’s cousin to the girls. Photographs were a pale imitation of the real thing, but for now they would have to do. Pointing to each of the girls in turn, she continued, “Those are our daughters, Amelia and Sophia. Amelia is the one in red,” she explained, pointing to Amelia and then Sophia on the screen, “Sophia is in purple. Here, let me get you a better picture.”

Swiping her thumb across the screen a number of times, Ruby eventually came to a picture of the girls in their playtime princess dresses, laughing with each other as they acted out various scenes from *Snow White and Seven Dwarves* and *Beauty and the Beast*. For whatever reason, those were
their favorite Disney movies, which for obvious reasons frustrated Regina to no end. On occasion fervent pleas and deadly pouts even managed to persuade the former Evil Queen to assume her former personality in play. Replete with majestic – and exquisitely sexy if Ruby did say so herself – wardrobe, Regina would chase the squealing children around the house, cackling with embellished maleficence whilst performing paltry magic tricks such as summoning obstacles and harmless creatures to provide them entertainment.

The neighbors often watched those harmless performances from their windows with barely concealed anxiety. Ruby just found it all to be delightful and more than a little emotional. She cried and laughed with equal gaiety both out of love of her family and with a joyful pride that Regina had at long last embraced what she used to be. There was a time, after all, Regina had been incapable and insecure about the monster she kept chained within the dark confines of her mind. But with much patience and love she had grown confident enough to put on a very convincing show for her children without dissolving into hysteric later on because she’d let Her Majesty out of her prison for even a second around her babies.

Ruby could almost see Regina standing at the top of the stairs, hands on her hips, expression imperious and just a bit dark but never enough to be frightening, as she “pronounced” a royal proclamation that Snow White and her little friend Belle were to be apprehended at all costs. And she could hear the sounds of associated with those theatrics, the tinkling, melodic laughter of their children, who could feign terror as though seasons thespians but could not wholly hide their enchanted awe of their mother’s larger than life alternate persona.

Her expression grew tender and a more than a little bit nostalgic as her heart clenched at the thought of her babies. She could still remember the moment she'd given birth to Amelia and heard her first cries. Then there was the moment they'd laid Sophia in her arms, her tiny face all pink and scrunched up and annoyed at having been so rudely removed from her comfortable home of nine months. It seemed like yesterday but in reality had been over six years ago. They were growing up so fast, and it scared Ruby more than she would like to admit. Sometimes it felt like if she were to close her eyes for a second too long she might wake up to find them all grown up and not needing her anymore. And while she wanted so much to prevent that from ever, ever happening, keeping them perpetually in their youth was not a feasible option and furthermore was an ultimately selfish desire.

Esperanza’s gushing coo broke Ruby away from her thoughts.

“Aww! They're so precious!”

“That they are,” Ruby agreed, an adoring smile stretching across her lips as she gazed at the digital representation of her entire world. “And you can really tell in this picture which parent each of them takes after.”
After Esperanza had studied the picture for a moment, Ruby's last sentence finally seemed to register in her mind. When it did, she glanced up, utterly baffled. "Pardon any offense, but are implying that your children are actually your s?"

The confusion was understandable. Even those in the know sometimes had trouble processing the reality of how she and Regina had conceived. For someone like Esperanza who had very little practical knowledge of magic and a hefty helping of fear of it, the idea was bound to be inconceivable. Ruby could only guess as to the scenarios the raven-haired beauty could be contemplating to explain the physical resemblances; she doubted a magical conception was among them, though.

"And Regina's...together...biologically," she finished Esperanza's sentence. "It's a long story and kinda hard to explain. The gist of it is that Regina and I share True Love. We didn't plan it out or anything. It just... kinda happened. Both of the girls were conceived on the same night and we are both their biological parents."

"I have never heard of such a thing," Esperanza said, bewildered in disbelief.

Ruby shrugged the reaction off easily. "You wouldn't have. An acquaintance of ours explained how it happened and that there are...were...bad consequences to having a child magically. Both Regina and I paid a terrible price for our girls but that's stuff I really don't wanna get into because the memories are too painful. And besides, they were so worth it."

"I see," said Esperanza, looking slightly guilty for having brought up an obviously painful subject. "I'm sorry to have dredged up bad memories. I am glad for your sake, though, that all turned out so well. You have two gorgeous daughters. I can see how they would bring you such joy."

"Just don't mention the Play-Doh incident and she'll stay joyful." Emma's voice cut in from a few paces away, starting both Ruby and Esperanza, neither of whom heard the blonde woman approach. As they stared at her, she yawned loudly and then gave them a sleepy but totally cute frown. "What?"

"Did you suddenly develop stealth skills or something?" Ruby asked, a touch breathless. Her hand that was holding her phone was clutched over her chest and her heartbeat was just starting to return to a normal pace. "I didn't even hear you rustle. Have you been holding out on me all these years, Swan?"
Looking sheepish, Emma shook her head in the negative, her loose ponytail swishing from side to side. “When I got up, I noticed that you guys were all intense and focused on your conversation, so I tried to be quiet. I wasn't trying to sneak up on you or anything. Sorry if I scared you.”

“No, no,” said Esperanza, who after recovering from being startled had returned to cooking. “It's quite alright. Ruby and I were just discussing her family, and I have to admit, I was especially engrossed because I have been more than a little fascinated by Queen Regina ever since I learned I was related to her.”

Nodding her understanding, Emma ambled over to where Ruby and Esperanza were standing. She ducked her head between their bodies, peering intently at the mushrooms now frying on the stove. With a deep breath, she closed her eyes and then released a satisfied sound that bordered on obscene.

“God, I'm starving.” Ruby laughed as Emma turned to Esperanza, now grinning. “Say, you wouldn't happen to know how to make grilled cheese sandwiches, would you?” And then both were giggling like giddy schoolgirls while Esperanza stared as if they had gone insane.

Not long after, breakfast was served and though a pleasant conversation developed as they ate, all too soon the sun began to peek through the dingy windows of the cottage. Knowing that time was working against them, Ruby promptly began to clear away the dishes. With all three women pitching in, quick work was made of the clean up, and within an hours time, all three were standing in the clearing outside the small cottage Esperanza had been living in since her arrival in the Enchanted Forest.

They each took a moment to check their packs, double checking their supplies of food and water. Because of Regina’s diligence, Ruby and Emma had provided enough for both themselves and Esperanza for several days, which was fortunate, because their new companion previously traveled the roads by horseback and had only a small brown sack made of burlap type material with which to carry supplies.

With a long, and according to Esperanza, potential dangerous journey ahead of them, it was vital that they had adequate sustenance to maintain acceptable levels of energy. As anxious as Ruby was to get back home, she did not want to waste any more time than was necessary scavenging for food or hunting along the way, especially seeing as how time itself was behaving so strangely here. She recognized that they would have to stop where they could to refill their water bottles, but other than that she wanted to minimize interruptions on the trek ahead.

After ensuring that their provender was in order, Ruby peered into the shadowy depths of the forest. Her keen eyes could pierce the veil for only a hundred feet.
“Well,” she said, a feeling of foreboding blooming within as she turned northward, “over the river and through the woods, to the Evil Queen’s house we go.” And with determined steps, she began the journey to the Dark Palace, not knowing the appointment with destiny awaiting her there.

Chapter End Notes

The journey is about to begin. Things are about to get interesting for Ruby and the gang, so stay tuned! In other news, traffic has been low for this story and I’m not sure if that’s because of the posting schedule or waning interest in an already exclusive RedQueen fandom. Maybe it’s because the story sucks, though. Let me know if it's any or none of the above! ;)
The Crystal Lake

Chapter Summary

Ruby and the gang pass the first leg of the journey and on the way stop at an old landmark important to her and Emma's past.

Chapter Notes

"The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with eager feet,
Until it joins some larger way
Where many paths and errands meet.
And whither then? I cannot say." - J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 7 – The Crystal Lake (Ruby)

For almost three hours, the small group trekked towards the Dark Castle with relative ease. Having been informed by Esperanza that the trails were passable in this part of the forest, they agreed to stick to those in lieu of seeking out a main thoroughfare. Thus far the provided information had proven mostly accurate, although the pathways were rough compared to what Ruby was used to back home. The added stress to her body was, she thought, a fair trade for expediency. And she couldn’t really complain about the lack of major obstacles along the way, since only a few fallen trees had blocked the path along with one stream shallow enough to pass over on rock outcroppings. Other than that, the passage was smooth and steady, allowing very good headway to be made on the journey.

As far as Ruby could reckon, they had traveled approximately ten miles, which was excellent considering she and Emma were lugging loaded packs through often annoying underbrush and dirt trails that were meagerly carved out at best. But they had trudged along like troopers on the march and, if Esperanza was correct in her reckoning, were nearly halfway to the Dark Castle already. Ruby could feel her anticipation building. The encroaching proximity to their objective had her chomping at the bit to press on for a while longer. If it weren’t for other considerations – two of them to be precise – that’s exactly what she would have done. But whereas Esperanza seemed in fair enough condition to continue on, Emma did not. The blonde was in dire need of a break if the labor required to put one foot in front of the other was any indication.
Although annoyed at the delay, Ruby called a halt to her compatriots a few feet to her rear. As Emma bent over at the waist to catch her breath, Ruby choked back her frustration by reminding herself that Emma, while an extremely fit woman, was laden with more than she probably should be, and would therefore need more rest along the way than Ruby did. Being the Savior did not include the supernatural strength and endurance that Ruby derived from lycanthropy. Patience would have been exercised with her companions’ limitations, particularly considering they all might need to be at full fighting capability at a moment’s notice. The forest surrounding the Dark Castle had changed dramatically in the decades after the Dark Curse swept the residents of Misthaven away, and with Esperanza having only a very limited knowledge of the area there was really no way to predict what dangers might await them on the final leg of their journey.

While Emma took a moment to recover, Ruby peered out over the surroundings and spotted an area of thinning trees to the northwest. Just past them was a very large outcropping of boulders, and behind those she noted what looked like a body of water. From her perspective, she could not reckon how large it was nor could she predict whether or not its water was drinkable without closer examination. Hopefully fortune would be on their side, as with her canteen running low, those of her companions were bound to be empty.

“We should take a breather,” she said as if needing one herself. Mostly the suggestion was for Esperanza's benefit. The newcomer, unlike Emma, was yet unaware of the physical boons werewolves enjoyed. Ruby didn't want the woman to feel as though she was a hindrance and Emma was long used to Ruby indulging her human limits. Rather than loiter any longer on the trail, she pointed in the direction she spotted the body of water. “I think I see a pond or lake or something up ahead, we can rest there.”

“Sounds good,” Emma said from behind her shoulder, still slightly winded though not nearly as badly as Ruby would have expected. It seemed that her fair-haired friend had made good on the promise to physically prepare herself for what might well be a grueling journey. After straightening up, Emma grimaced and shuffled her feet as if attempting to restore blood flow. “It'll feel nice kick back for a minute. No offense, but the roads here suck ass.”

“I do not know what that means,” Esperanza said as she stepped up to Ruby’s other shoulder. The woman looked both perplexed and a little disgusted at the vulgar colloquialism.

“It was her indelicate way of saying the roads are bad,” Ruby said around her amusement as Emma grinned, both clearly besotted by Esperanza’s innocence. Fun as it would be to continue teasing the new kid, she cleared her throat to get progress back on track and then indicated to the northwest. “It's just this way.”

Ruby headed off toward the clearing without bothering to wait on her companions. As she emerged through the underbrush, she stopped cold and her eyes lit up with recognition. Before her was a lake of waters so crystalline that they appeared as rippled glass that shimmered in the sunlight as it ebbed
and flowed. Gentle waves lapped against the shore and upon the rocks, adding a backdrop of serenity to the calm beauty the scene presented. The lake was also much larger in diameter than she ever would have guessed. Due to being on the high end of a rolling hill, she could see well beyond the boulders that lined its near shore. The bulbous end of the lake closest to them tapered off and then stretched out as if an enormous tear-drop whose wavy tail reached at least a quarter of a mile into the distance before disappearing into the forests. Beyond the forest stretched a mountain range, broad and tall with snow capped peaks of various heights, the largest of which jutted into the sky as if a monolith surrounded by squatty pretenders to its earthen throne.

“How did I not recognize it?” she asked herself as Emma and Esperanza entered the clearing and took in the majestic view. The former was gawking in astonishment while the latter woman gasped, awestruck at the wonder of nature unfettered from the influence of humanity. Ruby completely understood the reaction. The first time she’d caught a glimpse of the Crystal Lake, it took her breath away. That had been so long ago now that she was surprised she remembered it so vividly. Just for a moment, ensconced in the familiarity of a meaningful time in her life, she allowed herself the luxury of basking in the natural tranquility painted by the hand of some unknown, unnamed god.

For the first time since arriving back in the Enchanted Forest, she began to feel genuinely nostalgic. Tainted as her recollections were of this place due to her experiences while living here, she had forgotten just how gorgeous its raw, untamed nature could be. She could feel her wolf’s agreement in the back of her mind, along with her itching desire to dig her paws into her native soil. The urge to shift and run to her heart’s content was almost overpowering.

Shaking her head out of her reverie, Ruby broke the spell that had come over her to declare their location to the others.

“It’s the Crystal Lake.” Her announcement came in breathy tones just barely loud enough so her companions overheard.

“You know this place?” asked Emma, her green eyes alighted with hopeful excitement.

Ruby nodded as she nibbled at her lip, then turned to Emma with watery eyes. The nostalgia was now in full effect as she was assailed by more memories, one of which was particularly precious and relevant to not only Ruby but to Emma as well.

“Yeah, I do,” she affirmed, her voice wistful with remembrance. “But before I tell you about it, let’s sit and rest for a while. Sound good?” When both women nodded their agreement, Ruby removed her pack and fetched her canteen. She knew from experience that the water here was not only potable but pristine in both content and flavor, as it was fed directly from the run off created by melting snow upon the glacial peaks of the mountain ranges that rimmed in the entire region. The taste of the water here was so legendary that the lake would no doubt have stayed perpetually dried
out if a newly crowned Queen Regina had not banned the unwashed masses from helping themselves to even a single droplet from her most precious supply of personal refreshment.

Eager to get a sip to reacquaint her taste buds, Ruby moved toward the shoreline to kneel on one of the wide, flat rocks hanging out over the water. From there she was able to dip the canteen in without getting her shoes or pants soaked. At least one of Granny’s lessons had stuck: it was important on long journeys to stay dry. Following her lead, her companions did the same and soon they were all three sitting amiably upon the same rock whilst sipping on water more rejuvenating than any to be found for a thousand miles.

The rhythmic sounds of the waves lapping against the shore line did much to soothe what tension had built up inside Ruby along the way. Nearness to the first objective of her trip had come with stark awareness that she would soon tread upon the very stones Regina once relentlessly paced as the Evil Queen. There was no denying how apprehensive she felt at being so tangibly exposed to that sordid part of her wife’s history, and it had her nerves unsettled in ways that she hadn’t anticipated. And while it was certainly possible her feelings were due to a lingering conflict within her subconscious to fully reconcile herself with the woman Regina used to be, she very much doubted it. She hadn’t looked at Regina as the Evil Queen in so long she sometimes forgot there even was one. But even though Ruby was willing to acknowledge some of the things she would see in the Dark Palace would no doubt be disturbing and serve only to paint a terrible picture of the life Regina once lived, she also knew from experience that nothing contained in those darkened halls could irreparably blemish her opinion of her True Love.

Before agreeing to move in with Regina, the former Queen had made quite certain that Ruby was aware as to exactly who she was making such a commitment to. As Regina laid out her most appalling sins and in so doing bared her own heart to either be delicately accepted or cruelly rejected, Ruby got the distinct impression that the expectation was that she would choose the latter. Her keen eye made her perceptive, so she’d not missed the way Regina went rigid in anticipation with each shameful detail that was revealed. Whether wholly conscious or not, that lack of faith had hurt Ruby a great deal more than she would ever admit.

Regina had been wrong to be afraid, and when she was done spelling out what she insisted was but a portion of her laundry list of crimes, Ruby told her so.

“I was never under any sort of illusion as to the kind of person you are...or were,” she’d then said with the kind of heartfelt conviction that even Regina in her valid trepidation could not misinterpret. “I entered this relationship with eyes wide open. And while I’m not privy to everything you did back then, I know enough to be certain you more than earned your former title.”

Regina flinched visibly at that, but Ruby had felt it necessary to be brutally honest so as leave no doubt. If Regina thought for one second that the redeemed woman she’d become in recent years colored Ruby’s perception, that Ruby was in some sort of denial about or was wearing rose-colored
glasses that blinded her to the exceedingly dark past she was trying to leave behind, she would never accept the difficult truth being presented to her.

And rightfully so when it would be an egregious lie for Ruby to insist there wasn’t a time in her life that she genuinely hated the murderous tyrant Misthaven knew primarily as the Evil Queen. Once, she had burned with such an insatiable desire for vengeance on Snow’s behalf that she plotted to sneak away while her friend was sleeping so as to slip quietly into the Dark Palace and assassinate the Queen while she was sleeping.

“What stopped you?” Regina had asked, her facial expression showing horrified astonishment while her eyes were dullled and shoulders drawn as if she were internally withering. The rather blunt admission of this decades old plot to murder her in her sleep that fortunately never came to fruition had to be the last thing she’d expected to hear from a woman everyone in Storybrooke considered to be a hero of the highest esteem.

That Regina hadn’t bothered to hide her shock wasn’t surprising; not many people knew Ruby to be capable of cold-blooded murder. Then again, not many people really knew Ruby at all – just Granny and Snow really at that time, though Regina was certainly well on her way to soul-deep intimacy with Ruby’s own inner monster. And since they were going to be living together, she figured it was high time they got properly acquainted.

Grieved nonetheless over the effect her transparency was having on the woman she loved, Ruby raked a shaky hand through her hair. But her eyes never left Regina’s, and she could remember how much she’d been silently willing Regina to be patient and for her to understand the reason she was revealing such a callous and aberrant scheme at so critical a time in their relationship.

“Somehow Snow figured out what I was planning to do and stopped me,” Ruby said with no small amount of regret. And not that Snow had stopped her of course, but that she’d been ready to commit so heinous a crime upon a woman she would some day learn to love more than her own life. “I didn’t stand down quietly, either. I begged her to let me go, insisted over and over that I could end our life on the run in a single night. But she wouldn’t budge, just kept telling me it wasn’t the way and that it would break her heart for me to do something like that in her name. ‘That’s a tactic more up Regina’s alley,’ she said, and that turned out to be the right thing to say. I gave up such thoughts after that. Which is a good thing knowing what I do now. You may be a notoriously light sleeper, your Majesty, but it isn’t hard for me to extract myself out of your arms at night without waking you. Wouldn’t have been difficult then for me to creep into your chambers while you slept after downing your nightly glass of wine and rip your heart out of your chest before you could even scream.”

Ruby had tried to keep her tone teasing, but her heart plummeted into her suede boots at the way Regina blanched and clutched in barely constrained terror at the pearls hanging daintily around her neck.
“How tragic that would have been,” Regina had said, trying to sound unaffected and failing miserably. “You’d have ruined sheets that cost more gold than ever passed through your hands in a lifetime.”

“I agree that it would have been, but not for that reason!” After heaving an unsteady breath, Ruby scrubbed at her face, searching for the right words.

The only thing that ran through her mind in the heat of the moment was how twenty-eight years in Storybrooke had gone a long way toward changing those feelings. In fact, after the curse broke, the reunions all over town broke up, and she’d retired to her little room at the B&B, all she could think about was that despite the ill intentions, Regina had brought her to a land where her life was remarkably and demonstrably better. How could it not be when she hadn’t needed to worry about losing control of her wolf and eating someone she cared about on a daily basis? And then there were the other, less existential reasons, such as her thorough appreciation of the modern conveniences of indoor plumbing, electricity, television, and cell phones. And then there was the significant matter of the social freedom inherent to laws demanding she be treated like a human being instead of a possession and which allowed her to speak her mind as she wished and dress as provocatively as she wanted even though her grandmother despised both her “sassy tongue” and “trashy wardrobe.”

“If I’d done it...if I’d killed you, I wouldn’t have all this!” She’d gestured around the room and was pleased to see Regina followed her meaning. “In Storybrooke, my body belongs to me alone to do with as I please, to abuse or pamper at my every whim without the threat of being stoned or flogged or paraded through the town square before my hair is shaved down to my scalp and my shoulder is branded to forever mark me as a filthy whore unworthy of human dignity. In Storybrooke, I have the final say in whether or not I’ll ever bring a child into the world, something that I lived in perpetual fear of back in the Enchanted Forest. In Storybrooke, my skills are of value beyond how still I can lay on my back or how efficiently I can darn socks or chop wood or wash dishes or do any of the other menial, gray-matter dulling tasks appropriate for women in a place of archaic values the Western World has for the most part abandoned. And in Storybrooke, I’m not a monster, not just a tortured woman who lives with a vicious, indiscriminate killer in the back of her mind who forcibly presses to the fore once a month demanding to be unleashed upon any helpless victims who are unfortunate enough to cross her path. For that alone I owed you my eternal gratitude.

“So as thoughtful as your concern is, it’s ultimately unwarranted. I know who you were Regina, and I’ve not been concerned with her for a long time. All I care about now is the person sitting here next to me, the person I love with all of my heart. ‘Cause I have to tell you, she’s pretty damn spectacular.” When Regina scoffed, a tear running lazily down her ruddy cheek, Ruby reached for her hand. “I mean it! You’re a good woman, Regina, in spite of your past. You’re a wonderful mother and terrific girlfriend, and an amazing leader that I’ve come to greatly respect and admire. Hell, even Cursed Ruby felt that way. Did you know I used to daydream about working up enough nerve to ask you out on a date?”
For the second time that night, Regina had appeared bewildered. “You did?”

“God, yes! I was totally infatuated with you for, like, the entire time. You can’t tell me you didn’t feel me staring at your butt every time you strutted your way out of the diner? ‘Cause believe me I did. I may have even drooled a little at times.”

“I can’t say that I didn’t, but then again I am fairly used to such leering. I do have a fantastic ass, dear.” Regina smirked at that, which brightened Ruby’s life right back up after the dark turn the conversation had taken.

She returned the smirk with a rather salacious grin and wink. “Don’t I know it!”

“So why didn’t you say anything? Just so you know, I might have said yes…”

“For the same reason you sat me down tonight and tried to give me an out. I felt I wasn’t good enough.” When Regina frowned and began to protest her intentions, Ruby stopped her with a firm tut and then launched into a speech she is still proud of to this day. “Don’t even try to deny it. I know what you were doing, and as I said, it was totally unnecessary because I…know…you. We have so much in common, you and I, beyond our being yearly competitors for Storybrooke’s resident bombshell.”

They shared a laugh at that because it was true. It was no secret to Ruby that at least half the male patrons at Granny’s – and quite a few of the female variety – frequented the establishment as much to stare at her assets as to enjoy Granny’s superb cooking. And while Mayor Mills might have been able to intimidate a lion into shrinking into a flea and was more than capable of striking abject fear into the heart of the most courageous individual with only the scarcest hint of her famous glare, everyone in town was also painfully aware that she was drop dead gorgeous. During the Curse, people didn’t attend Regina’s speeches or functions out of a sense of civil duty, but to get a glimpse of a face more suited to deity than mortal flesh, flawless olive skin that looked as silken as Ruby now knew it to feel, professionally or elegantly displayed décolletage, hips made to grip, and, as Regina had said herself, a fantastic ass that held every eye spellbound as the mayor walked away.

It honestly depended upon the time of year as to who tallied up more votes. As the months got progressively hotter Ruby wore increasingly skimp clothes, which tilted things in her favor over the prim and proper mayor, whose fashionable power suits accentuated her beauty year around. Regina in the winter, though, was a sight to behold, especially when it was snowing outside, which made her raven hair and exotic skin tone stand out all the more. Of course, Ruby thought anyone who preferred her to Regina was a moron. She still does.
“But like I said,” Ruby then said, tone turning more serious, “I know what it’s like to feel undeserving of love. I felt that way every day after I slaughtered Peter and then literally ate him. But that day you walked into the Diner so sad and alone, something started to change for me. Little by little, I began to realize that I know you in ways maybe no one else can. I know the struggle with the darkness. I know the intolerable pain of loss. I know what it does to a person to have a mother whose selfishness bred failure in every possible avenue to provide what every child needs: unconditional love, support, and acceptance. And I know how it feels to yearn for love more than anything else in the world even though it seems to be all but impossible because of the past, because of who I was and who I am. I saw that yearning in you, and it sang the sweetest song to me, a song I couldn’t resist. Still can’t. So I’ll make you one promise right now: if you can live with the Big Bad Wolf, then I can live with the Evil Queen.”

That solitary tear upon Regina’s cheek had turned to dual streams by the end of the speech. And as Regina let them fall unabated in an open show of gratitude for being accepted for possibly the first time in her life, she lifted Ruby’s hand to place a reverent kiss upon the knuckles.

“I can do that. Thank you, Ruby,” Regina said, a whisper that soothed Ruby’s ear and a prayer that warmed her heart. After that, everything simply fell back into place.

But now Ruby was facing a scenario she couldn’t possibly have predicted all those years ago. Within hours, she was going to be quite literally wading through the dark, suffocating past that had so long haunted Regina and made her feel as if she’d never, ever be deserving of love. And though doing so wouldn’t change how Ruby felt about her wife, the prospect of walking through the menacing halls of the Dark Palace made her feel queasy, almost as if she was prying into a part of Regina's life that she had no right to even though they had both spoken vows to the contrary on their wedding day.

The discomforting feeling that accompanied such considerations was problematic for Ruby, but at least she understood the source. She was glad, though, that Regina was not able to accompany her on this trip, for the Dark Palace was not merely a building but was the very edifice that had come to symbolize the Evil Queen's reign of terror, a time which Regina had spent so many years tirelessly purging herself of. Going back there would almost assuredly prove to be a trigger that might send Regina spiraling back into the ever-waiting arms of old insecurities or even worse, old habits.

In that moment, determined not to let the past have any more influence over them than it already did, Ruby swore that come what may, when she walked away from the foreboding structure her beloved once inhabited, she would try her damnedest to leave behind everything she had seen and learned buried in the past where it belonged. Her future was not in this place but was back in Storybrooke where her wife and daughters were waiting, and the future was what she was most interested in. That was why she was here, after all, so that in the future, her kids could experience the wonder and freedom of running with the wolves that untold generations before them had, and she knew without needing to ask that was what Regina wanted, too.
Having rested long enough during her long rumination, Ruby glanced over to see Esperanza leaning back on her outstretched arms, bathing in the sunlight that was beaming down into the clearing. Emma, on the hand hand, was staring back at Ruby expectantly for the story she’d promised before her little solo trip down memory lane. She smiled and shook her head. The woman was almost as stubborn as she was.

“I used to come here all the time on week-long patrols,” she began, breaking the silence. “Once your parents claimed King George’s Royal Castle as their own, I knew it was only a matter of time before Regina made a move. After she crashed the wedding and threatened their happiness, I had to do something, so once a month – the week of Wolf’s Time – I would go out by myself to scout her troop movements and the area surrounding the Dark Palace. That's why I didn't think I would have any problem getting us there. I got to know this area very well.

“Anyway, this one time, I convinced your mother to accompany me on my mission and we made a day out of picnicking out here, right under Regina's nose. It was kinda thrilling for both of us, especially for your mom, being as she had spent so much time cooped up. I could tell she missed our adventures. Your father wasn't so happy about it, though, and to be honest, I'll admit it wasn't the best idea considering...” Ruby's voice trailed off as she debated whether or not to finish her sentence.

Emma gestured impatiently for her to continue. “Considering...what?”

Giving Emma a tender smile, Ruby said, “At the time, she was pregnant with you. About five months. It was the last time she left the Kingdom before your birth.”

Upon hearing that information, Emma felt a heartrending mixture of joy and sadness. Joy that she had connected to a part of her past with her mother she hadn't known about, but sadness for the fact that she never got to come to this place with her mother as a child. Somehow, she knew that this lake was exactly the kind of place that her mother would have taken her and that she would have loved to visit over and over again.

Surrounded by the sights and sounds of a serene setting her mother once enjoyed with Emma still safely protected within her womb, she could almost envision how it might have been had she been raised in the Enchanted Forest. Knowing how much her parents loved her and how far they were willing to go to protect her, she knew that she would have been a carefree and rambunctious child who would merrily run and sing and dance and play along the shore as her blonde curls bounced over her shoulders. Her parents, of course, would have been watching her with indulgent smiles on their faces, happy simply because she was happy.

But as precious as those thoughts were, they were ultimately just flights of fancy that existed only in the realm of wishes and dreams. Emma was not a person who lived in such realms. She was a pragmatist and had been since the day she first realized that the world was not a place for dreamers,
but was harsh and cold and would beat a person down until they couldn't get back up again. For a long time, she'd kept that girl alive who dreamed of the day her parents would come and rescue her until inevitably she was left to fend for herself. The only way she was able to cope with the unrelenting harshness of life was to accept it, lest it crush her beneath its merciless booted heel. So that's what she did. To protect herself, Emma closed herself off to such frivolous concepts as hope and love and faith.

It was only after she came to Storybrooke that she began to recover bits and pieces of that girl she'd been before reality all but stamped her out of existence. Since reuniting with Henry and her parents, she had learned that there was room in her life for dreaming and wishing, after all, and that it wasn't wrong to hope and have faith even when the all evidence pointed to the odds being insurmountable. At times she would indulge herself in such things, but twenty-eight years of hard bought lessons did not disappear altogether, no matter how fervently her fairy-tale-hopeful parents wanted them to. In the end, Emma was still a pragmatist, just one whose edges had somewhat softened. Rather like Regina, she thought.

Looking back at Ruby, Emma was met by a concerned gaze. “You okay, Em?”

"Yeah," Emma said as she ran a hand over her hair. She had apparently failed to hide her sour contemplation as effectively as she'd hoped and the always observant Ruby had picked up on them. And while she knew better than to hide the truth from her friend, she was not in the mood to dwell on her past any more than she already had. “Just...I dunno. It's hard to explain. I wish I could have come here as a child with Mom and Dad, but that does me no good. The past happened. I've moved on. Don’t get me wrong, I'm glad you have good memories of this place, but I don't. Thinking about what might have been just opens up a can of worms for me that I'd rather leave be."

Her answer seemed to have the unintended effect of hurting Ruby, who very subtly winced. Mentally kicking herself for being selfish, Emma sighed. Ruby was her best friend and Emma wanted to explain why she felt the way she did about the past and her reluctance to speak about it. Really she did, it was just so hard for her to talk about the past without slipping down the rabbit hole, which would invariably leave her grumpy and standoffish. But the reasonable side of her knew she needed to talk about this with someone, and she couldn’t think of anyone better suited to understand where she was coming from than Ruby, who had almost as many parental issues herself as Emma did.

Most of Emma's hesitance to speak of her childhood was due to her time in foster care. Growing up feeling like she was unwanted, that she had been cast off on the side of the road like some common piece of trash was still a bitter pill that she chewed on from time to time to remind herself that life was not some fairy tale. Unlike those fantastical stories so carefully arranged to inspire hope in the hearts of children, Emma had learned from infancy that the world was cold and cruel. Remembering her roots, the foster parents that failed her and the foster siblings that tormented her, served as useful tool to ensure she didn't forget that lesson. Her jaded nature had served her well in Storybrooke, and no matter how much better her life was or how close she had become with the parents that abandoned her, she needed to stay grounded in reality lest she float away upon billowy clouds made of fairy-tale
promises. The lives of too many people depended on her. She couldn't afford to get carried away into lackadaisical complacency by the oft-deceptive assurance of a happy ending and the seductively dangerous concept of True Love.

But on the sleepless nights when Emma still felt like an orphan, all cynical, unworthy, and alone – and that seemingly in contradiction to Killian's warm presence and gentle snoring beside her – it was the thoughts about her parents and what could have been that most tormented her. It wasn't because she blamed her parents for what they did that made her feel that way, either. She had long ago reconciled their actions with her own in putting Henry up for adoption. Like she had, they were just trying to give their child the best chance possible at a good life. No, what kept Emma up at night blinking away tears was that, had the Curse had never happened, she would have been the happiest little girl to ever live.

Emma hadn't wanted to begrudge Neal what had been so cruelly ripped away from her, but she couldn't deny how much it hurt to watch her parents constantly dote on him as he grew into the happy, well-adjusted kid he now was. That could have been her. She could have had that life. She could have been her Daddy's princess and her Mother's pride and joy. Neal was blessed with every opportunity that she was not. And while Emma loved her brother with all of her heart, it still grieved her sometimes just to look at him. He was a reminder of everything she'd lost and of everything she'd never get to experience.

It was those troublesome thoughts and feelings that most plagued Emma when she was the Dark One. The spirits that comprised that curse were manipulative and cunning and knew how to exploit her greatest weakness. They plied her with thoughts of revenge, on her parents, her brother...on Regina for casting the Curse in the first place and on Gold for being the one to construct it. The whispers in her ear grew more and more bold, insisting that her parents never loved her and hadn't wanted her, that giving her up was the easiest thing they'd ever done. They took great satisfaction in reminding Emma that she didn't belong, that she was a misfit and a castaway and that no matter how she gussied and polished herself up as the Savior, that would never change. She was unlovable and unknowable. She was the greatest Lost Girl of them all.

For the first week that she bore the curse, Emma had sequestered herself in the cellar Zelena had imprisoned Rumplestiltskin in. She'd remembered how Zelena had enchanted it to dampen the powers of the Dark One curse as much as possible, which made it a prime location to hide out while she dealt with the cacophony of voices, trying to break her down and destroy her sanity. But most of all, no one would think to look for her there.

That was one of the most desperately lonely weeks of Emma's life, and one she would not soon forget. On more than one occasion, she'd ripped the doors off the cellar, dead set on punishing her parents in the most cruel ways she could conjure up after which she would burn Storybrooke to the ground in the blissful throes of insatiable fury. Only thoughts of the people she loved most staid her hand: of Henry, her precious son, whom she loved more than life; of Neal, who was wholly innocent and undeserving; and of Killian, who had somehow become her rock, and whose devotion helped buttress her own strength and will to resist.
It had been almost ten years since the Dark One curse was broken, but thinking back on those desolate days still cast a bleak cloud of depression over Emma that followed her around for hours. It was why she tended to focus on the present. The past was somewhere fools and dreamers lived. It was unchangeable and unreachable, whether for the purpose of joy or torment. Only the here and now offered the opportunity for change and a chance to mold a better future for herself and for her family. Emma buried the past with that accursed dagger and even though Gold had found a way to reconstitute it for his own use, she wasn't about to go metaphorically digging it up again.

“I'm sorry, Ruby, really,” she began as she turned her eyes to the ground, almost disconnected from herself as she kicked at some loose rocks near the shoreline. “It's just that since becoming the Dark One, my past has been kind of a sore spot. I mean, it always was, but that just amplified it.” At that, she looked out over the area, her green eyes taking in the serene beauty of the lake and the surrounding forests and distant mountains. Such untarnished beauty helped to distract her from the heaviness of that awful time. “Since coming to Storybrooke, all I've heard about was True Love this and True Love that, that it can break a curse, that it's the most powerful magic of all. But you know what they don't tell you? That while it can break any curse, it can't erase the memories that get left behind.”

Pausing for a moment, Emma looked at Ruby, whose attention was fully focused on her, though a shadow fell over her features. Emma didn't have to ask why her friend was so troubled when this particular subject came up. When she'd become the Dark One, Ruby was in self-imposed isolation with the local wolves of Storybrooke, which came on the heels of a messy slip-up of control that resulted in Victor Whale nearly losing an invaluably skilled hand. The two had only been in the early states of their friendship, but Ruby was crushed that she'd hurt someone she already cared for deeply. Even Whale’s insistence that it was his fault more than hers didn’t deter Ruby from shouldering all of the blame. Rather than regress into state of paralysis regarding her condition, she chose a voluntary quarantine that lasted far longer than it should have.

To the point, though, Emma knew that Ruby still felt guilty for not being there during a time when she thought Emma had most needed her. As a woman who considered it one of her foremost duties in life to be a faithful friend to those she cared for, her absence had been an abysmal failure. For a while after things died down again, Ruby took it upon herself to be Emma's shadow, watching over her without being asked in an unnecessary attempt to repay the debt she'd felt she owed. Emma had told the woman time and again that she didn't owe her anything, but Ruby was as stubborn as she was loyal. That was the beginning of a rekindling for their friendship which had only grown since and flourished into what it was today.

“When I was in hiding, all I could do was dwell on the what ifs,” Emma continued, allowing her face to remain open as she told her tale in the hopes that it might stay an attack of Ruby's guilty conscience. “And the more I did, the more angry I became: at Gold, Regina, my parents, and the world in general. But especially my parents. I had never really dealt with what happened to me, even after being reunited with them that last time...after going back in time, that is. I thought I had finally accepted who I was and come to terms with my childhood, but Pan had been right all along. Deep down, I was still that same Lost Girl I had been since the moment I was put into that wardrobe, and
the curse really magnified all of that anger and bitterness.

“Anyway, True Love's kiss broke the curse, but I've never forgotten how I felt during that time. To get past it, I had to to leave it all behind me and move toward the future – a better future, with my son, the guy I love, my family and my friends. So that's what I did. But even now, whenever I think of the way the dagger felt in my hand, so wrong yet so right in way I could never describe, I'll get these strange otherworldly feelings of creeping darkness that chill me to the bone. That's why I try not to dwell on it long.”

Looking incredibly sad and sympathetic, Ruby nodded. “I can respect that. I had to do the same thing after...well, you know.”

“Yeah,” Emma said, her expression falling even further at the typical phrasing of a day she loathed to even mention. Even becoming the Dark One hadn't affected her the way she was when she rounded the corner in Joshua Woods’ basement. Finding Ruby – her best friend, a woman she loved and respected – the way that they had and seeing her in such a state was something that still gave her nightmares. And if it affected her that deeply, she couldn't begin to imagine how Ruby and Regina suffered.

When a thought clicked in her mind, Emma suddenly glanced at Ruby with a stricken expression. “God, we've really seen some awful crap over the years, haven't we?”

“Come to think of it, yes we have,” said Ruby, and as she began to really contemplate all that had happened in Storybrooke since the curse broke, she was nearly overwhelmed by the tragedies and near death experiences, some of which were sadly not quite so near. It really did seem like it was one thing after another. Looking back, it was a miracle that the people she loved the most had made it through alive. “Jesus,” she breathed out as it really hit her, “when you really think back, it's really scary. How many times have we almost died? How many times did we almost lose everything?”

“I know,” said Emma, her eyes grave. “That's why we can't linger on it, or else we’ll start to get paranoid or go crazy. Like I said, the only thing that we can afford to think about is the future, 'cause if we don't, I think all of that sorrow and pain would just crush us.”

From beside them, Esperanza spoke up, reminding the two women of her presence, though they hadn't really forgotten it. They'd just got wrapped up in their own little bubble that was now thoroughly popped.

“It sounds like you have been through a great deal in this new land,” she said, brow furrowed a little anxiously. “If it weren't for the perils and terrors that have come to inhabit this land, it would make me question the wisdom of journeying there.”
Giving Esperanza a reassuring smile, Emma patted the hand resting on the rock between their bodies. “It’s not so bad. Sure, we’ve had some stuff happen, but I think we’re all pretty happy now. Things worked out in the end, don’t you think, Ruby?”

Ruby echoed Emma’s smile. “Yep. Emma’s right. Terrible things may have happened but I, for one, am a very happy woman. If it meant I got to have my family at the end the of the day, I’d be willing to suffer through a whole lot worse than what I have...a hundred times over.” Her smile then disappeared as she met Esperanza’s brown eyes, her own narrowing a bit. “However, I am very interested to know about these ‘perils and terrors’ you just mentioned, ’cause I get the feeling you were hinting that we might be running headlong into some of them.”

Ruby’s pointed statement had Esperanza looking very guilty. “You are right to be concerned,” she said, “but I cannot say for sure what dangers await us. I can only tell you what I’ve heard from the few people I encountered who have ventured this deeply into Misthaven.”

When Esperanza paused, Ruby saw Emma stiffen in her peripheral vision, and though she had almost done the same, she restrained herself until she heard what the woman had to say.

“According to those few individuals, things began happening about eleven years ago,” Esperanza continued hesitantly, though her voice grew more steady as she spoke and saw no anger in either Ruby or Emma's demeanor. “A brilliant glow surrounded this area and it was so bright and enduring that for several days there was no night. When it finally dissipated, people began seeing strange men clad in black and red armor patrolling the forests surrounding the nearby castle with increasing frequency.

“It was around that time that the days and nights began to lengthen and shorten at random and the seasons became unpredictable. It sometimes snowed in summer and was hot during the winter. Terrain began shifting, hills forming where once plains, and the forests changed, thickening in some places and thinning in others. It was as if, at least according to those I talked to, the land had forgotten how to behave or was being influenced by a power greater than any they had heard of. It wasn’t long after that curiosity overcame fear, and people began to venture closer and closer to the castle. Unfortunately, most who did were turned away by force, but a few who escaped with their lives were able to overhear hushed conversations amongst the strange soldiers – stories of a great sorcerer, the greatest to ever live, who was going to bring them glory and power, and not just over Misthaven, but over all of the Nine Realms.”

“Nine Realms?” Ruby echoed, confused. “What the hell? Have we landed in one of Henry’s comic books?” She specifically was remembering comics related to a certain blond, hammer-wielding Norse god with a name she loved to poke fun at when her step-son was around and they’d just watched the latest Marvel movie.
“Hey Henry!” she would say before launching into the joke. Only those two words were required to have Ruby already laughing at how corny it was and at how Henry would already be morphing into a frightfully accurate impersonation his mother as he waited for the punchline. Her favorite went like this: “Did you hear about that time the god of thunder was riding through the sky on his mighty stallion?”

Henry normally just sighed here but sometimes he would say, completely deadpan, “No Ruby, I’ve not heard this one a thousand times already. Please tell me again.”

And Ruby would just grin. “If you insist! Well, with lightning crashing all around, he triumphantly screamed, ‘I’m Thor!’ So his horse looked up and said, ‘Of course you are, you forgot your thaddle thilly!’”

Try as he might, Henry could never hold in a laugh. But all joking aside, and though her question was rhetorical, Ruby glanced over to Emma to catch her reaction. The Savior looked as perplexed as she did. Catching Emma's eyes, she said, “I'm assuming this has something to do with realm jumping.”

“Maybe.” Emma shrugged as if not convinced. “We should talk to Jefferson when we get back to be sure. He might be able to explain more. He might have even heard of this sorcerer dude before.”

Ruby nodded sagely. “That's a good idea, actually. That information would sure come in handy now, though, rather than after the fact.”

“It would,” said Emma wryly. “But we can't do anything about that now, can we?”

There was no refuting that, Ruby thought. Without means to procure concrete information regarding the subject, all they really could do was press Esperanza for what else of relevance she might know, namely the sorcerer, who he was and what he wanted.

“We've not ever heard of the Nine Realms that you're talking about,” Ruby said to Esperanza, “but we have heard of the sorcerer. A couple of his cohorts showed up back home, though they weren't really so bad...misguided, but not bad, at least from what I've heard.”

“They weren't bad at all,” Emma added. His apprentice was a genuinely decent man from all accounts, and while the author turned out to be a bit of a prick, he was not evil by any means. The
Sorcerer, however, remains an enigma. Hopefully, he's more like his employees than not."

“I wouldn't know.” Esperanza shook her head in disappointment. “A magical shield was put up around the castle after the intrusions. None since have seen or heard anything from inside. That is, unfortunately, all I know. It may be inadequate, but at least it explains why these forests seem so different to you, Ruby. They are.”

Silence descended as the women took a moment to contemplate what they were about to walk into. As far as Ruby was concerned, she was not deterred in the slightest, although she was much more worried than she was only five minutes ago. There were potential obstacles and threats now looming that may very well stretch the word harrowing to its definitive limits. But she had come for a purpose and was not about to let a boogeyman no one had seen or talked to and which only existed in rumor stop her from achieving her objectives. The main problem left was figuring out how to get Emma and Esperanza through this unscathed. She wasn't sure it was possible.

“Listen,” she said, looking between the two other women, “I can't ask you guys to go any further. Not knowing what we know now. I intend to carry on, but I think you guys should go back to Esperanza's cabin and wait for me there. I have Regina's map and few trinkets she enchanted to get me through any magical wards I might encounter at the castle. I should be able to get in and out with no problem.”

Emma scoffed, looking extremely offended at the suggestion she stay behind after having come so far. “To hell with that,” she said, now frowning with righteous indignation. “I'm not about to leave your side for a second, and quite frankly I'm pissed that you'd suggest it. We've been through too much together. No, I'll be going with you, come hell or high water, and if you don't like it, I don't really give a damn.”

Chuckling, Ruby nodded, having honestly expected as much from her best friend. Emma was not the kind to be told what to do. In fact, Ruby had found that the best way to get Emma to do something was to actually tell her not to. Apparently she hadn’t learned in high school, or was too obstinate, to recognize reverse psychology when applied to herself. Or in bail bondsperson school. Or in Savior school.

After shooting a grateful smile to her bestie, she turned to Esperanza. “Since Emma is going to be pigheaded...please consider going back. This is my mission, I just dragged you guys into it. I've known Emma long enough to know better than to fight her, but we just met you. You're a good woman, Esperanza. I can tell. And very brave, probably even very capable in a fight, but I would feel much better if I knew at least one of us was safe.”

After studying Ruby for a moment, Esperanza shrugged. “While I appreciate the gesture, it is unnecessary. I came to this land to seek out Queen Regina, and after finally journeying so close to
her castle, her spouse then intrudes upon my home. As much as you may think this your journey, Ruby, it is not. It is Emma's journey as well, and it is also mine. Fate, as you said earlier, lead me here and I would be a fool to swim against its inexorable tide.” A smile formed on face, the creases in her cheeks becoming prominent, and at that moment she reminded Ruby very much of Regina. “Besides,” she then said, her eyes now twinkling, “your assessment of me is at least somewhat accurate. I am highly skilled with a blade, and though my ability to wield magic is rudimentary, it is not ineffective. And what's more, I sense something in both of you that I cannot ignore. In the short time I have known you, I have come to believe you are people worth fighting for and that I would be very proud to share this adventure with. That is, of course, if you will still have me?”

Tears pricked at Ruby’s eyes. “Of course we will,” she said in tender tones, “and from the bottom of my heart, I thank you. Both of you.”

“You're welcome.” Emma's affection laden reply was augmented by a hint of moisture in her own eyes. She reached out to take Ruby’s hand and began to stroke the back of it with her thumb, a familiar action that made Ruby ache with affection. “You know how I feel about you. I’d follow you almost anywhere.”

“As would,” said Ruby, then gave Emma’s hand a squeeze as a pleasant silence descended over the group of three.

“Well then,” Emma then said not long after, “I think we need to hit the trail again before we lose any more time. The sooner we get to the castle, the sooner we get what we need.”

Ruby released Emma’s hand, and as she she watched the blonde woman stand and stretch, said, “And as soon as we have those maps we can track down the closest pack. All that will be left is convincing them to follow me home.”

“Sounds like a damn fine plan to me,” Emma said, full of optimism.

“Wherever you lead, I will follow,” Esperanza added as she too stood and stretched, though much more delicately and gracefully than Emma had.

Standing up herself, Ruby walked over to her pack and slung it onto her back while Emma and Esperanza did the same. Once she had it all fastened up, she retrieved her compass then turned to her companions. “After you, Em,” she said, extending the compass out to her friend with an encouraging grin. “Just head due north and we should be good.”
“You sure?” Emma asked, a bit excited by the prospect of being back in charge for a while. As she was herself what Ruby would call an alpha female, Emma did not do well taking orders. The only reason Ruby had taken the lead was because of her enhanced senses and what she had thought to be a superior knowledge of the area. Now, though, Emma could put those distasteful feelings of being a follower behind her and let her alpha tendencies come back out to play.

“I'm sure,” Ruby said, then soft-tossed the compass to Emma, who caught it with practiced ease.

“Don't have to tell me twice.” With that, Emma started back toward the trail, ponytail happily swishing behind her. Unable to stem the urge to gloat, she called back over her shoulder, “Just try to keep up will ya?”

Ruby growled playfully. “Oh, you’re so on, Swan!”

As she raced to catch up with Emma, Ruby heard Esperanza’s twinkling laughter, and the sound did much to alleviate her guilt over involving two people who, for very different reasons, she couldn’t bear to see hurt. With Emma the reasons were obvious. There was no one outside of Ruby’s immediately family that she loved more, that she valued more, and that she trusted more. Emma was the best friend a girl could ever ask for, even better in some ways than Snow had been, and that was a mighty high standard to live up to. Mean Esperanza – outside of her kindness and honesty and apparent bravery and strength – represented all that remained of Regina’s family, which made both her and the information she carried with her priceless. No one else lived who could fill in the blanks about Cora’s life the way Esperanza could, and Ruby knew how much that would mean to Regina.

But as much as Ruby wanted to protect them both, she couldn’t help feeling glad that they were with her, that she wasn’t alone on her quest. It would have been dreadful to face the rugged miles traipsing about the forest all by herself. But Emma and Esperanza kept her spirits up, kept her laughing as they traded bad jokes and singing as they rehearsed their favorite songs set to the beat of six feet marching in tandem. And as Ruby settled into the brisk pace Emma had set, she figured that if she had to feel guilty about dragging anyone along with her, at least it was them. She couldn’t ask for better.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thanks to my beta, UnfairestOfThemAll! Also, let me know if there are any questions, etc., or if I need to explain stuff more thoroughly. Otherwise tune in same time next week.
The Hounds From Hell

Chapter Summary

On the way to the Dark Palace, the Scooby gang encounters a new enemy. Also, more RedSwan friendship feels.

After only an hour of travel due north, the three women found themselves nearing a dense thatch of thick fir trees about a hundred yards in circumference. As opposed to when they’d stumbled upon the Crystal Lake Ruby instantly recognized the location as one of minor importance to her. During her patrols of Regina's lands before the Dark Curse, she had used it as break point with which to lose particularly determined patrols that kept up pursuit beyond the average range of the Queen’s soldiers. Usually this only happened when she was being lazy doing her scouting as a human. Luckily her increased strength and speed even while on two legs rather than four helped her escape the patrols with relative ease.

There was one notable exception to the rule and which consistently gave her fits: the Black Guard. Hand selected by Regina, the Black Guard was a contingent of elite troops fanatically loyal to their Queen that underwent a grueling training regimen to maintain peak physical fitness. The Guard was constituted after the first time Ruby ever met Regina upon the frigid, remote mountain pass bordering what once was the White Kingdom and that of King George. The disastrous loss of an entire company of the Queen’s Guard prompted Regina to respond by taking the best soldiers from every company in the kingdom for a new unit. Armed with enchanted armor and weapons, Regina personally trained their officers on how to most effectively combat a monstrous werewolf. That they were never quite able to get up to par with Ruby’s capabilities did not mean she didn’t have more than a few nearly perilous encounters with them. The members of the Black Guard were the most formidable opponents she ever faced back in the Old World, and to this day she still bore a few scars from well struck blows from their swords and spears.

One such close call was during the last days before the Curse struck. With Emma’s birth imminent and Regina’s vague threat at Snow’s wedding looming ever closer to fruition, Ruby had felt it necessary to search for a way to get through the seemingly impenetrable defenses of the Dark Tower. Should the worst come to pass, she was prepared to go on a suicide mission to end the Queen’s life, but she needed a way to get to the tyrannical woman first.

While patrolling the around the forests within eyesight of the foreboding mountain upon which the castle was perched, she was ambushed by a squad of the Guard that somehow had escaped her attention. Caught completely by surprise and with no weapons with which to defend herself, she had no time to shift before retreating into the nearby forest. She dodged their initial attacks as best she could, but was wounded by a lucky strike to her left side. In pain and bleeding, she’d had to run on an uneven and debris littered floor upon human legs further limited by her injury. Thankfully, she’d made it to this dense area, which afforded just enough of a screen from her pursuers for her to hastily bandage the bleeding wound on her side and then transform back into the wolf so that she could flee
and live to fight another day.

Being back now after so many years sparked memories of that close encounter with death. Had she not been in proximity to the break point, she would have stood little chance of surviving. More and more of the Guard were pouring into the woods and she was already weakening to the point where even escape felt uncertain. She’d made it out by the skin of her teeth, but soon enough she discovered the Guard could be as deadly from a distance as they were up close.

Ruby shuddered at the phantom pain in her side from a wound long healed. It was one of those scars she still carried around with her to remind her of the rough and tumble existence she’d endured in the Enchanted Forest. It wasn’t long after losing the Guard that she’d been forced to shift back to a human again. With her side seeping blood and burning as if salted, she was afraid the pain would cause her to lose control over the wolf. Walking on two legs rather than running on four made what should have been an hours journey home three times as longer. By the time Ruby limped inside the castle gates of the Royal Palace, Snow was in the courtyard with Charming, pacing nervous ruts into the cobblestone as her husband stood silently brooding with concern.

“Red!” Snow had shouted upon catching sight of her wounded friend.

“Hey.” Feet dragging with every step and looking startlingly pale, Ruby had tried to muster up a smile as she accepted Snow’s help walking the rest of the way through the courtyard. It turned out more of a grimace. The burning in her side had morphed into an inferno of agony by the time she reached the safety of home.

Snow’s worry was written all over her fair face. “What happened? You look awful.”

Jaw clenching against the pain, Ruby relayed the events of her patrol as her friends led her inside in what she dimly recognized as the direction of the infirmary. She doesn’t remember much after Doc started patching up the wound. According to Snow, she’d passed out mid-sentence answering a question. The blade of the Guard who clipped her was coated with poison that lowered her immune response and the wound had become infected. Fever set in quickly, and she had languished in delirium for an entire day before her accelerated werewolf healing overpowered the poison and had her on the mend.

That incident was the closest Ruby ever came to dying back in the Old World. And with those recollections pressing at her mind, she certainly didn't want to linger in the place it all happened.

As she stepped into the first row of trees, a weird feeling about the place crept up her spine. There was a darkness lurking within the trees that hadn't been there before. She could sense it looming as if
crested just over an invisible horizon, searching for the opportunity to strike from the shadows. The hair on the back of her neck stood up. Instinctively, she tensed, readying herself to act.

“What is it?” Emma asked from behind Ruby, having deciphered her body language easily enough after years of partnership.

“I don't know,” Ruby said warily, “but I don't like it.” She peered out over the forest once again to locate the source of her disquiet. The branches and leaves of the rugged trees were fluttering and swaying in the wind, creating a haunting sound that had Ruby's muscles coiling with anticipation. She hadn't noticed the wind start up until then. Her instincts began screaming that something was terribly amiss, something sinister that had the wolf on edge with anxiety.

After dropping to one knee to lower her profile and listen, she gestured with her hands for Emma and Esperanza to follow suit. The nearly instant shifting of clothing and rustling of gear indicated they had promptly complied. Closing her eyes to focus all of her attention on audible cues, Ruby hoped to determine what was causing her instincts to blare out such a klaxon call that danger lie ahead. For a seemingly interminable space, she listened intently and heard nothing. There was no movement through the foliage or any other sounds that would betray the proximity of a threat in the form of either animal or person.

Thinking herself paranoid, she was just about to shrug off her senses as having gone temporarily haywire when she heard something in the distance. It started small at first, but as the seconds passed and it got closer she was able to sort out the individual sounds of twigs snapping and leaves crunching, along with the tell-tale rumbling of paws pounding against the loamy earth. Her eyes shot open, wide as saucers and she sprang to her feet, startling her companions.

“Get ready, they're coming!” She shouted the command knowing there was little time before something terrible was upon them. Without waiting for acknowledgment, she summoned a large supply of her energy to shift, then tensed for battle with a snarl that exposed rows of now razor sharp teeth.

Knowing better than to question Ruby's senses, Emma did not hesitate to pull out her gun, nor did she react to Ruby's abrupt decision to transform. Having worked side-by-side for so long, Emma was well aware that doing so during the day, and even at night when the moon was waning, required large stores of energy to be burned. Quite unlike Wolf’s Time, when the full moon empowered Ruby to shift at will with zero repercussions. Seeing as it was currently broad daylight, whatever Ruby heard had alarmed her enough that she felt it an acceptable risk expending a large portion of energy to turn into the wolf. And that Ruby was taking such a chance only increased Emma's stress levels by a significant margin.

Tightening her grip on her pistol, Emma looked over to Esperanza only to find the woman with her
rapier at the ready, having already pulled it from the thin sheath on her belt. Cool as a cucumber, the
grave expression on her face denoted a familiarity with danger. With a single, tight nod, Regina's
olive skinned kinswoman nodded to Emma, a signal of her clear state of readiness that Emma
returned in kind. Returning her focus to the surrounding forest, she raised her service pistol to aim
down the sight and then took a calming breath as she slid into a loose firing stance. Like the
weathered veteran of combat she was, her heartbeat rapidly settled into a steady rhythm.

It was only a moment later that a behemoth form burst through the dense treeline, lunging at Ruby
with a ferocious snarl. Reacting on instinct, Ruby neatly sidestepped the attack and quickly pounced
on the animal, pinning it to the ground with her own significant heft. It thrashed and jerked against
her, trying to shake her off, but her superior size and strength as a werewolf gave her an advantage
that could not be overcome. With a growl, she pushed the black-furred creature further into the
ground and then proceeded to rip its throat out. Arterial spray gushed into her mouth and erupted into
the air in thin jets of crimson, once, twice, three times, before the animal finally slumped to the
ground dead, giving one last involuntary jerk.

With one of her paws still dominantly resting on its chest, she lifted her head and howled in victory.
The celebration was short lived. Six more creatures careened through the trees at breakneck pace, all
intent on violence. Of sleek black fur and a form that appeared to be a grotesquely warped
exaggeration of a wolf, they raced toward Ruby and her companions with glowing red eyes that
burned with feral rage. Almost mad with her own battle lust, Ruby growled and then launched
herself at the largest of them, the one she had singled out as the alpha. Before she reached him,
however, two other beasts intercepted her. Their bodies impacted with hers in a terrific collision
which sent them all reeling back.

After skidding to a halt, Ruby propelled herself back up onto her feet and charged. She caught one of
the beasts off guard, still recovering from where it had slammed into the ground. Unable to react in
time, it could only yelp as she closed her jaws over its neck and bit down, crushing its spine with a
sickening crunch. Its head flopped uselessly to the side. The other creature was quicker to recover,
having regained its footing by the time she dispatched her first target. It faced her, snarling with
insane crimson eyes. Foam dripped from its mouth as if it was rabid. Appearing a blur, it leapt at her,
gaining air as it poised to snap its gaping maw at her face. Reacting on instinct, Ruby ducked low to
the ground to slide under the creature, and as she passed beneath, she jolted up with all her might.
Her shoulders slammed into the beasts ribs, which sent it flying toward the thick trunk of a very old
and sturdy tree. The crunch that accompanied contact was immensely satisfying.

Approaching it at a deliberate lope, she eyed the alpha who was poised nearby, glaring at her
hatefully. Watching her every move, it made no attempt to intervene on behalf of its fallen comrade,
instead taking the time to study her. Unconcerned, Ruby kept those devilish orbs fixed on her as she
closed the distance to the fallen beast. It lay at the trunk of the tree, motionless but for the brush of
wind through inky fur. As she approached, she realized that it was dead. The impact had crushed its
rib cage into its heart.

With that threat eliminated, Ruby turned on the alpha with her most menacing look. Her posture
practically rippled with unrestrained malice. She felt dangerously close to bloodlust as they stared at each other, sizing one another up and growling deep down in their chests. And then the beast sprung at her so fast that she reacted just in time to deflect with her muzzle the incoming jaws of what was a horrifyingly large creature. With the blow having been avoided, it slid past her on its haunches, then twirled around, muscles tensed. For several more beats they two circled each other, growling and snarling, and Ruby had to admit her shock that such a creature, wholly foreign to her and very nearly her size, existed.

Along with the jet black fur and devilish red eyes it shared in common with its comrades, the creature was so twisted with evil as to resemble something from the depths of hell. A head only slightly more rounded than a wolf, characterized by large triangular ears and a broad snout, sat upon wide shoulders pack with muscle. As it bared rows of razor sharp teeth, saliva dripped from the exaggerated canines onto the ground, burning whatever it touched as if highly acidic.

If she'd had time to analyze the situation, she would have been given pause simply because of the dark magic radiating off the animal. The nauseating stench bespoke something aberrant, something beyond the pale of what would be considered unnatural even in the Enchanted Forest. However, Ruby did not have such a luxury as time to consider such things.

As the alpha continued to circle her, assessing her for weakness with an uncanny intelligence, Ruby heard a shot ring out to her rear, followed by a whine that indicated Emma had scored a hit on one of other creatures attacking them. Soon, another, lower pitched whine was given, and Ruby darted her eyes over to see Esperanza standing over the third creature, her rapier piercing its chest. Knowing that the battle was all but over, Ruby turned baleful eyes onto the lead creature, daring it to attack her with the odds so firmly against it.

It's eyes narrowed for a moment as if it were analyzing the situation. Again, Ruby was struck by the intelligence behind the crimson eyes of the hellbeast (her unilaterally chosen nickname for the creatures). It was frightening enough that these things were clearly enhanced by a brand of dark magic that even Regina at the height of her madness would hesitate to call upon. But factoring in intelligence to that added a whole new layer of danger. Were there to be more of these creatures under the Sorcerer's control, hordes of them even, the entire mission was in jeopardy, not to mention their very lives. The only silver lining was that they had struck enough of a blow to ward off future attempts on them for long enough to slip into the palace and back out unnoticed. Or at least Ruby hoped so. She felt sick at the possibility that she had led her best friend and the sole remaining member of Regina’s family into a trap.

Having apparently arrived at the inescapable conclusion the battle was lost, the alpha growled viciously at Ruby, and through the menacing rumbling, she could hear the unspoken warning being issued. It would not forget what had happened, which meant that this fight was far from over. Wheeling in a blur of motion, the alpha retreated back into the shadows from whence it came, tearing a path through the foliage and howling madly as it went.
“Well,” Emma said, breathing a sigh of relief, “that was interesting.” Despite the understatement, Ruby nodded as she settled on her haunches and began to clean her fur of the blood that had sprayed all over her during her first kill. Looking down at one of the bodies, Emma's nose crinkled with distaste. “And just what the hell are these things?” She toed it with visible disgust.

“I believe I may know,” Esperanza answered since Ruby could not, though she listened intently to Esperanza's tale right along with Emma. “When I was a young child, there was a lonely old man – a hermit the locals called 'The Wanderer' – who loved to tell stories to the children. No one knew where he was from, only that he hailed from a far away land. His stories were always so colorful and happy that no one questioned his origins. And while most never grew curious beyond those simple stories, I always wondered if he knew more than he let on.

“As I grew older, I began to visit him regularly to help him maintain his home. He was old, after all, and although I did this more out of curiosity than a sincere desire to help, he was so grateful that someone wanted to spend time with him that he began to confide in me. I learned many other stories and legends from him that were not quite so appropriate for children.

“One of those was of a powerful magician – a man with noble beginnings whose desire to save his kingdom lead him down a path of damnation. According to that legend, he became the first werewolf, the sire of all who followed thereafter. Sadly he succumbed to madness, and when he fell he twisted his lupine brethren into hounds of hell which lived solely to accomplish his will. I believe these creatures may be of such stock. How they have remained hidden for so long is a mystery and I cannot be certain as to the veracity of these stories. But they provide a possible explanation.”

Ruby's ears perked up at Esperanza’s tale, and having cleaned herself off to satisfactory degree, she shifted back to a human so she could question her further. “I've never heard that story,” she said, unable to hide her rapt interest.

Ruby had always wondered about the circumstances that gave rise to werewolves. Regina always said that werewolf magic felt ancient to her, almost primordial, as if it had been bestowed upon the race by nature itself rather than originating via curse or some such other forgotten magical feat. With both of them so interested in the subject, though for slightly different reasons, they poured through the tomes in Regina’s vault brought over from the Old World. When those proved unhelpful, they consulted Belle, who found mentions of werewolves in the vast collection of books in the Storybrooke Library, but none that focused on them as a race, their histories and origins and such.

If Esperanza was right, though, there was at least one living person in the Enchanted Forest who had relevant information that was of priceless value to Ruby. She needed to know more.

“Did he say more about how my kind came to be?” she pressed further. “I mean with specifics?”
Esperanza shook her head in the negative. “The legend was very broad in nature and did not go into
details beyond that which I have told you.”

Ruby sighed with frustrated disappointment. “Damn. Well, that's more than I knew five minutes ago.
But as to your theory, I can safely say that it is right that wherever these hellbeasts came from, it
wasn't the Enchanted Forest. Their magic does not feel like anything I've ever experienced from
here.”

“Hellbeasts?” Emma interjected, her head cocked to the side with a smirk on her face. “You couldn't
come up with something a little less generic?”

Ruby's eyes narrowed to slits at the playful slight. She stuck her tongue out childishly. “It was all I
could come up with on the spur of the moment, so sue me. Besides, I was close wasn't I? Esperanza's
legend said that they were 'hounds of hell'. Hellbeast is pretty damn close if you ask me.”

“I suppose that's true,” Emma chuckled. “Still, that last...thing was one bigass dog. It was almost as
big as you are in your wolf form.”

"Yep, and that's not the least of my worries,” said Ruby, remembering the intelligent eyes that were
sure to haunt her dreams. “The others didn't seem to be, but that one – the big one – it was intelligent.
Like, unnaturally intelligent. I could see it in it's eyes. It was studying us...analyzing us, and I have a
bad feeling that we've not seen the last of it.”

“That may be so, but we defeated them once,” said Esperanza, who was now leaning against a tree,
casually cleaning the blood from her blade with a handful of leaves. “I have full confidence that we
can do so again. We won't be caught off guard so easily next time. Forewarned is, as my grandfather
used to say, forarmed.”

“I hope you're right,” Ruby said, truly wanting that to be the case. She had her doubts.

The alpha beast had learned from their encounter just the same as they had, so the next time they met,
the odds would not be quite so favorable as four against three. If the creatures lived in packs as the
wolves of the Enchanted Forest, the odds were much more likely to be twice as skewed or worse. If
that was the case, their only hope was to get to the Dark Palace undetected and remain that way until
their objective was achieved. Stealth would be the name of the game from here on out, she just
prayed that they were able to maintain it.
After that short conversation, Ruby and Emma went about burying the bodies as best they could while Esperanza stood watch. Best not to alert anyone to their presence should a patrol stumble through the area, Ruby had figured. They had to make due with the compact trenching shovels that Regina had supplied them with, which made for a longer process than if they’d had actual shovels. But in the wilderness of the Enchanted Forest, beggars could not be choosers. They were fortunate to have what they did.

It took about half an hour to bury the bodies and cover them back up, which was precious time lost that could not be recovered. As soon as the bodies were disposed of, they set back off on their journey toward the Dark Palace. With Ruby at the helm they took a brisker pace, and each agreed to pass as much of the journey as they could in silence so that she listen for any evidence they were being tracked. Emma, Ruby was proud to say, did admirably well, saying only a few spare sentences and those to check on the SITREP.

Nearly two hours later and having heard no signs of being pursued, Ruby called a break. The Dark Palace lay some two to three hours ahead depending on the briskness of the pace and five minutes could be spared to rest before pressing on to the final leg of the journey.

Perched shoulder-to-shoulder upon a fallen log, Ruby glanced between her companions. Neither looked particularly winded. Esperanza was sweaty from the long exertion, as were they all, but her breathing was regulated and her heart-rate steady. Ruby didn’t know the woman well enough to make an assessment of her overall state of wellness, but thought she had to be in good shape to have made the journey from Xavier’s lands to Regina’s. The distance between the kingdoms was disparate in both character and distance, the latter of which was well over five hundred leagues according to the most accurate maps available.

Ruby had no doubts as to Emma’s fitness. Being Sheriff in a town full of citizens who hailed from another world and who could be ornery, pleasant, over-energetic, or downright chaotic based on the time of year and who were never, ever boring meant there was no time for Emma to sit on her ass and get fat. Not that she would have anyway.

Ruby discovered very early on in the friendship that Emma was a workout freak who kept herself in great shape year round. That taut Saviorly body was one of the reasons Ruby was initially attracted to Emma in the first place. As a visual person, it was hard for Ruby to resist rock hard abs and toned arms when combined with just the right amount of womanly curves, always bouncy blonde princess curls, and the sort of high cheekbones most women would kill for. The first thought that crossed Ruby’s mind that day in the B&B she’d first laid eyes on Emma Swan was whether it would be a prosecutable offense to lick a line from the woman’s dimpled chin up to her perfect cheeks. The second had been to question the newcomer if she worked out so that Ruby could invite her to the gym for some unsubtle ogling.
Eventually Ruby found out that Emma did, indeed, work out, but by then so much had happened that they’d already settled pretty firmly in the friend zone. That didn’t stop Ruby from admiring Emma’s work ethic, though. The woman was quite honestly a machine. If it weren’t for Ruby’s werewolf genes, there would be no way in hell she could out-lift Emma on any exercise of her choosing or hope to keep pace with the blonde on the treadmill. Emma had, she thought, lucked out by inheriting her athleticism from her father.

“Cheating is the only way you beat me at anything,” Emma had once said, sour at straining to bench one-fifty when Ruby could manage three hundred pounds with minimal effort.

“Don’t hate. Appreciate,” Ruby said as Emma grunted through the last five reps. “Can’t help I was born this way.”

Emma rolled her eyes as she scoffed, but Ruby didn’t hold that against her friend enough to withhold help safely racking the weights. She was used to that kind of thing from Regina. And besides, safety first was her motto in the gym.

As Emma sat up, Ruby tossed her a towel which the blonde caught and then used to rub the sweat from her face and upper chest. Her pecs were really popping after the exertion, and glistening as they were it was hard for Ruby not to stare. Happily married though she was, she wasn’t blind, and Emma Swan was a total babe.

“Just because you can lift the front end of a car,” Emma said, “doesn’t mean I’m gonna bow in awe of your stupid cavewoman strength.”

Ruby grinned and then playfully flexed her biceps. “Me Ruby. Me lift car and have hot muscles!”

They both laughed at her silliness for a while before Emma proceeded to very nearly keep up with Ruby on the treadmill. Sometimes they got a little bit too competitive with their exercise routines, much to the entertainment of those who also frequented Hercules’ establishment, Olympian Fitness. They attracted the most attention when things got heated, like on CrossFit nights when the crowd would gather to watch the contest Ruby and Emma would put on against each other, often with wagers on the line spurring them to push themselves to the limit. To make things more fair, Ruby would wear silver wrist bands to suppress the wolf, which not only gave Emma a fighting chance, but meant that Ruby lost almost as often as she won.

Some people didn’t like their antics, though, especially those old world moralists that thought two married women shouldn’t be spending so much recreational time together. Ruby ignored them, though. She had no use for antiquated traditions and social mores. Those people who did would
never understand the way Regina and Killian did that the urge to drive one another to be better, to lift
a little more, to run a little further, to be a better cop and person every single day was an integral part
of her friendship with Emma. And if that offended anyone, well, Ruby was happy to tell them
precisely where they could shove it.

Anyway, given Emma’s high level of fitness, it was unsurprising she had held up well on the shorter
slog from the break point. The journey between the cabin and the Crystal Lake had been twice as
long as the current jaunt. Esperanza’s, though, was a boon Ruby hadn’t counted on, and she thought
it bode well for any future encounters along the way. Many things could go wrong on this trip, but at
least none of them would be dying simply because they were tragically out of shape.

When Ruby judged her companions were sufficiently rested, she sprang up from the log, threw her
pack back on, and then called a resumption of the trek toward the Dark Palace. She was still smiling
at Emma’s half-hearted grumbling when she set off down the road. The sun was yet high in the sky
and the day was Goldilocks gorgeous, so Ruby allowed herself to get swept up in the sounds of
nature. Everywhere around her critters were crawling, birds chirping, and various other four-legged
creatures were going about the business of staying alive in a world bent on killing them. It made her
happy to hear the wildlife flourishing, if only because it made the prospects of finding a healthy wolf
pack that much more likely.

Another hour passed by in silence before Emma spoke up. “I’ll take lead,” she said as she sped up to
pass Ruby.

“Yes, ma’am, Sheriff Swan!” Ruby said with ample cheek, smiling as she lagged behind then fell
into step behind her best friend. “I know how much you love being in charge.” Which was true.
Emma loathed taking orders almost as much as Ruby abhorred feeling caged. So at the Station she let
Emma be the boss while she was afforded an extra long leash. Thus far the arrangement had worked
out splendidly for them both.

“And I know how much you love to stare at my ass,” Emma said, then shot an open-mouthed wink
at Ruby over her shoulder.

In response, Ruby waggled her eyebrows suggestively, causing her friend to laugh. “Guilty as
charged. After Regina’s, it’s objectively the finest ass in Storybrooke.”

From beside her, Ruby saw Esperanza scratch her head, brows furrowed deeply. “I am deeply
confused,” the raven-haired woman said, her accent intensifying in her confusion. “You two are
admittedly friends who are both happily married. And yet you speak to one another as if lovers. Am I
missing something or is it common in your world to share in this way?”
While Emma spluttered, half-indignant and half-embarrassed, Ruby howled with delight. There was no need for translation as to what Esperanza was suggesting, and Ruby was less humored by the question than the seemingly innocent woman’s knowledge of such practices.

“Oh, my God!” Ruby said after her laughter died down. Emma was still looking mortified. “Are you telling me that people in your kingdom have swing parties?”

The little crease between Esperanza’s brows only deepened. “I have not heard this term before, but if it means those pretentious function in which the wealthy and privileged exchange spouses for sexual gratification, then yes.” She blushed adorably at the mention of ’sexual gratification.’ “Or at least that is what I have heard from my friends employed by the local nobility.”

“No way!” Ruby couldn’t contain her grin. “That’s hilarious!”

“It’s true,” Esperanza said, and though there was obviously more to the story judging by the genuine discomfort hiding under her chagrin, Ruby declined to stick her nose where it didn’t belong. She didn’t want to sour the mood by being an obnoxious jackass to her wife’s cousin.

"Just so you know, it's not like that," Emma said, offense having given way to amusement at the basis of Esperanza's assumption. "We're just really close, that's all. The teasing is a natural part of our rapport. Admittedly, some people think we're weird, but to hell with them."

"Not the ones who matter, though," Ruby said, reaching a hand out for Emma to take. When Emma did so, she gave the appendage a squeeze and made no attempt to hide the torch of eternal affection she carried for her best friend. "We're best friends who love each other and would do just about anything for each other." Ruby already knew Emma felt likewise, but it warmed her heart just the same to see her emotions reflected back at her from the most important person in her life outside of her wife, her children including Henry, and her Granny. "If that's wrong, I must have missed out on the day true friendship was explained."

Emma hummed in agreement. "You know, during my years in the foster system, there was one family that I went to that I actually thought would stick. I told you about them right?" Ruby nodded. "Well, you remember that I only landed back in a group home because some heinous shit went down completely out of their control."

For a second time, Ruby nodded, though her face fell right along with Emma's as details of the story came flooding back. Her heart ached over the disastrous events that befell that family which deprived Emma of the only good home she'd ever known before Storybrooke. Now was not the time to dredge up painful memories, though, she trained her expression into an encouraging smile.
After a shaky breath, Emma, too, endeavored to erase all hints of the sadness Ruby knew was eating away at her inside. It really was a tragic tale. She'd cried to Regina about it for over an hour after Emma told her, and it still rent her heart to think how close her best friend came to having a happy upbringing after fate had so cruelly conspired to deal blow after blow to an innocent child who hadn't asked to be brought into the world and then abandoned. Sometimes when Ruby thought about that, it made her feel hateful toward Snow and David. But then she'd think about Regina's role in the whole affair and the anger would flee. A lot of people had done a lot of things, both villainous and heroic, to land Emma into that enchanted wardrobe, and if Emma herself bore no ill will toward them, who was Ruby to?

"Anyway," said Emma, shaking her head ruefully, "while I lived there, they would read me stories from the Bible." To Esperanza, she explained, "That's a Holy Book prevalent in our new world. I'd been through too much to believe in...well, fairy tales, but there were a few of the stories that resonated with me. One was about two young men named David and Jonathan who had every reason to hate each other but for lack of a better term, fell in love with each other, just not in a romantic way. It's like they were soul mates and best friends and brothers all at the same time, and their relationship was beautiful. I can remember crying as my foster father read it to me and asking him if he thought I'd ever find a friend to love like that.

"'Of course you will, my little cygnet,' he said. 'And when you do they'll love you just like Jonathan did David.'"

"That's how I feel about Ruby. She's my Jonathan."

Ruby almost gasped aloud, but caught it in her throat by biting down on her lower lip. Emma had never told her that before. But seeing as the Curse had supplied her with memories of Granny reading her the same story, she liked the analogy and thought it entirely appropriate.

"And you're my David," she said, gazing at Emma and arrested by the seemingly infinite cord of friendship tethering them together. Her heart felt full to bursting, and she swiped at a rogue tear that trickled down her cheek as Emma gave her a smile that was all rosy cheeks and equally glistening eyes. Swinging their hands between their bodies, Ruby returned her attention to Esperanza, who was observing with rapt interest and not a little tenderness. "To our eternal gratitude, both Regina and Killian understand and appreciate that bond."

"They kinda have to," said Emma, smiling wryly. "For one, they're stuck with us. But two, Regina is almost as bad with her sister these days. And don't even get me started on Killian and my Dad..."

Ruby chuckled. "I know, right? Bromance of the century!"
Emma winked playfully. "Understatement of the year."

"So," Ruby then addressed their fellow traveler with deliberate kindness, "is that an adequate explanation to sate your curiosity?"

Esperanza nodded firmly, looking a touch apologetic. "It does. I am sorry if I implied anything out of the way."

Ruby gave the woman an indulgent smile. “It's all good, sweetie. You’re not the first to comment on it and probably won’t be the last.”

“It must be nice to have such a friendship.”

The way the sentence was said told Ruby that Esperanza did not have many friends of her own. “It is. You’ll find out soon enough. Right, Em?”

A grin full of cheek on her face, eyes dancing, Emma said, “You bet your cute little ass she will!”

And then they all shared a companionable laugh, after which the chatter died down for a bit. In the hours that followed, conversation ebbed and flowed as the miles gave way beneath their boots. It was nearing mid-afternoon when they drew near to their objective. There in the distance the towering mountains ringing the Dark Palace appeared, telling Ruby they were less than five miles out. Now back in the lead, she guided them on a steady pace the final hour, immensely pleased that no further breaks were required even if she would have gladly allowed her companions the chance to rest once more. They were, all things considered, still high on energy and in good spirits.

“We're almost there,” she called out, breathing a little more heavily as she worked her way up the latest large incline. The land in this area of the forest, while still not wholly recognizable, was more so than it had been the closer they got to the Dark Palace. It was kind of strange to think that whatever happened there eleven years ago had caused such drastic changes to the surrounding forests at a distance but left them relatively unchanged in the near vicinity. Shrugging internally, Ruby chalked it up to a quirk of magic for now, but would definitely be picking Regina's brain once she got home.

Surging up the last little bit on the incline, Ruby gasped as her eyes took in the sight before her. The sprawling forest they had traveled through at last began to thin, and as it did, a low crest jutted out to
rise imperiously above the tree line. There, sitting proudly and threateningly atop it, all sharp lines and glimmering steel, was the Dark Palace. They had made it.
The Sword in the Stone

Chapter Summary

Regina's Angels get their first taste of the enigmatic sorcerer's power, and as they make their way into the castle, stumble upon a legendary weapon that may prove pivotal in decided not only the fate of Storybrooke and of Earth but all worlds connected to it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Under the light of the sun, the metallic spikes jutting high into the sky from Dark Palace shimmered and reflected as if mirrors into an inescapable void. The effect created was awe inspiring if not a little terrifying, but for Ruby, excitement usurped all other considerations. When Emma and Esperanza crested the incline seconds later, she looked at them with a humongous grin.

“We made it!”

As her companions took in the same sight she just had, Ruby watched a myriad of expressions play over their features from relief to awe with plenty of trepidation in between before finally settling into determination. They are both as ready as I am to get this over with, Ruby thought, which was good as there would be little incentive for delays or sightseeing once inside. Regina's explicit instructions suddenly seemed more manageable.

“Once you reach the Dark Palace, don't dillydally, Ruby,” she'd said the night before Ruby was due to leave. “It's not a place to linger, even if uninhabited. I had occasion to visit during Pan’s Curse and know there to be darkness lingering there, a darkness that I created and eagerly cultivated. It permeates every hallway and chamber, lurks in every nook and cranny. I wanted my home to reflect to new disposition, and I was entirely too successful. I don't want you in that place longer than is absolutely necessary. So, as soon as you arrive at the Palace, you are going to do what?”

After a moment of expectant glaring, Ruby huffed out an annoyed breath. “I'm going to activate your pendant, follow it to your chambers, grab what we need, and hightail it out of there.”

Humming with delight, Regina struck a pose as if a school teacher whose worst pupil just pleased and shocked her with a correct answer. “Very good! You were listening after all.”

“I always listen to you, babe,” Ruby had replied, returning Regina’s sass with her own.
Regina smirked, shaking her head because she knew better. “*Only when it suits you, dear.*”

And it kind of was the truth. Ruby had a tendency to feign acceptance of suggestions she didn’t like – that is, unless she thought doing so would land her in the kind of trouble even her best puppy-esque pouting could mitigate. Now was one of those times she was tempted to ignore the stern warnings she’d been given if for no other reason than Regina wasn’t present to scold her for such foolishness. And the opportunity to explore someplace new – Ruby had never set foot inside the Dark Palace – was powerful. Standing so tantalizingly close now, bearing witness to the awful splendor that made the structure one that pierced even the most courageous hearts with fear, made Ruby want to explore every inch of it.

What made her most keen to investigate, though, was its essential link to her wife. Even now she could taste the cloying flavor of dark magic and smell the anger and pain in the air. The almost tangible despair that seemed engraved into every surface of the edifice called out to her baser instincts because of familiarity; it was the same disturbing combination of residual sensory elements she encountered after Regina had a nightmare rooted in her past. This place was where it had all happened, where Regina had spent long, torturous years being deconstructed from a brave, loving young woman into a bitterly hollow shell that Rumplestiltskin took full advantage of. That impish bastard had filling her to overflowing with unbridled hatred through the indulgence of dark thoughts and the careful cultivation of dangerous inclinations. What emerged from that crucible was a broken vessel made into a terribly whole mass of unstoppable vengeance, fathomless malignity, and boundless cruelty; an unhinged tyrant whose rage and vindictiveness were so legendary that she inspired tales to be written of her in far away worlds; a woman undone who more than earned her altogether fitting appellation: the Evil Queen.

All under the guise of enacting her final revenge, Regina had cast the most insidious curse ever conceived. She hadn’t realized then that her true motive was to escape the unending misery of her existence. Decades were spent toiling with blood, sweat, and tears for Regina to successfully entomb the Queen within the mausoleum of her mind where she kept all of her other vast assortment of horrific memories. That the work was done unwittingly at first made Regina’s ultimate victory over her own personal darkness all the more impressive.

It felt wrong in a way, then, for Ruby to trample upon all of that excruciating labor when she knew very well Regina would be grilling her about the trip when she got home and that no details, however minute, could be permissibly omitted. Were Ruby to scratch the itch of her curiosity, the telling of it might inadvertently trigger a resurgence of thoughts and emotions best left consigned to the yellowed, cracked pages of ancient history. The very possibility of that happening made her wish to never walk upon the steel, stone, and mortar monument erected to her wife’s descent into insanity.

But no matter how much Ruby respected and loved and wanted to protect Regina, the proximity to gleaning some personal insights to a time before they formally became acquainted, not to mention fell in love, proved nearly too irresistible to pass up.
“No,” she told herself, imperceptibly shaking her head to rid herself of such contemplations. “You can’t get distracted. Use the pendant, follow it, get what we came for, and get the hell out.” Repeating that phrase over and over as if to emblazon it in her neurons, Ruby gestured toward the castle. “C’mon. We need to hurry. We can’t afford lose any more time. I wanna be out of there and on our way to our next destination before nightfall if at all possible.”

With silent nods of agreement, Emma and Esperanza fell back into step behind Ruby as she set off down the small hill. Her pace increased from what it was before in her urgency. As the Dark Palace grew larger and larger in her field of vision, Ruby focused on taking in every sound that she could make out. Esperanza’s earlier tale about patrols of soldiers in the area could not afford to be underestimated when the terrain had proven unreliable, which meant exercising at least some caution was preferable to beating a hasty retreat that might very well get them lost.

For a good portion of the trek Ruby heard nothing out of the ordinary, but as they got to within a quarter of a mile, she detected a low-level humming that that set her teeth on edge and caused the fine hairs on her arms and neck to pebble. For a while, she dismissed the noise as some kind of ambiance possibly produced by an unintended side-effect on her ears from the weird magic that blanketed the entire area. But the closer they got to the Palace, the louder the humming got, and as they came to within a hundred yards of the rising hill upon which the Dark Palace rested, the volume became impossible for her to ignore.

Stopping in her tracks, she held up her hand for the others to stop as well. “Don't you guys hear that?” she asked, her eyes focused forward, scanning the area to and fro for movement.

“Not really,” Emma said from close behind Ruby’s right ear. “Just forestry stuff like birds chirping and leaves rustling in the wind. Why? Do you hear something?”

Her sensitive ears on overload, Ruby winced visibly. If the noise didn’t get dialed down soon she would get a migraine. “I don't know what it is, but it’s almost deafening! You know what happens when you turn the stereo up too loud and there's no music playing? Like that. I can't make out an origin, but it's so close that my head feels like it’s going to pop!”

Emma frowned worriedly, resting a hand flat on the small of Ruby’s back. “You gonna be okay?”

“I will if this damn buzzing will stop!” Ruby grit her teeth against the pain as Emma went silent. Ruby didn’t have to see Emma’s face to know she was sorting out options in her head. While the blonde was thinking and rubbing gentle circles on Ruby’s back, Ruby tried every trick in the book to block out the noise, from humming loudly to stopping up her ear canals with her fingers. Nothing worked. It was as if the sound was not manifesting in the physical world but was being magically
emitted and therefore not restricted to the laws of physics.

“Oh!” Emma’s delighted squeak broke Ruby out of her pained stupor. She looked up to find her friend beaming a smile. “I know what it is! It's a force field. Esperanza mentioned it back at the lake – that it was put up to keep people out.”

“So it is true,” Esperanza said, her eyes wide at the reality that all of the stories she’d been told were not baseless after all. “If the shield is there, it means that the Sorcerer really is in the castle.”

Groaning, Ruby's head fell. Her head was now pounding so viciously that white spots started dancing in her field of view.

She growled with frustration. “Dammit! This makes things a whole lot more complicated and dangerous.”

The hand Emma had resting against Ruby’s back was raised to her shoulder. “Let's not get ahead of ourselves. One obstacle at a time, remember?”

Ruby made a face at the reference. “Yeah. How could I forget?”

Emma had used that exact phrase during Ruby’s first tough case as a full time Sheriff’s deputy. It was about four months into her employment, and other than the fallout from the tragic case of the Lost Boy who had killed someone due to desperation, she'd yet to tackle much more than simple misdemeanors. Contrary to popular belief, Storybrooke’s sordid crowd was populated by villains mainly of the petty variety easily caught between the combined skills of the Savior and the Big Bad Wolf.

One particularly lazy afternoon when she and Emma were both bored out of their skulls, a call came in of a domestic disturbance in a very affluent neighborhood. They had responded with misplaced glee, glad more than anything to have something to do beyond meaningless pencil pushing. In her excitement to get cracking on a real crime, Emma may have even broken several traffic ordinances, some of which she was personally instrumental in instituting. And though Ruby teased her friend over the irony, she was pretty sure she would’ve done worse had Emma let her drive.

When they got to the home and approached the door, all was quiet, which was unsettling considering the report mentioned excessively loud shouting and the sounds of objects being broken. Instantly, Ruby's senses began tripping that something terrible had happened. She cut a nervous glance over to
see Emma, who standing at attention with her hand resting on the handle of her gun as she reached out to the door. After three loud knocks and several calls for anyone inside to answer, the Sheriff reached for the knob with a stony expression that sent Ruby’s stomach to flip-flopping.

As soon as Emma’s hand touched the knob, the door very unexpectedly pushed open, and both immediately noted that the latch and socket were both broken. A scene awaited inside that would give Ruby nightmares for weeks. She could still remember in vivid detail the sweet, smokey smell of Jack Daniels mixed with coppery blood that permeated the living room as well as the sight of a used syringe haphazardly discarded upon the coffee table next to a spoon and lighter. The tools, Ruby knew from secondhand experience during the curse, of a heroin junkie. Next to the coffee table, a man was laying prone clearly in the throes of the powerful drug, muttering and murmuring disjointedly as his eyes flitted and fluttered.

But it was not the drugs or the mind- addled junkie that rattled her, but what was discovered a mere five feet to his left. There, in the middle of the small space between the living room and kitchen, were three bodies: one belonging to a woman and the two others young children. Their ghastly inert forms were arranged at odd angles and an enormous pool of blood was soaked into the tan carpet upon which they laid. It had taken an enormous amount of willpower for Ruby to keep herself from vomiting, but even more so to restrain herself from ripping the man apart who had obviously murdered his family in his drug-induced delirium.

After they had secured and restrained the man they assumed to be the junkie father, they began their initial walk of the scene. Several times during that first half hour, Ruby nearly lost her battle for self-control. She was still uncertain as to how she kept a lid on her swirling emotions in order to do her job.

But then in rapid succession, they made two discoveries that careened the investigation into a very unexpected direction. First was Emma’s discovery of a family photograph that proved their perp was neither the husband or the father. Rather, the husband was a very prominent member of the City Council who was well known to be domineering and abusive. They’d never been able to pin anything on him because the wife refused to do anything about it. The new information created doubt as to whether or not the man they’d found at the scene had even committed the crime.

The second discovery came about when Ruby had heard whimpering inside a closet in the hallway. After investigating, she’d found a very small girl, three years old at the most, hunkered down in the corner of the hallway. A teddy bear was clenched in her tiny hands as she wept and trembled. The sight had broken Ruby’s heart, particularly because she’d been heavily pregnant at the time and her motherly instincts were earnestly kicking in.

Considering the grizzly nature of the scene and the orphaned little girl clearly petrified out of her mind, Ruby’s nerves were frayed to a thread within the first hour of the investigation. But after David arrived to take the suspect to lock-up and the newly appointed social worker took custody of the
traumatized child, the added weight of responsibility having to handle such a delicate, high-profile, and potentially explosive investigation overwhelmed her.

She’d thought she was doing a pretty good job of hiding how much she was freaking out, but Emma seemed to share Regina’s sixth sense in discerning her feelings. Sometimes it was annoying she couldn’t escape knowing eyes watching her like a hawk even at work, but that day when a comforting hand reached out to steady her and sagely understanding green eyes fixed her with an expression of calm determination that belied Emma's own internal turmoil, Ruby was just relieved.

“*It'll be okay, Ruby,*” Emma had said, her voice as calm with assurance as her features. “*You can do this. Those kids and that poor woman in there deserve justice, and we're going to give it to them, okay? I know it seems a daunting task right now, and I'll admit that the odds are certainly stacked against us considering who we might be up against. But just remember: Rome wasn't built in a day and this investigation won't be either. So just take it one obstacle at a time, and pretty soon we'll get where we need to be to nail the bastard who did this.*”

Those words had stuck with Ruby ever since. Whenever she was presented with a difficult problem to solve or a complex case to crack, she remembered Emma's advice. One obstacle at a time. Keeping that in mind made it possible for her to focus whenever life threw crazy things her way, which seemed daily in Storybrooke. As grateful as she was for Emma's timely advice back then, she was equally so now.

“You're right,” she said, resolute once more. “We need to tackle the first obstacle, and that is this shield. We have to get through it before we can do anything else. So how do we do that?”

“I think I can take care of it if we can find it without someone getting zapped,” said Emma with no small amount of confidence. “Can you guide us by ear?”

“I can try.”

Taking a deep breath, Ruby closed her eyes and allowed the loud humming to become her primary focus. While so obnoxiously loud that her teeth rattled, the source did not feel imminently close. She could tell it was nearby, though. Somewhere to the north. After opening her eyes, Ruby carefully started forward, taking at a slow, deliberate pace as she let the ever intensifying sounds emanated by the shield guide her closer and closer. About ten feet away from the sloping ground of the large hill, the humming reached a crescendo that had Ruby fighting against a scream.

Cupping her hands over her ears instinctively, she stopped moving forward. “I think we're close!” Deafened as she was, she didn’t realizing she was shouting. And although Emma's lips moved in
response, Ruby could not understand with her thoughts muddled by the incessant blaring. “What? I can't hear you, it's too damned loud!”

Sighing, Emma made a gesture with her hand, the tips of her fingers glowing white. “There,” she said, and Ruby was relieved to find that the humming had stopped and she was now able to hear Emma talk once again. “That better?”

“Yes,” Ruby nodded, shaking her head in an attempt to clear the residual ringing. Out of gratitude, Ruby choked down a wise-ass comment that she wished Emma thought to do that earlier. Instead, she mustered up a lopsided smile that Emma returned. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” Stepping next to where Ruby was standing, Emma raised her right arm out perpendicular to her body, palm forward and hand open. “I'm going to...probe it with my magic now, for lack of a better description. See what we're dealing with.”

Ruby bit her lip, anxious for Emma’s safety. “Just be careful.”

“You know me,” was Emma's cheeky reply.

And that was the problem. The woman could be as reckless as anyone Ruby had ever known, especially where her magic was concerned. Getting past the shield was a vital step in accomplishing their objective, but it was just as important to keep Emma in one piece. Prepared to reiterate her desire that Emma be careful, Ruby was preempted by the Savior closing her eyes and extending out her magic to find the shield.

A cloud of white swirling magic began wafting from Emma's hand, dancing and twirling outward as it sought out the magical shield that kept unwanted intruders from gaining access into the Dark Palace. Onward and onward it went, extending out to about thirty yards up the incline before it suddenly came into contact with a solid yet invisible object. Bright white sparks shot out from where Emma's magic contacted the shield.

As the electric reaction intensified, Emma's face screwed up in concentration. Concern had Ruby ready to intervene or at least inquire after Emma’s state but her better judgment staid her interference. Not only did she trust the blonde to know her limits, but when performing intricate magic, she knew Emma needed to keep her wits about her. Not wanting to be a distraction that caused a mistake, maybe even a catastrophic one, Ruby clasped her hands together in front of her and began anxiously fidgeting with them.
To distract herself, she observed Emma's magic as it began to move up and down, swooping and swirling as it spread over the surface of the shield. The cloud of magic grew until it covered at least a twenty foot section. Not long after, she heard incoherent mumbling, and Ruby glanced back to find Emma’s forehead dotted with perspiration from the effort she was expending. A minute or more of intense focus followed before Emma’s face went slack, her body relaxed, and she heaved a deep breath. And then she faltered.

“Emma!” Esperanza shouted, rushing forward to steady Emma, who continued wobbling in place even with Esperanza’s support.

Heart thudding at seeing Emma so drained, Ruby tucked herself tight against her swooning to further buttress her. Trembling noticeably, Emma gingerly rubbed her temples, her green eyes slightly glazed over. As gently as she could, Ruby returned the comforting favor of rubbing Emma's back.

“Are you alright?” she asked, not bothering to hide how frightened she was.

“Yeah. ‘M fine,” Emma said, gently grasping onto Esperanza's forearm until her dizziness abated. “Whew! That's one hell of a powerful shield.” After taking a moment to gather herself, she straightened back up and cleared her throat. “I'm good, thanks. Sorry about that. Didn't mean to worry you guys.”

Nodding, Esperanza backed away a few steps, confident in Emma's ability to stay upright. Ruby kept her place at Emma's side.

“It's alright, sweetie,” she said as she continued to make soothing patterns upon Emma's lower back. “Are you sure you're okay, though? You about passed out on us.”

Emma nodded. “I'm fine. Really. Just wasn't expecting so much concentrated energy from such a large shield. As would be obvious, the size of a shield directly impacts the dispersal of magic, so they generally don't feedback. But this one did, though, and something nasty. Whoever cast it is very powerful.

“Thankfully, although surprisingly potent, the enormous size of the shield also works to our advantage. If it were smaller — say half as big — I wouldn't be able to break it without expending all of my energy. But because its so vast, the energy is diffused just enough that I can create a temporary hole in it without much trouble. It won't be anything fancy, but it will be enough for us to get through. However, I suggest we pick a location very close to where we're going to breach, ‘cause as soon as I do this, whoever cast this shield is going to know we're here.”
“Right,” Ruby said, drawing out the word in a fit of aggravation. She stepped away from Emma and turned back toward the Dark Palace, eyeing it sharply. “Another obstacle to overcome, I suppose. I was really hoping to avoid detection, but it doesn't seem like we have much of a choice. One way or another, though, we need to get to those maps or this whole trip has been for nothing.”

Shifting on her feet, Emma quirked her head at Ruby. “Don't stress out just yet, we'll get them. Where do we need to be when we break the shield?”

Ruby squinted her eyes as she recalled and then relayed the information Regina had been forced her to memorize. “According to Regina, the tunnel entrance is in the northeastern corner of the compound. She said to look for a large, misshapen tree with a horse carved into its trunk. A hundred paces up the hill from there is a large outcropping of stones, into which an alcove is carved. That's the entrance. The door is marked by runes from where she resealed it during their foray back here after Pan died using a mixture of blood and dark magic.”

Emma appeared slightly worried by that information. “How are we supposed to get in then? Last time I checked, Regina isn't here and I can't access dark magic anymore without the dagger.”

Ruby shrugged casually. “I honestly don't know how it's gonna work, but she swore to me that if I touched the stone, it would open.”

Emma’s golden brows arched. “Well, that's interesting. She ought to know, though, so I guess we’ll have to trust her. Anyway, let's head that direction. I don't like hanging around here. This place gives me the heebie-jeebies.”

“Oh indeed,” said Esperanza, looking up at the Palace with a measure of foreboding. “The patrols are bound to be more numerous so close to the castle. It would be unwise to linger any longer than necessary.”

Inclining her head in acknowledgment, Ruby turned back toward her companions. “Alright then. Let's head out.” And with that, she lead them away, cutting a path away from the shield and back into the woods before veering northeast.

The Dark Palace was a very large complex, so it took them nearly twenty minutes to travel around the eastern mountainside to the gnarled and blackened tree that Regina had spoken of. Squatting down to check the truck, Ruby spotted the symbol she was told to look for, confirming they were in the correct location. Looking out toward the mountain, she easily spotted the outcropping of rocks
that contained the entrance. She grinned.

“And there we are,” she said, pointing out into the distance at the entrance rock. She glanced back at Emma and Esperanza, who were looking to her for her instructions. She focused on Emma first. “Can you drop your protection spell on my ears so I can hear the shield again?”

“Sure,” Emma answered, and then gestured with her hand in that familiar way Regina often utilized to performing a spell without the need for incantation. With the block removed, Ruby instantly heard the incessant humming return and ground her teeth together against its grating effect.

“Follow me,” she said, indicating toward the mountain, “I’ll get us back up to the shield.” And with that, she began forward with a determined gait.

Leaving the protection of the forest behind, she entered the clearing with Emma and Esperanza following closely behind, and after traveling about a hundred yards, reached the beginning of the mountain slope. Careful to avoid large boulders and ruts in the rough earth that might break an ankle, Ruby picked a path up the sharp incline, all the while making sure to keep track of the noise level from the shield and her companions progress as she did. They had only made it up about twenty yards when she felt liquid in her ears she knew to be blood.

Stopping, Ruby turned back to Emma and made a gesture around her ear with her hand. Having understood, Emma nodded and respelled her hearing to block the annoying sound generated by the shield.

Breathing a sigh relief, she rubbed her ears clean then wiped the blood on her pants before nodding to Emma. “Alright, do your thing.”

After making a show of cracking her knuckles, Emma smiled crookedly. “With pleasure.” And then she stretched out her arms in front of her toward where the invisible barrier lay.

As before, Emma’s magic began to emanate out from her hands in a thick white cloud of smoke, which made its way toward the shield until it collided with the barrier and began to spread over its surface. But then, she began to move her hands as if she were shaping a box with them and as she did, her magic obeyed the silent commands to form a vertically oriented rectangle that extended about seven feet high by three feet wide, the typical dimensions of a modern door casing.

“Alright, get ready,” the Savior said, voice already strained from the effort to maintain her focus.
“When I cut the shield we'll have about thirty seconds to get on the other side. I can’t hold the spell longer than that.”

By the time Ruby glanced over at Esperanza, the woman was already on her haunches, ready to sprint at a moment's notice. Her calm and collected demeanor further bolstered Ruby's respect for someone who only a day earlier was a total stranger. And although Esperanza had her own motive for accompanying them on the journey, that she was willing to risk herself to help was no small thing in Ruby’s estimation. When they got back to Storybrooke, she was going to have to figure out a way to properly thank her new kinswoman, though she was not quite sure what she could do besides extend the same hospitality to Esperanza that Esperanza had to her and Emma. It might not be much, but at least it was a good start.

“I'm ready,” Esperanza preemptively declared, having anticipated Ruby's questioning glance.

Ruby acknowledged Esperanza with a brief nod before settling into her own preparatory stance. She turned back to Emma. “Do it.”

No more was said as Emma launched into casting the spell to breach the shield. With a fluid motion, she closed her hands into fists and swiped her arms downward to her sides. A terrific whoosh ensued as golden Savior magic began to condense around the edges of the rectangle, growing more and more bold in color as it congealed into what looked like some kind of plasma. In only a few seconds the puffy white clouds of magic had formed into four thin liquid lines that began to vibrate at an ultrasonic frequency that resembled the screech of a dog whistle. Ruby’s neck stiffened crookedly at the sound, but she summoned every ounce willpower to remain on task as Emma crouched down.

With all of them ready to run, Emma said, “Here we go,” and as soon as the words left her mouth the shield groaned audibly and became visible. It appeared as a thin, flowing red and gray pool of roiling waves, which instantly hardened and cracked. Grabbing a rock, Emma glanced at Ruby and then at Esperanza. “As soon as I toss this rock, we have to run.”

She didn't wait for acknowledgment. With a grunt of effort, she heaved the rock at the shield, which shattered on contact into innumerable pieces that rained down onto the ground. When Emma took off into a sprint, Ruby followed closely, and Esperanza behind her. As soon as all three were on the other side, they turned to watch the white lines of Emma’s magic start to fray like old cords of rope, untangling and unwinding as the energy of the shield overwhelmed it. It broke with a loud pop, dissipating into the air as dust, and as soon as the shield had reformed, it was once again invisible.

“Another obstacle down,” Emma said, obviously pleased with herself.
Ruby inclined her head in acknowledgment before turning her eyes toward the entrance to the tunnels. “Now for the next one.”

As it happened, breaching the entrance to the tunnels was not nearly so complicated as the shield had been. At the touch of Ruby's hand to the runes marking the door, the magic sealing them was released and the doors rolled open of their own accord. No one said a word as the inky darkness of the tunnels was revealed. They just looked at one another with wide eyes, and Ruby knew without needing to ask they were all thinking the same thing: “What the hell have I gotten myself into?”

Since Regina was so thoughtful as to provide flashlights, both Ruby and Emma retrieved them from their packs and then lead the way down the tunnels with Esperanza wedged between. No one dared to speak for fear that someone or something might be listening in the shadows, and the oppressive silence combined with the darkness to elevate Ruby's sensory awareness. Though her breathing was steady, Esperanza’s heart was thrumming rapidly, and Emma's tension was nearly palpable, echoing Ruby’s own as she pressed forward with her gun drawn and pointed forward, flashlight tucked neatly underneath it.

The stress they were all feeling only made the journey seem all the more interminable. Eventually, and after many startled halts due to creaks and groans that were to be expected of a such structure that had had endured for so long without maintenance, they made it through the tunnel with little other disturbance. At the end, the passage opened up into a large hexagonal chamber with a heavy door on the opposite side marked by the same runes as the entrance had been. As Emma meandered over to inspect the left side of the chamber, Ruby approached the sealed door and laid her hand on it. Much as had happened earlier, the magic released, dissipating in a puff of purple smoke.

When she reached for the handle to open it, she was startled by a commotion to her left.

“Woah, what the hell?” Emma cried, as the wall she had been leaning against gave way. Having been unprepared to catch herself, she tumbled into the opened passage, landing in a heap on her side. Her gun clattered out of her hand along with her flashlight, and as it tumbled away, the light reflecting off of the corridor walls gave a weird disco effect that turned her stomach.

Abandoning all thoughts of the door, Ruby scrambled over to help her fallen friend up. “Oh, my God, are you okay?” she asked as she bent down to take Emma’s elbow after she had sat up.

After being guided up gently, Emma said, “I think so. What the hell was that?”

“I don’t know. Regina didn't say anything about secret passage ways down here.”
As a cop, Emma's instincts were acting up. Here was a mystery that had literally fallen open in front of her, but considering how delayed they had already been, she wasn't sure what Ruby wanted to do. She decided the best course of action was to defer, but with the subtle hint as to what her opinion was. Emma considered herself a good friend, but she was not above manipulation to sate her curiosity.

“Do you think we should investigate?” she asked, purposefully peering down the narrow corridor.

For a while, Ruby didn't respond, looking torn between her own curiosity and her desire to carry on. Her bottom lip was firmly tucked between her teeth as she shifted her weight from side to side, trying to decide their course of action.

“Might I make a suggestion?” Esperanza spoke up from the middle of the room, having observed Ruby's conflicted expression and Emma's overt interest.

Ruby sighed with relief. “Sure.”

“You said Regina sealed this place with blood and dark magic, correct?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said, head cocked curiously to the side, “what of it?”

“Well, if she protected the entrance to the tunnel and that of the door that accesses the palace, it stands to reason that she would have protected this passage way in like manner.” Esperanza then smiled mysteriously. “And there is also our fortuitous meeting.”

Looking confused, Ruby's brow furrowed. “I don’t follow.”

“It seems to me that there is more at work here than meets the eye,” Esperanza said. “It is almost as if the hand of fate is at work. So then, if this passageway opened for Emma, then maybe it was meant to. What lies at the end of this corridor may well be something we will need later. But as I said, it is just a suggestion.”

“Makes a lot of damn sense to me,” Emma said. She gave Ruby a brilliant if not teasing smile. “Besides, you know you wanna find out what's down there as much as I do.”
Ruby resisted her own desire to examine the secret passageway for about a total of ten seconds before giving in. Thoroughly disgusted with herself, she made a sound of annoyance.

“Fine. But if we get eaten by a dragon or something, it's on you.”

Emma laughed at Ruby’s ridiculousness. “Oh, come on. Don't be such a drama queen. Leave that to your wife.”

“Hey!”

“I'm kidding, I'm kidding.” Emma was only mostly kidding, and Ruby knew it. “But just remember, I have killed a dragon before. And...this happening not technically my fault, as Esperanza so eloquently argued. That means she agrees with me. So there. You're outnumbered, Rubes.”

Her eyes slightly panicked, Esperanza turned to Ruby. “Please, do not take offense to my suggestion. If you wish to carry on, I will follow you.”

Hands on her hips, Ruby glared at Emma. “Now look what you did. Don't go pawning off the blame on our innocent little Esperanza, Swan.”

“Wouldn't dream of it, Mills,” Emma taunted back, green eyes dancing with merriment.

Despite the circumstances, Ruby was glad of Emma's needling. It was a fine way to pop the balloon of stress that had been gradually inflating since the moment they entered the tunnels. Besides that, Emma was right in assuming Ruby was curious as to what was on the other end of the passageway. And considering Esperanza’s rather wise interpretation of events, who was she to fight fate?

Stalking off down the pitch dark passageway, Ruby allowed her instincts to take over. Her ears were attuned to the slightest movement and her eyes were sharply focused, constantly scanning for movement, of which none was detected. The passageway itself was narrow enough that her shoulders almost brushed against its jagged walls, and judging by the count of her footsteps it cut a path into the mountain about thirty yards long.

At the other end, the passage opened into a small, rounded room, in the center of which was a large
nondescript stone. As soon as Ruby's feet crossed the threshold, the torches lining the wall lit up automatically. Blazing flames cascaded the room with orange light that cast an eerily surreal glow. As her eyes swept the room, a glint of metal caught her attention and she gasped. Without waiting for the others, she approached the center of the room to study the object.

Proudly protruding from the stone a sword of such unique beauty as to be without peer. Characterized by a long and tapered hilt wrapped with brown leather and criss-crossed with golden bindings, its crossguard was polished gold that gleamed in the low firelight – as was its pommel, which was circular and fashioned to resemble the sun beaming light in all directions. The silvered edges of the blade were so smoothly burnished as to reflect images with mirror precision, and along its entire length ran a strip of gold engraved with runes of ancient power.

As if possessing a power of its own, the sword pulsated with energy that Ruby could feel in her bones. It seemed to her that the blade was alive, humming an inviting tune, beckoning for her to take it, and of its own accord, her hand began to reach for it. But again, as with the door handle, she was stopped short in the process.

“Emma!” Esperanza called out in a harsh whisper, grabbing Ruby's attention away from the hypnotic pull of the blade.

Ruby turned to see Emma approaching the stone in measured steps with a dazed expression on her face, as if the pull Ruby had felt from the sword was magnified in the Savior a thousand times over. As Emma approached the stone serving as a scabbard, the blade's humming grew ever louder and upon halting less than a step away, it began to sing, a sound of glorious euphoria which echoed in Ruby's ears and reverberated all the way down to the base of her spine. Still caught in the throes of the musical language of the weapon, she watched dumbstruck as Emma's hand reached out to grasp the handle. The second the Savior touched the weapon, the singing stopped and Ruby was released from whatever mystical influence it was exerting upon her.

In one long, drawn out motion, Emma drew the sword away from the stone and as it slid free, the lights in the room flickered.

“Emma?” Ruby spoke hesitantly, trying to break through the fog her friend was in. Very carefully, she approached. “Hey, you okay?” No answer came, Emma's only movement to bring the sword up to her face, studying her own reflection in the smooth surface of the blade. Her green eyes were blazing, lit by flames from within that made her appear almost inhuman. Worry prompted her to reach for Emma's elbow.

When Ruby shouted her name, Emma's eyes hazed over before returning to normal. She blinked as shook her head. Upon catching sight of Ruby staring at her with open concern, she allowed her sword arm to fall to her side.
Frowning slightly, she said, “Did you say something?”

“I asked if you were alright.”

Emma dismissed her friend’s anxiety with a dismissive wave. “I'm fine.”

“Then you won't mind me asking what the hell that was?” Ruby gestured to the sword.

Emma shrugged as if unaware why she had behaved so oddly. “I don't know, really. I can't explain it. I could feel it, hear it calling to me. It wanted me to take it, to set it free. And the second I touched it, I knew.”

Ruby's look grew grave at that. “Knew what?” The smile Emma leveled her with was so serene and beautiful that it took her breath away.

“It chose me. All these years it's been waiting here...for me. Esperanza was right, we didn't come here by coincidence. Something larger is at work. It might be fate, it might be something else, but whatever it is, it feels right.”

Looking owlish, Ruby took a dramatic step back. “Woah there! Careful, Em, you're starting to sound an awful lot like your mother.”

“Strangely enough, I'm okay with that.” Emma tilted her head slightly, eyes alight with gentle confidence. “You know, back in Storybrooke I never much felt like the Savior. Sure, everyone believed in me and all that jazz, and I accepted the role, but I never really believed it myself outside of necessity. But now...” Her voice drifted off and her eyes returned to the gleaming metal of the blade in her hand. “Now, I feel like the Savior.”

“Good, 'cause that's who's needed right now,” Ruby said, happiness overriding concern for her friend. If Emma had finally accepted who she was because of this trip, at least one good thing came of it. That and, as she had said, the Savior was who Ruby needed her to be. “We don't need Emma the cop or Emma the best buddy if we're going to make it out of this in one piece. But Emma the Savior? She's someone that I know can get us back home.”
“Then might I say, I am at your service, milady,” said Emma with a grin, holding hilt of the sword up to her face in a knightly salute.

Ruby laughed, immensely pleased and relieved that Emma was back to joking. “Alright, Joan of Arc. Don’t get a big head just because you’ve been ‘chosen’. I mean, geez, what does that even mean? A piece of metal chose you. Wow. Color me impressed.”

“Hey, don’t knock it!” Emma huffed in a manner that was obviously mischievous. “A piece of metal chose Colwyn and he used it to save Lyssa from the Beast! And who knows, this piece of metal might save your Debbie Downer ass before all of this is over.”

Ruby laughed again. “I know you didn’t just reference Krull on me...”

Esperanza interjected, looking completely lost and searching for answers. “Who are Colwyn and Lyssa? What is a...krull? And why didn’t you tell me your full name was Emma Joan of Arc?”

At that, both Ruby and Emma looked at each other and burst out into a fit of very unladylike giggles that only seemed to intensify Esperanza's confusion.

“What is so humorous?” the exotic looking woman asked, sable brows scrunched up in rather cute manner.

“It's nothing,” Ruby said after her amusement finally subsided. “We're not making fun of you or anything, I promise. It's just that even though your confusion was totally understandable, it was also adorable.”

Giving a put-out harrumph, Esperanza pouted then turned back toward the passageway. “Well, adorable as I may be, I am also practical, and I believe that have taken a long enough detour from our objective. Yes?”

Nodding, Ruby sidled over to stand next to the shorter woman and flung an arm around her shoulders. “Never change, Espy,” she said as she guided the woman toward the passageway. “Never, ever change.”

Esperanza's nose wrinkled with distaste at the moniker. “Espy?”
As she fondly chuckled at both Ruby's typical dorkiness and Esperanza's unintentional adorableness, Emma crossed over to the wall opposite her to retrieve the white and gold scabbard that was hanging there. She then proceeded to remove her belt to thread it through the scabbard before replacing it. Once secure on her waist, she slid the magnificent weapon into its scabbard, listening with satisfaction to the metallic humming the action created.

“Well,” she said, “I'm good to go now. Ruby?”

Ruby grinned in confirmation. “Let's roll.”

And with that, the women exited the fire-lit chamber and made their way back down the passageway.

Not long after, they found themselves standing in front of the large metal door barring entrance to the Dark Palace. Ruby did not waste any time in pushing it open, granting them access to the interior of the castle.

“Alright,” Ruby said, turning to instruct her companions, “let's get into the castle as quietly as possible. Leave your packs behind. Take only one weapon. I want to minimize the risk of detection.”

Both Emma and Esperanza removed their packs without complaint, setting them against the outer wall of the large entryway. Esperanza chose to remove her rapier, resting it alongside her pack and then pulled a wicked looking dagger out of her boots. With a measure of disappointment, Emma removed her pistol holster from her belt and rested it beside her own pack as Esperanza had. Her new sword, however, remained firmly in hand. That done, they rejoined Ruby at the door.

“Ready?” she asked, looking to each of them.

“I am,” Esperanza said, while Emma nodded sharply.

Ruby was very proud of how quietly they managed to make it up the stairs, despite the fact that they were all tired and wearing heavy boots. Reaching the upper doorway having made nary a sound audible enough to hear through the thickness of the walls, they paused a moment to prepare themselves.

The reality of the situation suddenly set in for Ruby. All of their journey up until now had been
relatively mundane and without much danger, but all of that was about to change the moment she
opened up the last door separating them from the castle proper. While Emma had freely chosen to
accompany Ruby throughout the journey and had readily accepted the risks, Ruby couldn't help but
feel as if she had dragged Esperanza into this mess. The last thing she needed on her already
burdened conscience was another innocent death on her already laden conscience.

“Last chance to back out.” She directed her comment at Esperanza in the hopes the woman might be
convinced to wait in the tunnels. “You've come this far with us and I'm so grateful. I can't thank you
enough. But I don't want you risking your life for me and my quest. Please, wait here for us. Emma
and I can take care of things inside.”

“I agree,” Emma said. “We're no strangers to risking our lives. It's kinda our job back home. You, on
the other hand, don't have to do this.”

Esperanza smiled warmly at their thoughtfulness, but her voice was unyielding when she said, “I am
aware of the risk, and I thank you for your consideration. That said, I am choosing to do this of my
own volition. I'm with you both, wherever that may lead.”

Tear pricking at her eyes, Ruby took Esperanza’s hand and gave it heartfelt squeeze before turning
back to the door. This was it. The moment of truth. She lifted her hand to the handle, but sensed no
magic barring entrance. Unlike the door below, this one was apparently not sealed by Regina or
whoever now occupied the castle, so it was just an ordinary door. Before she could even grasp the
handle, though the door was flung open as if in anticipation of her arrival.

Behind it stood a tall and imposing man in richly embroidered robes of exquisite craftsmanship. His
severe face was defined by a square jaw, deeply creased cheeks, and large steel-blue eyes. The dark
hair upon his head was closely cropped and he wore a thin goatee on his chin. The man’s entire
demeanor and aura seemed to radiate power, and it took all of Ruby’s inner fortitude not to avert her
gaze or cower like a frail omega under his piercing stare.

“Welcome,” he said, his voice rough and hard despite the warm geniality of his greeting. “My name
is Belmordan and I have been expecting you.”

Chapter End Notes

I sincerely hope everyone is enjoying the story thus far. For those that are wondering,
this is the last chapter from Ruby's PoV for a while. Back to Regina next week! See
y'all then.
A Tale of Two Conversations

Chapter Summary

Regina and Zelena discuss Ruby's absence and their relationship over lunch. Afterward, Regina gets a strange phone call.

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to my awesome-sauce beta, UnfarestOfThemAll!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Hello? Earth to Regina?”

The familiar accent belonging to Zelena startled Regina from her daydreaming. She had invited her sister to eat an early lunch in her office so they could discuss potentialities for Ruby's upcoming birthday next month. The planning was an impromptu bid to distract herself from recent anxieties.

Two weeks had passed since Ruby and Emma stepped through the portal to the Enchanted Forest. By Regina’s calculations, their journey should have required no more than three or four days, a week at the most if things went sideways, which had her speeding past the mile marker labeled “officially concerned” at a breathtaking pace. For days now she had been living in a near constant state of controlled panic, stressing over her obligation to her children and the increasingly unavoidable urge to tear entire worlds apart to get to Ruby, wherever she was. The only reason she was able to function at all under so much self-imposed pressure was due to being an old pro at internalizing turmoil.

Leaning back in her plush office chair, Regina glanced warily at Zelena, who was regarding her with that patented smugness no one else could adequately replicate.

“What?” she said, grousing because she was not appreciative of her sister’s obnoxious gloating.

The witch’s green eyes twinkled as a wide grin spread across her face. “It's just so cute the way your face betrays your thoughts. And to think, people were actually fooled by your little demure act when you first became Snow White’s new Mummy all those years ago.” After placing her half-eaten salad off to the side of Regina’s desk, Zelena leaned forward to rest her head in her hands, elbows propped up on the wooden surface of the desk. “Well, if I had been there, I would have seen right through it,”
she continued, batting her lashes to provoke a reaction all the while maintaining a convincing – or at least to any one else besides Regina – facade of innocence. It was a very typical thing for Zelena to do. “One look at your face is all I would have required. It’s rather like reading a book really, just open the cover and there are the words, spelled out in big bold letters for all to see if they care to dislodge the scales from their eyes.”

Regina glared daggers at her coppery-haired sister. “That may be true, but if you keep egging me on I’m going to allow you the privilege of an ending you won’t particularly enjoy.”

Zelena tutted merrily at the empty threat, still pompously leaning over the desk. “Now, now. No need to be hostile. I was merely making an observation.” When Regina’s glare skewed threatening, she finally relaxed back in her chair, hands raised up in submission. Her smile remained intact, however.

Working her jaw angrily, Regina attempted to diffuse her mounting frustration before she, as Ruby would say, flipped her lid. Zelena had meant no harm by the comment, she was just needling Regina much in the same way she was apt to since they had finally put their differences aside. Though they had become quite close and had forged a real familial bond, sometimes Zelena liked to live dangerously and gleefully poke at the hibernating bear that was Regina’s temper. Regina often had to metaphorically snap at her sister’s prodding fingers as a reminder she was not one to be trifled with. That bite was conspicuously absent today, though, and as her anger ebbed as quickly as it came on, she was left feeling drained.

“If you’re so intent on putting your two cents in where they’re not invited,” she said around a tired sigh, “why don’t you leave me be and go do so with someone else who might actually tolerate it.”

Pretending to consider the dismissal, Zelena cocked her head to the side then tapped her index finger against her lips. Eventually after exaggerated contemplation, she said, “While that is an option, I think I’ll stick around a bit longer. Although for your sake, I suppose I can tone down the ribbing, if only to spare myself from the wrath of Queen Regina.” Regina rolled her eyes at that use of her old title, which elicited an airy laugh from Zelena. But then her sister’s humor transitioned into genuine concern that would have surprised anyone else but Regina. Although Zelena didn’t show it openly or often, Regina knew she cared. “Might I make a more tactful insight without fear of reprisal?” she then inquired.

Regina gave a longsuffering huff. “I suppose. It’s not like I could stop you anyway. You always do whatever the hell you want, no matter what I say. And we both know you can take me in a fair fight.”

“You’re right on both counts, Sis.” There was no small measure of satisfaction in that declaration. But while Zelena reveled in Regina’s grudging concession to being a slightly inferior sorceress, to
her credit she did not gloat longer than necessary. Time, Regina thought, had lent her sister some wisdom after all. “All the same, you know I’m only having you on.” Regina nodded. She did know that, which was why Zelena was still in the office with her instead of having been magicked to a remote corner of the forests surrounding Storybrooke. “And now that you’ve shown your hand,” Zelena went on, “I don’t want to speak out of turn.”

Regina peered accusingly at the ambiguous yet somehow accusatory statement. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Shrugging, Zelena primly crossed her legs beneath the sleek fabric of her sharp gray skirt then smoothed a hand over the white, lacy blouse that hugged her generous curves. “No need to get riled up,” she said. “I simply meant that I could tell something was wrong from the moment I stepped in to your office. You’ve been distant and cranky – I mean, more so than usual. The look on your face whilst you were lost in fancy not a minute ago told me why. You’re worried about your little wolf, aren’t you? Really worried.”

Regina briefly pinched the bridge of her nose between her fingers as she heaved out a terse breath. She hated being called out on her weakness. But if anyone in Storybrooke at present was allowed to do so, it was her sister.

“Was it really that obvious?”

Zelena nodded. “As I said before...open book.” Leaning forward again, she caught Regina’s brown eyes and held them. “Regina, I am your sister. It’s become my job – my privilege – to watch over you, even when you don’t really need it or particularly want it. I know you think you have to be strong for everyone, for the town and your family and even for yourself, but I can’t help but feel like now is one of those times that I, as your elder sibling, should speak up.”

Regina said nothing, now listening intently to the affectionate yet stern nature of Zelena’s speech. Seeing that her words had their intended effect, Zelena continued on.

“As I said, I know you, Regina, and I know you’re already working out ways to get to Ruby at whatever cost. I merely would like to caution you against acting drastically. You’re concerned about her, I get that, and I’m not going to lie to you and tell you that you shouldn’t be. She’s is in a dangerous place and been gone far too long for either of our liking. But she is also a big girl who is perfectly capable of handling herself. And besides that she has the ever-esteemed Savior with her. Whatever reason for the delay in their return, I don’t believe it to be life-threatening.”

“How can you possibly know that?” Regina asked harshly, her eyes narrowing to slits. “Do you
know something I don't? Because last I checked, none of us have even been to the Enchanted Forest in the last decade. There's no telling what they might have encountered there. Anything could have happened! She could be injured or trapped or lost or…”

Zelena shook her head sadly as she interrupted. “You always jump to the worst conclusions. Family curse I suppose.”

“Can you blame me?” was Regina's clipped response, giving her sister a pointed look.

“No, I can’t,” Zelena said. “Both of us have endured much pain and loss. But from what I've seen in the time I've been in your life, all of it had a purpose. We didn’t suffer needlessly, Regina. Somehow, from the ashes of our pain and darkness, something wonderful grew and blossomed: our family, our children, our happiness. Sure, we’ve both made tragic mistakes, but I think we’ve learned from them. Haven't we?”

Regina couldn’t reply. Too many hyper-intense feelings were swirling about, suffocating her, drowning her within the turbulent oceans of her own mind. So she sat there and stared into her sister’s impossibly blue eyes and allowed all of her fears to play across her features without making any attempt to conceal them.

Seeing Regina's turmoil filled Zelena with anguish, and she became so choked with emotion that she stood from her chair to cross over to the window behind the mayoral desk so her sister could not see the tears pricking at her eyelids. Like her, Regina was intolerant of even the most microscopic impression of pity. To be sure, they had come a long way as siblings, but Zelena knew that they would never be the lovey-dovey affectionate sort who spilled their guts over tea or gossiped about anything and everything on shopping trips to the mall. They had grown up too hard and too differently to bridge that expansive divide. That didn't mean that she didn't love Regina, though, nor did it mean she wasn’t affected by Regina’s pain.

Leaning against the frame of the window, Zelena picked at the curtain as she gazed out over the town she had come to call her home, which was amazing considering it wouldn’t even exist if she’d had her way all those years ago. Fate sometimes could be as strange as it was cruel and wonderful.

“I am cynical woman, Regina,” Zelena said once she was more composed. “That’s no secret. Nor has it changed for the most part. I swore you to once that I would always tell you the truth, and I mean to do that now.”

Regina tried to hide little sniffles and swipes at her nose that while admittedly cute made Zelena incredibly sad. She wanted to cheer her sister up in the worst way, which wasn’t all that foreign of a
feeling anymore. A good cheering up was not what Regina wanted or needed, though, and she knew that because they were very much alike in that way. A bitter truth was, in Zelena’s opinion, far more preferable than a honeyed lie, for one brought an immediate yet brief discomfort while the other delayed the pain for another day. Pain deferred was, she had learned, pain compounded.

As she considered how best to rip the band-aid off without triggering Regina’s prolific coping mechanisms, Zelena peered down below into the town square. Her eyes locked on to the little bench Ruby liked to camp on back when she was still on maternity leave, and she couldn’t help but smile at the memories it evoked. Whereas Regina’s responsibilities as mayor required her back on the job within a month, Ruby took her full three, but ever the thoughtful wife, Ruby was determined to keep Regina as involved as humanly possible in that critical early stage of their daughters’ lives. To that end she would visit Town Hall every day, baby carrier on each arm, and perch upon that bench until exactly one pm when Regina would approach the window and wave her up so they could spend the lunch hour together as a family. Theirs was a bond so essential that thinking about it would have turned Zelena green not too long ago.

But now Zelena loved Regina too much to let petty jealousy ruin their relationship. And in her opinion far too much had already been sacrificed to secure her sister’s happiness to consider any alternative other than Ruby coming home safe and sound. The couple were owed that much after all they went through to keep each other alive and then bring their beautiful girls into the world.

“The truth is that after all that you and Ruby have been through together, I simply can’t believe this is how it ends,” Zelena said, giving voice to her thoughts and sounding almost absent as her mind conjured images of Ruby sitting on that bench bouncing one baby in her lap for a minute while allowing the other child still in her carrier to play with her mother’s long fingers. “I refuse to accept that and so should you. Life is a cruel little bitch and the universe a callous bastard, but recompense is due to the both of you for all that you’ve endured at their hands. Soon enough you will be reunited with your wife and as sickeningly happy as ever. You’ll see. So don’t go giving up on that too-pretty pup of yours just yet, Sis. Give her a little more time. I believe in my heart that she’ll return within the next week. But if not, then we’ll discuss the next step.”

Turning her head, Zelena gave Regina, who had swiveled her chair in Zelena’s direction, a tremulous smile with unshed tears blurring her vision. The background of desperation she had seen in Regina’s eyes since arriving for their lunch date was finally beginning to ebb, giving way to a welcome tide of hope. Good, hang on to that, she thought while wondering just when she had started to sound as sentimental as the people she had once hated.

“We?” Regina asked, sounding very much like the insecure little girl Zelena sometimes wistfully imagined herself growing up with.

While Zelena had long since lost her bitterness toward Cora for abandoning her, she would hate the woman until her dying day for keeping her apart from Regina. Zelena did not believe for a second
that their mother’s choice to commit such an unforgivable sin stemmed from anything other than self-serving malice. Having been the sibling who was raised by Cora, Regina often made excuses for their mother keeping Zelena’s existence a secret, such as she had felt guilty for abandoning her firstborn or that it was her lack of a heart that was to blame. Zelena knew better. Cora had kept Regina ignorant of her older sister because she knew that Zelena would inevitably drive a wedge between Cora and the child she had so unfairly pinned all of her dreams and aspirations onto. The real kicker was that their mother’s assumption was correct.

As a woman who had ruthlessly eliminated any and all who opposed her, Zelena understood the lengths that one would go to in order to secure power, which was the drug of choice for all Mills women. Just as Cora had sought it, so had her daughters. But unlike their mother, both Regina and Zelena wanted more out of life than power. Regina wanted love and Zelena wanted acceptance, and in each other, both would have found what they were looking for. If they had been allowed to find each other and then to forge a true familiar bond, all of Cora’s grand plans and dark dealings would have been for naught. And although she is certain her sister would have remained firmly in their mother’s cross-hairs even with her present, she equally sure that there is nothing she wouldn’t have done to protect Regina from their mother’s machinations. Nothing. They had begun this journey of becoming sisters in the worst way possible, as mortal enemies, but even so Zelena’s love for Regina is strong enough to kill for her… and to die for her. How much greater would that feeling have been, then, had they been allowed to have each other when they were young? There is no doubt in Zelena’s mind that in that case she would have murdered their mother in cold blood before allowing her to harm one hair on Regina’s sable head.

So while Zelena hated her mother, it not because of being tossed away like a useless piece of garbage. No, Zelena hated Cora because she'd been denied the opportunity to grow up alongside her sister, to really love Regina like she knew she could deep down in her bones. But no matter how hard they tried to make up for the loss in the present, she would never know what Regina had looked like as child, would never know what her little baby sister's laugh would sound like as they played together, and she would never know what it was like to live through childhood having one person in her life with whom she could share anything and everything and on whom she could always depend. All of that was lost to her now, as the past was something could never be regained and the missteps that characterized their early interactions would forever color their relationship. And while the profoundly meaningful relationship she was currently building with Regina was slowly filling that void in her heart their mother created, it would never be whole. Such was the awful price of being born to a woman as monstrous as Cora Mills.

“‘Yes, ‘we’,” Zelena finally replied, a strange gentleness in her eyes. “Whatever you need me to do, I'll do it without question. I'll traipse about that accursed land right along side you if you wish.” Reaching out her hand, Zelena smiled when Regina grasped it tightly. “I know it took us a long time to get to this place with each other, and I'm sorry for that. But we're sisters, Regina. That means I will support your decision, whatever it may be.”

“Thank you, Zelena. That means a great deal to me,” Regina replied with a watery smile, giving her sister's hand a grateful squeeze. Zelena, she knew, was not the kind of person to show emotion openly or to speak from the heart freely, so whenever she did, Regina knew it was a sincere offering.
Even when an out-and-proud villain, Zelena had never hidden her feelings or intentions from Regina. She'd been blatant about her hatred and jealousy instead of skulking about in the shadows or concealing it beneath a veneer of amiability, and now that they were reconciled she was just as honest with her affection. That emotional accountability was one of Zelena’s great strengths, and was a big reason why Regina was able to forgive her after learning that she'd murdered Marian while in the Enchanted Forest circa forty years ago, thus successfully sabotaging Regina’s relationship with Robin.

People had openly criticized Regina for eventually including Zelena in her life, which was understandable considering all Zelena did to earn their ire. But Regina hadn't cared to weigh their opinions upon the scales of her decision when she had Ruby's unconditional support. It was Ruby who had encouraged Regina to try and mend fences with her sister, who pushed Regina with delicate tenacity to look past the crimes to the hurting woman crying out for someone, anyone to love her. And even if she couldn’t do that yet, Ruby rather shrewdly pointed out that Storybrooke was built on the premise of second chances and that Regina’s stubborn refusal to give Zelena the same plethora of opportunities to repent as she'd been extended would only serve to make her something truly loathsome: a hypocrite.

Keeping all of those things in mind made it much more tolerable to exercise patience with an angry, bitter, and envious sister who by rights had at least some reasonable justification for those feelings. Regina is glad for her wife’s persistence, if only because she gained in Zelena not only a steadfast ally but a friend and confidante who understood her as few others could. She is glad as well that Zelena has finally found someone to love, and a surprising someone at that, who holds her sister as accountable as Ruby does her, which came in handy whenever the two strong-willed and opinionated siblings invariably butted heads. It didn’t hurt that their respective paramours got along so famously, either, though it was incredibly unfortunate that both were currently on other worlds than Earth.

“Of course,” said Zelena, brushing off the tender moment when it had become unbearable for her. However reformed, Zelena was still Zelena. They lingered in a brief bubble of quiet contentment until Zelena glanced up at the clock and gasped. “Oh, bloody hell! I hate to run, but I need hurry if I’m to be on time picking Francesca up from school.”

Francesca was Zelena's daughter by Walsh, the man who had once been the Wizard of Oz. The relationship initially creeped the hell out of Emma Swan, as she still looked back with some amount of disgust on her near-engagement to the man during her year in New York after Pan’s curse. Regina, of course, enjoyed Emma’s discomfort to no end, thus her wholehearted approval of the fledgling romance. While the relationship didn't last for more than a year, Zelena wound up pregnant during that time, and though Regina was not all sure it was as accidental as her sister insisted, she was nonetheless happy for the stabilizing influence Francesca provided. Becoming a mother rooted Zelena to life in Storybrooke, whereas before she’d merely been fluttering aimlessly through it, a ship without an anchor in oft stormy seas.
With an understanding nod, Regina stood, and after watching Zelena toss what was left of her salad in the trash and collect her things, walked with her sister to the door.

“Remember what I said,” Zelena said as she hovered in the doorway of Regina's office. “Don't do anything rash just yet.”

Regina gave her sister a placating smile. “I won’t. Witch’s honor. Give Frankie a kiss from her Aunty Gina, though, won’t you?”

Zelena returned the smile with a sparkle in those amazing azure eyes. “Will do, Sis. Listen, I'll call you tonight after I tuck the munchkin in if that’s alright.”

“If you must,” Regina teased, a bit more chipper now.

“Oh, I must,” Zelena grinned, and then exited the office with a theatrical wave. Regina stepped into the hallway to watch Zelena saunter her way down the long hallway, laughing as the less valiant employees milling about parted to the sides as though the Red Sea to allow the red-headed deliverer free passage from Egypt. When Zelena was almost out of eyesight, she called back over her shoulder, “Later, Sis!”

Regina rolled her eyes affectionately. Zelena was just too much sometimes, but she had to admit, the woman formerly known as the Wicked Witch kept her life interesting.

After making her way back into her office, Regina returned to her desk and attempted to get some of her paperwork done. The monotonous task of reading official documents and signing them when necessary helped, along with her sister's unique form of encouragement, to distract her from her worries. Soon enough, six o'clock was rolling around and it was time to head home. After finishing up reading the document she was currently perusing, she signed it and slipped it into a file folder on her desk for distribution the next morning, and then set about the routine of winding up her day with practiced efficiency. First, she replaced her pens in the upper right hand drawer of her desk and then moved her stapler back into its place beside her collator. Next, she deposited the assortment of files she had worked on into their respective cabinets. And then she called in her secretary to set the agenda for the next day. Once all of that was done, she collected her phone and purse, dug out her keys, and headed for the door.

She was just about to reach for the knob when her cellphone rang, startling her out of her groove. Glancing at the screen, she saw that it was a number she didn't recognize and thought to ignore the call. But then something in her gut tightened as if urging her to answer. Reluctantly, she accepted the call and held the phone up to her ear.
“This is Regina Mills. May I ask who is calling?”

“Mayor Mills,” the voice of an unfamiliar woman answered. “My name is Reila and if it is possible, I would like to meet with you tonight. There is something you must know.”

Regina’s brow arched at the strange request. She didn’t know any person who went by such a name and that instantly had her hackles raised. Considering how tired she was and the high levels of stress she had been under the past several weeks, her response was unsurprisingly harsh.

“Pardon me for my bluntness, but I don’t know you and I’m very tired. I’m sure whatever business you have can wait until the morning. Call my office then and schedule an appointment.”

Taking the phone away from her ear, Regina was on the way to hanging up when the woman’s voice echoed a desperate plea. “Please, your Majesty! This cannot wait!”

The woman’s invocation of her title halted Regina’s movements. Annoyance rattled through her bones. Of course someone would call at the end of an already stressful day to complain about something related to the Old World. Eyes narrowed suspiciously, she held the phone back up to her ear and unleashed her irritation.

“Let me spare you any additional waste of oxygen. I’m sure you’re unhappy about something that I’ve done recently or in the past, but let me tell you, dear, that’s nothing new. The line of grievances against me is unbearably long and if you simply must air them much to my infinite frustration you are most welcome to place yourself at the back of it and wait your goddamn turn! And I don’t know if it’s escaped your attention or not, but I am no longer Queen, though I’ll be happy to leverage that title right now if need be to get home to my children at a decent hour. As such, whatever it is you have to say can wait until the morning and it will. For your own sake, I suggest you take the hint. I won’t give another.”

“But your Majesty, the information I have is not about you,” the woman replied, her voice audibly trembling at Regina’s imperious tone.

That popped the balloon of Regina’s indignation right quick. Her interest was immediately piqued.

“Go on.”
“It's about a young woman named Ruby Lucas. I believe you know her.”

“I damn well ought to! She's my wife,” Regina said, her heart speeding up at the unexpected turn this phone call was taking. When the caller didn’t immediately respond, Regina barked, “Well? What about her? Speak up, woman!”

The caller's voice sounded even more strained as she said, “I can't tell you over the phone, your Majesty. It's of a sensitive and extremely urgent nature best relayed in person.”

Throwing her head back, Regina groaned. Before the call she had so been looking forward to the comfort of home and the joy of some well-deserved quality time with the girls before indulging in a long, relaxing bath and finally crawling into bed. But as much as she needed the rest and as much as she longed for her children, the potential information this woman had about Ruby overruled all other concerns. She was naturally wary to be sure, since she neither knew this Reila woman from Eve nor had heard Ruby mention her, but whatever it was Reila had to say was obviously important enough for her to risk Regina's wrath. In the current predicament, Regina couldn't afford to be dismissive of something that pertained to Ruby, not when she was hamstrung for now to bring her wife home.

“Very well,” she sighed. “I'll meet with you. Do you know where my office is?”

“Yes, your Majesty.”

Looking at her watch, Regina thought through her course of action, then relayed her instructions once she had decided. “Meet me there in half an hour. Be prompt because I'll have my secretary waiting for you. And for God's sake, drop the regal honorifics. Madam Mayor or Mayor Mills will suffice if you insist on formality. If not, Mrs. Mills is just fine.”

“As you wish, Madam Mayor. I will be at your office as directed,” the woman said, her choice of address causing Regina's chest to tighten. She had lost count of often Ruby playfully uttered them during the ten years they had been together but had yet to grow tired of hearing them. From the mouth of a stranger, however, they were fretfully disconcerting.

“I'll be waiting,” she said, and with that abruptly disconnected the call. On edge yet again, she walked over to the small couch in the corner of her office and plopped down heavily onto the plush cushions that now offered her no comfort. It was hard to explain, but she got the feeling that she was about to receive some very troubling news, which almost made her want to avoid meeting with this Reila woman in spite of her agreement. But her sense of duty to her wife usurped the opposing sense of self-preservation, so she settled in to wait.
Opening up her phone, Regina scrolled through her contacts until she found the name she was looking for and then opened up a call. When the person's voice sounded over the phone, Regina ran an anxious hand through her hair.

“Hello, Snow. I hate to inconvenience you any further than I already am, but I need you to watch the girls a while longer. Something urgent has come up...”

Chapter End Notes

Well, just heard the show got picked up sans half the main cast. RIP. Pretty sure it'll be trash next season, especially without Emma. But we'll see I guess.

In the spirit of that news and the content of this chapter, this one goes out to Bex Mader. Gonna miss seeing that sassy redhead on my screen. May you land in green pastures, Bex!

Anyway, I hope some of the threads of the story are starting to come together now...loose as they may be. Also that phone call at the end hearkens back to the end of The Price of Destiny, in case anyone wonders what the hell is going on and feels it came out of left field.

As always, thanks for those who are reading, leaving kudos, etc. It means a lot! See y'all next week for more.
Regina finds out who Ruby's father is.

Half an hour later, Regina was sitting at her desk impatiently waiting. The surprising phone call from Reila as well as the ambiguous urgency concerning Ruby had her skin crawling with dreadful anticipation. She'd been wracking her brain the past few minutes as to what the woman’s information could be, but was drawing blanks; by choice, Ruby kept no secrets from her.

From the outset, Ruby was very forthcoming about her past, sparing no details in recounting the notable events in her life. Regina was made painfully aware of the gory details, ranging from Peter's tragic death, to the grand adventures she'd gone on with Snow, and on to the precise number of the Black Guard she had killed back in the Old World. Even the names of every lover Ruby had taken during the Curse was disclosed over the course of time (and thereafter kept meticulously recorded by Regina, along with addresses and potential blackmail material she collected on each without Ruby’s knowledge, in a ledger locked away in her office safe). No matter how sensitive the topic, if she had the courage to ask, Ruby was always willing to answer. And as should be expected, the reasoning behind this brutal honesty was as sweet as the woman herself.

"You've had too many people lie to you, Regina," Ruby had told her. "I won't be one of them. Ask me and I'll answer, even if it's painful or embarrassing."

In the nearly twelve years they had been a couple, Regina only ever had cause to doubt Ruby's candor once. And on that occasion, her doubts ultimately proved to be unfounded because there was a very good reason for the deception – incidentally, she was currently wearing that reason on her left ring finger. Twisting her gorgeous engagement ring, she chewed anxiously her lip.

Thinking about that trying time never failed to fill her with equal measures of anguish and awe. The memory of being so viciously stabbed in her own home and of discovering Ruby in that godforsaken basement was always precarious balanced with those of receiving the news she was going to be a mother again – twice over – and learning that her True Love with Ruby was strong enough for them to share a heart; and not just any heart, but her heart, a once blackened mass of vile hatred that was miraculously purified by the love of a son and a woman so brave and wonderful that she could know Regina down to the most ugly parts of her soul and still love her. Generally it depended on Regina’s mood as to whether the good memories or the bad ones won out.

Today, the stressful anticipation waiting for Reila had her stewing on the negative, and she became
so engrossed in her recollection of those events that she didn't notice anyone had approached her office until a sharp rap upon the door pierced the heavy silence. Startled out of her troublesome reverie, Regina stood and ran a shaky hand over her clothes to straighten them out where she'd been slouching in her chair. Once satisfied she was presentable, she made her way over to the door and flung it open.

On the other side stood a very sick looking woman with bedraggled salt-and-pepper hair and gaunt features whose dull amber eyes were even more muddied by the dark bags surrounding them. Yet despite her obvious illness, the woman was dressed primly and held herself proudly erect, a sign of either noble upbringing or immense pride. Without having to be told, Regina recognized the underlying motivation for this woman suddenly coming forward with such 'urgent' information.

Inclining her head, Regina leaned lightly against the inside frame of the opened door. “You must be Reila.” She gestured with her hand toward the inside of her office. “Please, come in and have a seat.”

Dipping her head in deference, the woman nodded. “Thank you, Madam Mayor.”

Regina scoffed under her breath at such timid deference, but declined to comment on it as she watched the woman brush past her and then struggle the few paces toward the couch in the corner of her office. Feeling her sympathy rise, she sighed and stepped beside the obviously ailing woman to guide her onto the couch.

Once the visitor was uncomfortably seated, she gave Regina a grateful, albeit pained, smile. “Again, thank you for your indulgence, Madam Mayor.”

“Think nothing of it,” Regina said, managing a smile of her own that was more robotic than heartfelt. She turned to retrieve a chair from in front of her desk and positioned it near the couch facing Reila. Sitting down with her elbows on her knees, Regina leaned forward to make deliberate eye contact with the sickly woman who was now wringing her hands nervously in her lap. “You've no need to fear. I'm not a threat to you.”

Nodding, Reila looked up at Regina through wary, apologetic eyes. “Forgive me if I’ve caused you offense. Your reputation precedes you.”

Sighing, Regina shook her head. Again, her past was coloring important interactions. Would she never escape it?
“That’s quite alright, dear,” she said, a lie for the sake of propriety and aimed at disarming Reila’s understandable apprehension. “You’re not the first to enter my office under a cloud of distrust. Just remember that I am no longer...that woman. I am a mayor, a mother, and a wife now. Nothing more.” Reila visibly relaxed at the assurance, not much but enough to satisfy Regina that the woman would not clam up out of a misplaced sense of fear. She leaned back and crossed her legs. “Now, you said on the phone that you had information about my wife that was of an urgent nature. If that’s true, please speak your mind freely.”

“Very well,” said Reila, her posture still somewhat cautious. “I must begin by confessing that you are not the first to hear it.”

At that, Regina’s spine stiffened and her eyes narrowed. “Who else have you spoken to?”

“To King George, Madam,” was the hesitant answer.

In a completely instinctual reaction, Regina's eyes widened and she felt her face grow warm with displeasure. She could tell the vein in her forehead was now prominently throbbing as she tried unsuccessfully to mask her indignation. “Why on earth would you do such a thing! That man is a vicious criminal and furthermore, he hates Ruby!”

To her credit, Reila did not flinch at the outburst, though she did avert her eyes for a moment before slowly bringing them back to Regina's with a great deal of trepidation in them. “I had to,” she explained rather lamely. “It pertained to him foremost.”

“How is that possible?” Regina asked, leaning forward once more in an intimidating manner, which very much to her satisfaction produced a noticeable reaction. “Ruby is my wife, my family. Were you not aware of that beforehand?”

Reila nodded, shifting slightly away from Regina's obvious anger. “I was. But as I said, the information was more pertinent to the King than to you.”

Breathing heavily through her nose, Regina struggled to reign in her rapidly escalating temper. If the woman was going to talk circles, they were going to be here all night and she did not want to spend that kind of time in conflict with her baser instincts. The longer this track of conversation went on, the more likely she would do or say something regrettable. She needed to steer the conversation back on topic before that happened.
Drawing a deep breath, she let it out slowly before choosing her next words. “In the interest of progress, let's set aside who should have been told first. Quite frankly, I'm unconcerned about Albert Spencer, and what’s more, I'm very tired, very worried about my wife, and my patience is wearing perilously thin. So just tell me what you came to and let us be done with it.”

Reila audibly swallowed. “Y-yes, of course. By all means, Madam Mayor!” Drawing herself up straighter, she brushed an unsteady hand over her blouse to smooth it down. Regina was unsure of whether the trembling was due to the woman’s illness or her fear. Whatever the cause, she was glad to be getting to the point of this strange visit. “How much do you know of the circumstances of Red’s – Ruby's birth? Or of her mother, Anita?”

That certainly got Regina's attention. So this was about Ruby's mother. *Interesting.*

“Not much more than Ruby herself, I'm afraid,” she said plainly, feeling no reason to be obtuse. “I know that she was young and unwed when she fell pregnant, and that she abandoned her newborn daughter so she could be free from responsibility. I know that she embraced the monstrous side of her gift and ultimately forced Ruby to kill her. She was a despicable woman who was utterly unworthy of the angel she delivered into the world.”

Gazing back at Regina, Reila wiped her damp brow with the back of her hand. “That is all true,” the frail woman confirmed. “And of her father?”

Regina's already piqued interest suddenly intensified. The subject of her wife’s unknown father was a very sore one. Despite every insistence from Ruby that she was happy with her life as it had turned out and that she had everything she could ever need or want in Regina, the kids, Granny, and her friends, Regina could tell she was lying. The deception wasn't malicious, but it was deception all the same, which as a well-practiced liar Regina could easily perceive.

There were many reasons she didn’t confront Ruby about it, such as that Ruby was not so much lying to her as to herself. Regina had long ago deduced via careful observation that the idea of never knowing who her father was bothered Ruby so much that she had willfully persuaded herself that it didn’t. Ruby was a kind, gentle soul who took criticism seriously on subjects in which she was pliable, but when she believed in something with all of her heart, or worse was in denial, the woman dug her heels into the ground with a spectacular conviction that no force in all of the universe could abolish. And when Regina knew herself to be just as mulish, how could she broach the subject without any discussion devolving into one of their incredibly rare knock-down-drag-out arguments that invariably left both of them metaphorically limping away to lick their seething wounds? Thus, seeing no good way of removing an old thorn that didn’t seem to be irreparably harming Ruby either psychologically or emotionally, Regina decided to merely monitor the situation until it started to seem untenable, at which point she would intervene. Thankfully that hadn’t happened as of yet, because she still didn’t know what to say or do to help Ruby deal with her abandonment issues. Come to think of it, perhaps that said a lot about how in need they both were of more therapy.
That said, Regina never missed the subconscious disillusionment whenever the subject of parents came up – especially in regards to Anita’s tragic if not well-deserved fate. Ruby often lamented that she didn’t get to ask her mother everything she had wanted to during their short-lived reunion, and though she never said it outright, Regina could read between the lines. Whenever Ruby wished she could speak to her mother again, it wasn’t just due to wanting one final chance at reconciliation, but because she yearned to know who her father was. There was a hole in Ruby’s life that her father should have occupied, and it was one that could only ever be filled by him. No amount of love from Regina or their kids or Granny or their friends could ever adequately serve as a substitute.

Every little girl needed her father and craved the kind of doting affection only he could give. It was a fundamental truth that Regina learned firsthand. There were days that she still missed her own father so much that she shed tears over him, and the role she played in his demise only made the longing all the more bitter. But at least she’d had her father in her life. Daddy was far from perfect, but he was there to pamper her where her austere mother wouldn’t, to give her gifts and encourage her to pursue passions that her mother openly disapproved of, and always had open arms to run into whenever her mother was in a particularly foul mood and took it out on her. His gentle wisdom and unwavering love never departed from her corner, even when her whole world unraveled after Daniel’s murder until all that remained was a swirling vortex of darkness that greedily devoured what little light remained in her soul. Flaws and all, Regina had loved her father more than anyone else in the world – the proof of which lie within the infinitely regrettable circumstances surrounding his death – and save for Ruby and her children, she still did.

Ruby, on the other hand, didn’t have that. Any of it. She’d been abandoned by her coward of a mother the second she was born and was to this day totally ignorant of her father’s identity. Hell, Ruby didn’t even have the hint of a name to go by with which to investigate that haunting mystery, and it made Regina inexplicably sad to think that Ruby had forever lost the opportunity to find him when Anita died.

But if she was correct in assuming what Reila was implying, that might not be true at all. To know that there was someone alive who could shed light on that subject would undoubtedly thrill Ruby beyond measure. It was almost tragic then that said person was here right now in front of Regina while Ruby was another world away, unable to receive critical information she had been waiting for her whole life.

“She knows nothing of her father,” Regina informed Reila, deciding that since her wife was not here, it was incumbent upon her to act on her behalf. This was something Ruby would want to know and Regina was obligated by the sacred vows she had made on their wedding day to find out everything she could. “However, I’m assuming by your question that you do. Am I correct?”

“Yes, your Majesty,” Reila replied, falling back on the honorific in her clearly stressed state.
When the woman appeared reluctant to continue, Regina prodded her with a sharp look. “Well? You came all this way to tell me, so stop procrastinating and get on with it.”

Another spell of silence reigned until Reila eventually said, “I knew Anita well,” she began, and her eyes glazed over as she delved into the vault of her memories. “From the time she arrived at the castle with the King's retinue, we became fast friends. I was the personal attendant to the King's wife, you see, and Anita for a time occupied a place within the court. We spent much time together. She was so full of life, so strong and opinionated, and completely without fear. In her boldness, she took me under her wing, and in turn I trusted her with my every hope and dream. We were like sisters. I loved her.”

Regina was not quite certain how this related to Ruby's father but was willing to give the woman a degree of latitude to get to the truth, so she did not interrupt.

“Imagine my surprise then when Anita told me that she was having an affair with a married man,” Reila then said, her distant tone indicating she was now firmly in the throes of the past. “I disapproved of course, but Anita was as stubborn as she was passionate.” Much like her daughter, Regina thought. “She took what she wanted, regardless of the consequences.” The same and yet very different then, as with my mother and I. Yet another commonality between Ruby and I. “That was what I appreciated most about her, and what I think he appreciated as well...her lover, that is...the King.”

As the last words left her mouth, Reila leveled Regina with a deliberate gaze whose gravity made the world seem to shift. It was if in that moment, Regina could see all the threads coming together, the tapestry of Ruby's past being woven into a coherent picture right before her eyes. As it became more and more unveiled, the knowledge of the truth slammed into her like an iron first and she was rendered temporarily speechless.

King George was Ruby's father? Impossible, was her first thought, but the more she considered what Reila said and the underlying motivation behind the confession, the more she realized the revelation was more than likely to be accurate. After all, what reason did the woman have to lie? She was clearly sick – deathly so even – and had been burdened by this secret for far too long to carry it any longer. And she also seemed so profoundly relieved to have divested herself of it that Regina couldn't imagine her having fabricated the tale.

If this information was – as Regina suspected it to be – true, it was going to change everything. Everything. Hell, it was changing Regina's own perception of the world, tilting her own life a little off axis because King George was her Father-in-Law, and if the news was having that kind of effect on her, she could only imagine what it was going to do to Ruby. One thing was for certain, she would be absolutely devastated.
Though Ruby purposefully refrained to speak about her as-of-yet anonymous father, Regina could recognize the wistful expression that overtook her face whenever they talked about her own. It was the look of a woman who had spent many long hours fantasizing about what her daddy might be like. Did she look like him? Act like him? Was he a good person? Had he been a hero who had dashingly come to her mother's rescue only to be cruelly ripped away from their family before she was born? If he'd been around, would he have told her bedtime stories and held her hand while walking her to school or while he taught her how to dance? Would he have looked at her like she was the apple of his eye? Would he have cried tears of radiant joy as he walked her down the aisle? And while those hopeful thoughts were always evident in Ruby's eyes, they were never expressed, which is why Regina often neglected mentioning her own father even when her experience growing up in the sunlight of his warm adoration seemed relevant to the conversation.

But now all of Ruby's dreams and fantasies would be dashed to pieces on the unforgiving rocks of reality. George was none of the things Ruby had imagined her father to be. He was selfish, hateful, prideful, condescending, and in his own unrepentant way, evil. She knew that it was hypocritical of her to ascribe such aspersions to anyone else's character considering how she used to be, but she couldn't help herself. Even when she was Queen, she had hated the man on principle, and her hatred only intensified when she started dating Ruby and remembered what he had done to her. Now, come to find out, Ruby was his daughter all along? It seemed like vindication on the surface that he would treat his own child in such a deplorable manner, but reason resided only a layer beneath her acrimony for the man, and it chose that moment to rear its ugly head.

With a hardened expression, Regina commanded Reila's attention. “He didn't know, did he? That's why you went to see him first, to tell him that Ruby was his daughter.”

Though the question was not overtly blunt, it didn't have to be. Reila understood what Regina was asking. “Yes,” she said. “You are correct. He was unaware that Anita was pregnant when she fled the castle.”

That meant when he had tried to pin Billy's murder on Ruby, he'd been framing his own daughter in ignorance of who she really was. The thought was so absurdly ironic and so detestably tragic that it made Regina want to scream. How, she thought bitterly, could the universe visit so much suffering on someone so undeserving as Ruby?

“Is there a particular reason you're telling this to me instead of Ruby?” Regina next asked. “I know she is unavailable at the moment, but perhaps it would have been more appropriate to inform her first upon her imminent return.”

“No!” Reila suddenly injected, almost shouting. Regina flinched back. “You had to know right away.”
Confused, Regina's brows furrowed. “And why is that?”

“Because the King insisted upon it,” was her simple answer, as if that should satisfy her inquiry.

Scoffing loudly, Regina shook her head. “I'm sorry, but that's not good enough. That man’s word won’t cash a two penny check around here. Try again.”

Looking anxious again, Reila took a steadying breath. “It's all I have to give, your Majesty. The King insisted I tell you this information and then relay to you the urgency for you to visit him.”

Barking out a laugh, Regina stood from the chair and crossed over to her desk. There, she leaned lightly against its corner and crossed her arms, “And he expects me to what? Forsake my duties to my children and my town to pay him a visit in prison? Is he delusional? Are you aware what he did to land himself there in the first place?”

“Yes, your Majesty,” said Reila. “The King informed me of his shameful conduct toward his daughter.” Regina flinched at the open mention of Ruby as George's daughter. If this bombshell panned out and Ruby were to accept it (and that was a big if), referring to her as such was going to take more than a little getting used to. “He also told me that you would be resistant to grant his request out of a desire to protect her. But he insisted that I be clear your visit would be for her sake and not for his.”

Seeing the fury in Regina's eyes at implied threat, Reila stuttered to defend herself before the Queen could attack. She blurted out, “He told me it was a matter of life and death! T-that's all I know, your Majesty, I swear!”

Aware that the mousy woman was far too petrified of her to be lying, Regina clenched her eyes shut against a growing migraine. “Very well, I'll consider it,” she said, and then heaved a weary sigh. After opening her eyes again, she gestured toward her office door with her hand. “You have dispensed your obligations, Reila. Now leave me.”

Nodding weakly, Reila very slowly stood, her legs quaking with the stress of her illness and Regina's obvious anger. Again, Regina found herself softening toward the sick woman.

“You're dying, aren't you?” she blurted out, causing Reila's eyes to widen at her bluntness. “That's why you're telling this story now instead of years ago when you should have.”
Looking ashamed, Reila nibbled briefly at her thin lip. “Yes. Terminal cancer. I’m not much longer for this world.”

Taking a deep breath, Regina walked over to the frail woman and touched her shoulder gently. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry. Despite the fact that your negligence has hurt the person I love most, I wouldn’t wish such an illness on you. You have my sympathy – again, for what it’s worth.”

“It is worth a great deal, your Majesty,” the woman replied with some relief and much sadness. “And I am very sorry to have hurt your Ruby. I always enjoyed it when she was my waitress at the diner. She seems like such a lovely girl, and that pretty smile of hers never failed to make my day brighter.”

Regina's demeanor softened ever-so-slightly at the mention of her beloved wife. “She is. And believe me, you’re not the only victim of her smile. I have it on good authority that no one can resist it. And if I’m being perfectly honest, I have to admit it has the same effect on me as it does many others.” As they share an amiable moment, Regina imagines Ruby’s one-of-a-kind smile and feels warmth gather in her chest that will forever be associated with it. Biased she may be, but in her opinion Ruby has the prettiest smile she’s ever seen. And judging by Reila’s fond expression, she’s of the same mind. But all too soon the moment passes, and Regina clears her throat. “In any case, you didn’t have to tell the truth. Circumstances may have prompted you to, but all the same I know it had to be difficult.”

“It was,” Reila said, appearing grateful for Regina’s unexpected compassion. “But it needed to come out, and I’m glad it has. Now I can go to my grave in peace.” Looking almost serene, she then made to depart, and with Regina’s guidance slowly shuffled her way to the door. Once there, she halted and turned back one last time. “You’ve been kind to me, kinder than I deserve. Thank you. You aren’t the monster some folk make you out to be.”

Regina hummed her partial consent. “No, I’m not. But I’m by no means an angel, either. I am, however, married to one, and it is in large part due to her that I have become the better person you see before you today.”

Regina wasn’t quite certain why she felt comfortable admitting such a nauseatingly saccharine sentiment to a woman she’d just met. Maybe it was because Reila had the appearance of a kindly grandmother she could inherently trust? The idea was confirmed when the frail older woman took on an expression as if inclined to pat affectionately at Regina’s cheek in that way Granny often did just because the cantankerous old bat knew she hated it.

“In that case,” Reila said, and that she wisely kept her hands to herself relieved Regina immensely, “I sincerely pray that whatever the King has to say helps in some way. But before I leave, may I ask one last thing?”
Feeling indulgent, Regina waved in permission. It wouldn’t hurt to spare a dying woman a few more seconds. “You may.”

“Are you happy, your Majesty? Does she truly make you happy?”

A bit surprised, Regina's eyebrows raised, though she didn't have to think at all to formulate an answer. “That’s two questions, dear, but to answer the first: yes, I am. Very much so. As for the second, well...I consider myself to be the most blessed woman alive. So yes, she makes me very happy. Happier than I have any right to be.”

A withered hand rose to rest on Regina's where her arms were crossed, the skin colder to the touch than it should be. Sorrow for the older woman offset any annoyance at the physical contact. Reila had said she wasn’t long for the world but the pallor and temperature of her skin told Regina how imminent her death truly was. She schooled her features to hide her pity, though, as it was the last thing she would want in a similar position. Extending that courtesy seemed the least she could do for a woman who was too cowardly to tell the truth in life but had found the courage to do so when facing death. Not all could say the same.

“Then hang on to her, your Majesty,” Reila said, giving Regina's hand a gentle pat. “Hang on to her tight and don’t ever let go. Don’t make the same mistakes I did. Fight for her if need be, though all hell try to pull you apart. Though life will throw all sorts of distractions at you, try not to take her for granted. I don’t need to know her to understand that she’s special, and I can tell by the way you speak of her that you appreciate that. But does she? If not, tell her! And last but not least, I implore you with all of my heart to love her with all the strength you can muster...enough for two lifetimes at least. Life is so short, Your Majesty, and so very precious, and we never know how much of it we have left. I don’t want you to end up like me, staring into the darkness at the end of the tunnel with more regrets than I can bear to think about lest I drown in them. Breaking my oath to Anita to raise Red as my own is one of them. I failed that girl and myself in the process. So promise me you won’t waste another minute, that you’ll live the best you can with what time you have and that you’ll do right by her”

Feeling choked up at the impassioned speech, Regina gazed at the frail woman before her. Unbidden tears burned her eyes as Reila’s pleas resonated into her very essence. Words spoken by someone whose life could be summed up with innumerable regrets should never be casually dismissed. And though Regina had an impressive few of her own, she knew it only took one to haunt a person staring death in its cold, implacable face. How hard it must be, she thought, to have so many and no hope at all of rectifying them. In the face of that, the wisdom being imparted was undeniable. All the same, it lanced at her heart and soul because there was a part of her tucked deep down in the abyssal recesses of her being that feared she would end up like Reila no matter how hard she tried not to.
“I will,” she said, and with renewed determination to not allow old insecurities any sort of a renewed beachhead in her life. She had worked too hard to surrender even an inch to them now that she had everything she’d ever dreamed of. “I give you my word. I won’t fail her.”

Breathing a sigh, Reila stepped away and with a stilted courtesy said, “Then I will take my leave, your Majesty.”

After giving Reila a regal nod, Regina watched the dying yet dignified woman turn and walk away, her steps less labored than before. There was not much Regina could do for her, as there was a point of proliferation at which even magic could not cure disease without incurring so steep a price as to make it unfeasible. Nonetheless she made a silent vow to ease Reila's pain however she could. There were several potions she could think of off the top of her head that would likely work, but to be sure would require more thorough research. Perhaps a consult with her sister might even be in order.

For now, though, and as selfish as it was, she had other things to think about. Mainly, what she was going to do about George, Ruby's ostensible father. The mere implications if that the claim turned out to be true were enough to rattle her teeth and weaken her bones.

“Oh, Ruby,” she said to the nonexistent audience occupying her empty office. Her head sagged against the door jamb with sudden exhaustion. “You're a princess after all. I just wish it wasn't like this.”
Stepdaughters Give the Best Advice

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of Reila's revelations, Regina consults the Charmings.

After collecting her things for the second time, Regina hastened to exit the office. No time was spared for idle chit chat on the way out, though a few town officials bravely attempted to have a word with her only to be rebuffed by a curt dismissal or a warning glare. Once she was all strapped in her car, she drove straight to the Charming’s loft. With Reila’s bombshell still reverberating deafeningly through her brain, she navigated the journey on auto-pilot in what she considered impressive fashion. No accidents occurred, the speed limit was adhered to, and no other traffic ordinances were violated, and still she arrived ahead of schedule. Unfortunately, her ruminations while driving did little to help her reach a decision as to what to do with what she had just learned.

Rather than announce her presence immediately, she spent the next five minutes loitering in front of the door to Snow and David’s loft, agonizing over whether or not to concede to George’s visitation demand. As she paced, an internal war was between waged between Regina the wife and Regina the Queen, and to be honest, she was not quite sure who was winning. On one hand, her need to know what George had done to prompt his urgent message carried significant weight, especially if it was, as Reila insisted, a life or death situation involving Ruby. On the other hand, though, her limited knowledge of the former monarch as a man informed a healthy suspicion supported by mountains of evidence collected over the decades.

George was a liar and a manipulator of the highest order, something to which even Prince Charming himself would readily testify. Even under the best of circumstances he was not to be trusted, and although Regina was most assuredly desperate to know if Ruby’s life was really at stake as had been implied, she was of a mind to ignore the summons altogether. But that was her pride talking, and in this case, she could not afford to allow justifiable grievances to interfere with the vows she’d made to protect Ruby at all costs. Distasteful as it was, she knew what she had to do. Actually resolving herself to the course was another matter entirely.

_It wouldn’t hurt to get another opinion before I make any concrete plans_, she thought as she pursed her lips with frustration. And she’d become so absorbed with processing the conundrum that that she visibly jumped when the door to the loft was abruptly flung open.

“Whoa, sorry,” David said, holding up his hands in apology. A damp dish towel was flung over his shoulder and he had a five o’clock shadow going on that suited him.
Regina had always thought David to be a handsome man. There was a reason, after all, that she’d attempted to seduce him while the Curse was still active, and it wasn’t just to heap more misery upon the simpering pest that was Mary Margaret Blanchard. Revenge was the main reason, of course, but to deny there was no underlying attraction would be a bald-faced lie. That moment in the kitchen was real, a little too real for Regina back then, which explained her violent outburst after her advances were rebuffed. Fortunately for both of their sakes, Charming’s unwavering sense of honor influenced him even while Cursed, quenching that ember before it could even stoke into a tiny fire.

But seeing him all domestic now, knowing that he so willingly pitched in with the duties of running a modern household where many men would shirk them, only scored him additional points on her scale of attractiveness. Not that she’d ever admit to such a thing when she one wasn’t supposed to entertain such degrading thoughts for strangers not to mention tried and true friend, and most importantly when she had an equally rugged and far more handsome woman at home who satisfied her every need. In a lot of ways, Ruby was every bit as domestically useful as David was, even more so when factoring in her werewolf physicality, and yet still managed to be so wonderfully feminine that Regina still had a hard time accepting her good fortune. There weren’t many women who could rock a flannel shirt and jeans just as well as she did a little black dress, but Ruby did so regularly, proving she really was the best of both worlds. That said, Regina had to hand it to Snow for landing such a catch as David. Among genuinely good men, he was wanting for a peer, and that he was so easy on the eyes did not hurt at all.

“I didn't mean to scare you,” he then added as she gaped at him from where she’d been so unexpectedly startled. “I just heard you pacing out in the hallway. Figured I'd let you in before you wear a hole in the floor.”

“That's quite alright,” Regina replied, lifting her hand to her chest as if to manually slow down her heart rate. “It was my own fault for being so lost in my thoughts.”

The appraising look David gave her had her hackles rising, but she held her emotions in check and kept her mask firmly in place so as not to offend him for caring. It was not his fault that her life seemed to be getting tossed into the blender yet again only for God knows what to emerge out of the emulsified mess.

Seeing she was not amenable to elaborating, David put on an affable smile and gestured inside. “Well, why don't you come on in and I'll round up the girls. They're upstairs with Rose.”

Rose was David and Snow's three-year-old daughter. Unlike her other golden-headed siblings, she had inherited Snow's jet-black hair, which pleased the girl's mother greatly. Regina thought she was otherwise a nice mixture of her parents. A bright and sweet child, Rose had large blue eyes and a dimpled grin that had a way of warming a person's heart. She had David's nose and build but the same cheeks and chin her mother and sister were famous for. Everyone who met Rose loved her, and Regina could not deny that she had grown rather attached to the child herself. She had come to
anticipate her little visits to 'Charmingville' just so that she could be greeted by Rosie's beatific smile.

As David turned to make his way toward the stairs that lead to the second floor, Regina reached out to grab his arm. “David, wait.” When he turned back, his brow was wrinkled with confusion. “I need to speak with you and Snow first. Leave the children be for a while.”

Nodding in understanding, David made his way into the kitchen. Regina followed close behind, her anxiety still high. As sensitive and critical as this situation was, she was worried about wasting valuable time and was furthermore loathe to breach confidentiality to anyone before consulting Ruby. Yet she knew that of all people, Snow and David would be most suited to offer advice because their love was not so biased as Regina’s. Whereas she would forever prioritize Ruby over herself, Snow and David loved them the same, so whatever counsel they gave, Regina knew it would be with both of their best interests at heart. Trusting them came easier knowing that.

Once they were in the kitchen, Snow glanced up from mixing a salad. Like always, a pleased grin formed on her face the second she caught sight of Regina. The expression warmed Regina’s heart, having long ago lost the ability to trigger bitter memories of that same smile on a ten-year-old accomplice to murder who had just become her step-daughter.

“Regina!” Snow said, chirpy as ever akin to her fine-feathered friends. “How did your meeting go?”

Regina had informed Snow over the phone that she had a last-minute meeting to attend, which was true, she’d just neglected to spell out the details. She was about to rectify that, though to what reaction she wasn’t sure beyond suspecting much the same as her own: shock, rage, and then grief.

“Besides picking up the girls, that's why I'm here,” Regina said, noting how Snow quirked her head to the side with interest. “But before I get into that, thank you once again for keeping them a little late.”

“Oh, it was no trouble at all,” said Snow, who then snatched the towel off her husband's shoulder to wipe her hands off. “I'm glad to have them any time! You know that. They're such good girls and Rose loves them to pieces.”

“So do we,” David added, wistful smile tugging Regina’s heart in a nice way.

There was a reason the girls preferred the Charmings to all others save their immediate family and their Auntie Em. The couple had a soft spot for them that two cunning little manipulators like Sophia and Amelia exploited to great success. There was a time Regina would not have tolerated the way her daughters were pampered by her friends, but with much reflection after Henry was grown, she
realized how much like her mother she’d become. So she endured it with the girls, keeping in mind what it was like for her to have someone spoil her with good things only for them to be savagely reprimanded for it. Her father had endured many lectures from her mother, and Regina suspected some a fair few stripes that were quickly erased, regarding his propensity for soft parenting. She refused to be responsible for scarring her daughters that way. She’d done it to Henry, and while he turned out brilliantly in spite of her atrocious failures as a mother, she was not about to make the same mistake again.

So she let Snow and David buy the girls toys they didn’t need and take them out to the movies or to the park for an afternoon of fun with Rose. So long as they got structure at home (which they did because there were some things that Regina was simply unwilling to change), respected and obeyed their parents and elders, and behaved themselves, she was content to keep a very loose leash. Though Ruby hated that particular metaphor. Which was why she used it more often than she should.

“Thank you,” she said, and meant it with all of her heart. “And although I am biased as their mother, they are good girls. Most of the time. Except when they are acting like their Mama. Then they are absolute heathens!” She grinned conspiratorially with her friends, and the three shared a brief laugh before the discussion turned serious once more.

“You said you wanted to talk about your meeting,” Snow said. “What happened?”

Angling her body toward the petite woman, Regina heaved a breath, suddenly very uncomfortable. She didn't like being put in this position at all. Oh, how she wished Ruby were here so that she could take this straight to her rather than having to fumble about for reassurance that she was making the right choice in her stead. But Ruby wasn’t here, and Regina had to make a choice whether she wanted to or not.

Scrubbing her face tiredly, she sighed. “I don’t quite know where to begin.”

“Alright.” Snow set down her utensils then walked over to stand in front of Regina. She placed a gentle hand on Regina's elbow. “Maybe we should sit so you’re more comfortable.”

Acquiescing wordlessly, Regina allowed herself to be guided over to the tiny couch where out of habit she perched lightly upon the edge, back ramrod straight and legs primly crossed. Snow joined her, settling right by her side so that their knees were brushing together while David sat across from them in a comfortable looking arm chair.

“I suppose I should start at the beginning,” she said. Running a hand through her hair, Regina blew
out another harsh breath. “I was about ready to leave work when I got a call. It was a woman I’d never met who claimed to possess information I needed to know. I attempted to put her off until tomorrow but she insisted that it was urgent and couldn’t wait because it was about Ruby.”

“Oh God, has something happened to her?” Snow asked, suddenly concerned.

“No. It was nothing of that nature,” said Regina, shaking her head slightly. “But the woman refused to tell me over the phone, so I reluctantly agreed to meet her. After a slightly roundabout conversation, she told me something that – while I believe her to be sincere – I’m frankly having a hard time digesting.”

Leaning forward in his chair, David rested his elbows on his knees, the same look of concern on his face as on Snow’s. “What was it?”

Closing her eyes, Regina gathered her fortitude. Again, she loathed being in the position of sharing such sensitive information with Snow and Charming before Ruby, to whom it ultimately pertained. Even so, she felt like it was something that she needed to do, for peace of mind if nothing else.

There were very few people she could trust with matters of Ruby's parentage. In fact, she could count them all on one hand. Granny was most obvious, but Regina understood that if she’d told Granny about George being Ruby’s father, the hot-headed old woman would have had a conniption. Archie was another, but she felt, perhaps unfairly, that he lacked the life experience to give her practical advice on a subject so emotionally charged as that of an orphan’s parentage coming to light. Emma would have been most apt to consult, but she was currently in the Enchanted Forest with Ruby, and Regina’s morally and ethically dubious friends would be less than helpful since many had formerly made an occupation of forcibly separating children from their parents instead of the opposite. That left Snow and Charming as the only viable option to hear what she was about to tell them who would still be capable of formulating an objective opinion that might actually help make her decision more palatable.

Resolve back in place, she set about easing them in. “Let me ask you something first. Has Granny ever spoken to either one of you about who Ruby's father might be?”

The effect the question provoked was as anticipated as it was instantaneous. While Snow gasped, Charming flinched as his eyes went wide. For several moments, the couple sat in silence, peering at each other in bewilderment as they tried to digest the question. Snow was the one who broke the silence first.

“No, she hasn't,” she said, her eyes still wide from shock. “Are you saying that this meeting was about Ruby’s father?”
“Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying,” Regina said, not mincing words. “This woman, Reila, related a story to me that, while I would much prefer it not be, is one that I personally believe to be true. She said she was once friends with Ruby's mother, Anita, and that Anita had an affair with a married a man...a king, at that. According to Reila, Ruby was the product of that affair.”

Snow sat back abruptly as if thunderstruck. “What? Ruby’s father is...was royalty? How did she come by this information?”

Regina angled herself toward Snow, willing the woman to see how conflicted she was to lend more credibility to her next words. “She said that she lived in said kingdom and was the personal attendant of the Queen. Anita, according to her, was a very close friend while all of this was happening.”

“And you believe her?” Charming asked, sounding and looking skeptical. Regina couldn't blame him when she had been every bit as skeptical and more so seeing as Ruby was her wife. Only Reila's sincerity and the terminal diagnosis that prompted her divulgence had convinced Regina of the veracity of what she would otherwise dismiss as an outlandish allegation.

Regina rolled her eyes at having to repeat herself. “As I've already said twice: yes, I do.”

“Are you sure?” Snow asked, her voice still betraying her shock. “She could be lying.”

“She could be,” Regina said, “but I don't believe she is. She's held onto this secret for all this time and could have taken it to her grave. She's dying, you see, so she had no reason to lie. Besides, you should have seen her, she was terrified of me and yet chose to brave my wrath to deliver this information. That alone lends credence to her claim.”

For a long moment, Regina let that sink in. Of all the former denizens of Misthaven now residing Storybrooke, Snow and Charming more than any others would be aware of how much courage it took for someone to approach her with such explosive information, particularly regarding someone she loved. Sure, Regina was a relatively reformed woman, but that didn't mean she had undergone a personality transplant. She could still be hateful and harsh and unyielding, and that was to people she actually liked. To a woman who was on death's door, facing down the Evil Queen with credible information that was sure to shock her as much as enrage her was a singular act of valor. To have the gall, then, to come to her with false information would have been the epitome of foolishness, tantamount to a death wish had eras been different.

And while it was certainly possible that the woman hated Regina so much that she just wanted to get
in a parting blow before exiting this world stage left, that was extraordinarily unlikely. Most people did not behave so spitefully in the face of death, rather preferring to spend what little time was left settling up old debts, unburdening oneself of toxic remorse, and being with one’s family as much as humanly possible. Regina thought at least two of those motives were what spurred Reila into action, and that was why she believed her.

It took some silent contemplation, but eventually she could see that both Snow and Charming had come to see the wisdom in her reasoning. Regina was glad of it. She didn't want to waste any more time than necessary to convince them that what she had been told was accurate. Something told her she didn't have much of that infinitely precious resource to waste.

After scrubbing his face with his hand tiredly, Charming caught her eyes. His acceptance was plain. “So, who is it? Someone we know?”

Regina chuckled ruefully as it suddenly dawned on her just how tangled this web was quickly becoming. In all of the fluster over learning this piece of information about Ruby, she had forgotten the colorful history Charming shared with George. Technically, if it turned out to be certifiably true that Ruby was George's daughter, it meant that Ruby shared a familial – albeit adoptive – link with David. This would likely please Snow once it registered that in a roundabout way, Ruby was indeed her sister-in-law. But Charming would not see it in such a positive light. Unlike Snow who could see the best in just about anyone, he was painfully aware of the kind of man George really was and hated him even more than Regina did, which was saying something considering David was not one to bear grudges. For all she knew, George was his only exception.

“Oh, you could say that,” she replied, wry humor evident in her words. She gave David a pointed look. “In fact, you know this particular King quite well, Charming.” That was all she needed to say for David to make the connection.

Looking aghast, he yelped in disbelief. “No way!” He clapped his hands on his jean-clad lap as he exclaimed his aghast denial. “There's no way in hell! Fate cannot be that sadistic.” When Regina kept staring at him with a raised brow, he realized she was being deadly serious. “You're really not joking, are you?”

Regina shook her head sadly. “Unfortunately, I'm not.”

“Wait a second,” Snow spoke up, shuffling to the edge of the couch. “I'm missing something here. Who, exactly, are we talking about?”

“Think Snow,” said Charming, “what other king could prompt that kind of reaction from me? And
don't you remember me telling you about what he did to Ruby while you and Emma were in the Enchanted Forest?"

Snow gasped even louder than before as realization dawned. “Oh, God! Oh, my God! Spencer? I mean...King George. He's Ruby's father?”

“According to Reila he is,” Regina said. “Fate is, as Charming so eloquently put it, quite sadistic. The same man who framed Ruby for murder is supposedly her father. Though Reila insists that he did not know who Ruby was until she told him.”

Charming's eyes widened. “Wait. She told him who Ruby was?” When Regina nodded, David dropped his head into his hands. “Oh, this is bad,” he lamented, his voice partially dampened due to his position. “This is very, very bad.” He looked back up to Regina, his eyes grave. “You know that he’s going to use this against her, right? He's going to try and worm his way into her life. We can't let that happen, Regina!”

Recrossing her legs, Regina shifted on the couch as she rubbed her arms in an idle gesture. “I know. And thus, my dilemma. I could ignore his summons and hope to God that he's bluffing, but what if he’s not? Also, Reila informed me that George needs to speak to me in person because he believes Ruby's life may be in danger. Could he be lying? Could this just be some game of one-upmanship with me or some sort of retaliation for me sending him beyond the barrier to be incarcerated? Yes to both.

“I am not ignorant of the fact that even if he does have pertinent information, he will be trying to manipulate the situation to his advantage. It's what he does and he's very good at it. Even at the height of my power and influence as Queen, I never allowed myself to become indebted to George because he is a shrewd and devious man who was always adept at getting whatever he wanted. I kept myself purposefully disentangled with him, both socially and politically, not only out of personal disdain of him but out of sheer self-preservation. He would not have hesitated to use my manic obsession with Snow at that time against me. And even as lethal I was back then, I fear he would have succeeded should he have put his mind to removing me from the chessboard. Few who ever fell under George’s cross-hairs have lived to tell the tale. So believe me when I say I know what he’s capable of.

“And yet if I want to protect Ruby, I will have to accede to his demands, which may very well open up Pandora's Box for us both. I feel like something bad is going to happen no matter what I choose. You can see why I'm conflicted, then, can't you?”

Casting glances to David and then Snow in turn, Regina saw only understanding in their eyes for the nearly impossible choice she had been left with. Their sympathy reinforced the sagacity of approaching them.
Rather than answer, Snow turned her body so that she was facing Regina and so that one knee was up on the couch pressed reassuringly against Regina's leg. She then stretched her hand out into the tiny space between their bodies where it remained unclaimed for several moments while Regina's mind spun.

She was still uncomfortable at times around her former stepdaughter, but she had to admit, the girl she had once hated so much had grown into a veritable fount of wisdom and encouragement on which Regina had come to rely. Many times during her relationship with Ruby, both before they were married and after, Snow had been a source of sound advice to aid in navigating the complicated ups and downs of a committed relationship. And to be sure, life with Ruby was not always smooth sailing. They'd had their share of rough patches, but when Regina was at her wits end with Ruby’s obstinance, Snow was never more than a call or a visit away, was never judgmental and always hopeful, and who had ears ready to listen and shoulders strong enough to lean on. They had come such a long way from the years Regina spent hatefully brooding over Snow’s naive inability to keep a secret.

At present they were finally more of a family than they ever were when Regina was married to Leopold. And while that reality was all kinds of horrifying and nauseating to the darker parts of her psyche, it was mostly just nice to know she had someone outside of her atypical nuclear family so fully in her corner. In a way, though their roles were somewhat reversed, she and Snow were finally coming full circle back to that relationship they would have developed had her mother not interfered, which was something worth holding on to and worth cherishing instead of allowing the black clouds of the past to linger any longer.

Breathing a shaky breath, Regina's eyes found Snow's, so soft and green and full of tender affection that she couldn't help herself from accepting the affectionate gesture. She needed Snow's support right now and she needed her advice, so to hell with what her mother would think and to hell with what her old self might think. Her mother never had a True Love and her old self never knew what real happiness felt like, but Regina did and she was desperate to hold on to it, just as she had been seven years ago when Ruby was abducted. Snow was offering her an anchor to keep her from plunging into the deep end again, and she was damn well going to latch on to it with all of her might.

Slipping her hand into Snow's, she gripped it tightly and gave the pixie haired woman a watery smile.

“Oh, honey,” Snow said, so full of love that she positively radiated warmth, “I know you've been put in an impossible situation, but I think you already know what you need to do. I think you're only here because it's too important of a decision to make lightly and because it's not just your life this will affect. You want my advice, so this is it: listen to your heart.”
Before Regina could respond, Snow reached out to brush her cheek, crumbling some of her defenses. A lonely tear slipped free of her lids and fell down her cheek. Snow wiped it away with her thumb.

“What is it telling you, Regina?”

Taking a shaky breath, Regina averted her gaze, pulling her bottom lip into her mouth as she fought against the aspects of herself that were at odds: her mind and her heart. Shuttering her eyes, she focused on blocking off that calculating part of herself that was over-analyzing the situation, trying to predict the possible outcomes of each choice and anticipate George's motives. As it faded to the background, the sound of her beating heart became more and more prominent until it completely drowned out the noise from her brain. In its rhythm, she could hear very clearly what it was trying to tell her.

Was it really so easily forgotten? It had only been seven years, but sometimes it felt like a lifetime. Regina supposed that was why she sometimes went months without thinking back to the circumstances that conspired to bring her closer to Ruby than she had ever been to another person by almost ripping them forever apart. She didn't like to think about that time, not because of what came out of it, but because of the inhuman torture and pain that Ruby had endured.

While it was true that Regina loved Ruby's scars because they were proof that she was alive, the memories of that horrible ordeal were a completely different story. Those still haunted Regina on a regular basis. They chased her in her dreams, ran her ragged in nightmares until she woke up drenched and panting and wanting nothing more than to wrap her arms around Ruby and hold her so tight that it hurt. She hated those nights, hated the sleeplessness and despair that came after the nightmares because she didn’t want to wake Ruby up just for her own selfish comfort. She had lost count of how many times she wept silently into her pillow, hoping Ruby’s sensitive ears wouldn’t pick up the dampened noise yet unable to stop the outpouring of miserable grief that clung to her like a second skin.

But in her desire to burn the dreadful memories out of her mind, she had allowed one important one to fade into the background. It was the one where she ripped out her own beating heart, gazing in awe at how red and vibrant it had become under the influence of Ruby's enormous and all-consuming love; the one where she severed her heart in two and gave half to Ruby so that she could live again. Never had Regina felt so alive and connected with another human being as she had in that moment. She had finally understood what it meant to truly love someone, to have become one with another person on such an essential level that her heart was literally compatible with their body.

How had she allowed herself to lose sight of that miracle? Had she gotten so stuck in the mundane monotony of day-to-day life that she allowed it to simply slip away as if the driftwood remnants of a once majestic tree? Or had she just taken it for granted that the love she and Ruby shared was strong enough to create two lives and was enduring enough to sustain two others?
Whatever the case, she remembered now. And with that remembrance came stark clarity. Ruby was her choice: then, now, and forever.

Turning back to Snow, Regina smiled, secure in the knowledge that she had done the right thing. “It's telling me one thing: Ruby,” she said, still clutching Snow’s hand. “I have to do whatever it takes to protect her, even if it means making a deal with the devil.”

Returning Regina's smile, Snow gave her hand a squeeze. “Then do it, Regina. As friends who love you both, you have our full support. And if you need, David and I will watch Sophie and Amie again after school tomorrow. Whatever you need, we're here to help.”

“While my instincts are warning me about George, I agree,” said David, his own expression reflecting unity with his beloved wife. “You need to do what your heart tells you is right. I know that if I were in your position, I would do the same for Snow. Still, you should know you don't have to do this alone. If you want, one of us can go with you to Warren.” Warren was the town in which the Maine State Prison was located.

“While I appreciate that, it's not necessary,” Regina replied, having disentangled herself from her adorably clingy ex-step-daughter. “I need to do this on my own. However, I will take you up on your offer to watch the girls if you don't mind.”

Shaking her head vigorously, Snow grinned, “Of course not! Like I said, Rose loves it when they come over. She'll be tickled pink that she gets to see them two days in a row.”

Smiling, Regina stood and brushed down her skirt. “Very well, then. I suppose I should get going so I can feed the little beasts and get them in bed at a decent hour. We all have long days ahead of us tomorrow.”

“I suppose we do,” Snow agreed, standing herself and crossing over to the stairs. Peering up to the room that once belonged to Emma, she called up: “Sophie, Amie! Your mom is here!”

“Okay auntie Snow!” Sophia's voice called out. “But can we finish our game? Just five more minutes. Pretty please??”

Regina chuckled. It was always five more minutes with those two. Whether playtime or reading or watching TV, it was always the same. “Please, Mommy, just five more minutes!” The heartfelt pleas
worked far more than they should. For a parent who had always fell to the strict end of the spectrum with Henry, she was almost ashamed at how much of pushover she had become with Sophia and Amelia. Almost.

Though small, there was a noticeable difference in her overall parenting style between her son and daughters, though she couldn't account for why that was with one simple explanation. That she was no longer a single mother was one, as was her change in the interim from being a constrained villain to a reformed one. She was not the same lonely and bitter woman who had adopted Henry to try and snatch the victory of a happy ending out of what seemed to be the jaws of defeat that she never seemed able to escape. Regina was happy now, truly happy in a way she’d never imagined she could be. Not only did she have Ruby, who she loved so much she’d literally given away half of her heart, but she had people in her life on whom she could depend and who loved her and supported her even though she had once been their sworn enemy. Love had done the impossible in transforming foes into friends, and that alone made parenting so much more enjoyable.

Of course Henry, being the clever young man, was not oblivious to this change, but he did not lord it over his mother. Instead, whenever the girls got away with things that he never would have, he took great pleasure in ribbing Regina in a good-natured way that didn't make her feel quite as guilty as she quite honestly should have. That was Henry, though, always so mature and accommodating and understanding. How he managed to grow into such a wonderful young man considering the sad state she'd been in when she adopted him was beyond her, but she was grateful just the same and so very proud of him.

Still, to hear the girls using the same tactics on Snow as they did their mother was very amusing. Regina was sure that it would work, too, as it always did because Snow was more of a pushover than she would ever be. Hell, Snow was more of a pushover than Ruby, who Regina often playfully criticized as being the enabler of the household.

Looking over to Regina, Snow gave a noncommittal shrug. “It’s your call, Mom.”

Cocking her head to the side, Regina smirked. “Well, since they asked so nicely...”

Chuckling, Snow called out once more: “Alright, just five more minutes! After that, I expect three little girls to be downstairs pronto. Okay?”

A chorus of: “Okay, Mama!” and “Okay, Auntie Snow!” rung out, after which came the sound of a flurry of excited movement on the wooden floors overhead.

Moving back over to the island, Snow fetched the salad bowl and moved it over to the dinner table.
As she bent down to place it, she glanced up at Regina, an open invitation in her eyes.

“You're welcome to say if you want. I know I’m not a gourmet chef like you, but I make a mean chicken parm, and there’s plenty to go around.”

The offer was tempting. If she took the girls home, she would have to cook, make sure they ate, clean the dishes by herself, make sure they completed any school work they brought home, and then have them in bed by nine. Crossing two items off of that list was certainly appealing, and between that and the sweetly inviting way Snow was gazing at her, she felt her resistance crumble.

“Oh, very well,” she sighed and then nodded gratefully to Snow, who beamed as if she had just won the lottery. In a whirl of motion, the diminutive spitfire went about checking on the rest of dinner, barking out orders to her hubby as she went.

“Wonderful! David! Can you set out some extra plates? And silverware. And can you check the bread, please?”

David glanced at Regina with a crooked grin. She shrugged, though she couldn't fight the smile that overtook her face. “Of course, dear,” he said as he went about fulfilling Snow's wishes.

As she watched them bustle about the kitchen like the perfectly synchronized True Love couple that they were, the tinkling laughter of three little girls echoed down from upstairs. Surrounded by the sights and sounds and smells of a loving family, Regina felt her insides tingle with a heady feeling of homeliness that washed over her like a gentle ocean breeze. She wrapped herself up in it as if it were a warm, cuddly blanket and willed herself to absorb all the love, support, strength, and happiness that was being so graciously extended. She needed it all if she was going to get through tomorrow.
Love Isn't Weakness, It's Strength

Chapter Summary

After the trying evening before and an unsettling dream that night, Regina gets a little encouragement from her girls.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Heart pounding in her chest, Regina walked with measured steps through a forest thick with underbrush and dimly lit by what faint light could penetrate through the thick canopy of leaves overhead. In the near distance, she could make out the lines of a ramshackle hut, and as she drew near she saw that it was little more than thatched sticks held together by weathered stone masonry. Smoke filtered out from the woeful looking chimney, signs of activity from within in the form of wisps rising high which then disappeared within the blanket of evergreen clouds above.

Her throat clammed up in dreadful anticipation as she approached. Just beyond the threadbare blankets hanging across a dilapidated door-frame prevented her entry, they would be waiting. A deep, preparatory breath later, she pushed through them and towards her destiny.

She entered with no fanfare befitting her reputation. The days in which she were universally feared had long since passed – not that it would help. The trio of crones who occupied this decrepit hut not fit to be called a home had little consideration for mere mortals, even those whose magical prowess was very nearly without peer. Their communion with the capricious, often self-serving eternal being to whom many magicians owed their talents had stripped them not only of such mundane cares as the persistence of their mortal shell, but of their conscience as well. They would pay little heed to either the reputation of a sorceress who once terrorized an entire nation or her desperation to save the only beings that made her life worth living.

“We’ve been waiting, Elaine of Garlot,” one of them said as she stepped into the dank interior. The hag’s voice was scratchy with age and disuse.

It was of note to Regina that being called by a different name did not phase her in the slightest. Quite on the contrary, it seemed natural for her to answer to it, as if it was her real name instead of the one her mother had so prophetically bestowed upon her.

“Then you know why I am here,” she said in an accent more English than her typically bland American. Strangely it seemed every bit as right as being called by another name, so she paid no heed to her unusual dialect as she stepped over to the cauldron around which the three ancient
witches were gathered. Hands linked together in solidarity, they painted a grotesque picture of decrepit reverence to a Goddess whose worship was banished to the fringes of society – and for good reason. Only one of them was arranged in her direction, and the flames reflecting in their stringy silver hair lent a devilish tint to a haggard, sunken face.

“You wish to consult the Triple Goddess,” the witch who was facing her said, her voice not at all dissimilar to her fellow diviner’s. The witch gave her an eerie smile, revealing perfectly pearly teeth that gleamed in the firelight, a stark contrast to a rotten face. Such was the paradoxical consequence of their long communion with a power beyond the veils of physical existence. “You will be pleased to know she is amenable to your request. Step into the circle and we will call upon her.”

The two witches in profile to her released hands in expectation of her joining them around the cauldron. Regina stepped up, her ribs under a relentless assault by a thundering heart. It was not her first time to commune with the Triple Goddess but it would almost certainly be her last. She was there by choice, though, and driven by reckless disregard for her own safety, so not a word was spoken as she took her place and held out her hands. Wrinkled flesh, paper thin so as to be easily torn, met hers and she gently squeezed the appendages belonging to two of the three Voices of the Goddess. The silence turned cold in spite of the heat, only to be broken seconds later by a low, keening chant that rose in volume with each subsequent repetition. As the sisters droned their invocation, the cauldron began to roil and bubble until the violence of the spell had whatever concoction was brewing inside spilling to the bare dirt floor. Smoke from the fire then wafted into the room as if of its own mind, and it danced around the cauldron lip, teasing every which way before swirling upward where it hovered and began to take the shape of three women, unique and yet intrinsically connected – the Mother, eternally pregnant; the Maiden, forever pure and virtuous; and the Crone, the source of all darkness and despair. The Triple Goddess.

“My child, I have come to hear your request.” Each of the three spoke in perfect unison after fully constituted, smoke-lips moving to emit a layered voice that, while airy as if having no real substance behind it, sounded like crackling flames. “What would you ask of me, I whose power you wield and whose will you have so faithfully served?”

She knew the question was but a formality. The Goddess already knew her thoughts and desires. She met mote eyes of dust and ash that seemed to peer into the depths her soul.

“I wish to make an exchange,” she said with far more bravado than she was feeling. Her legs were threatening to falter right along with her heart. “To spare the life of my lover and the child we created out of our love, I will surrender my own to satisfy the price of magic. Grant me this, O benevolent Mother, I beseech you. For my years of service, this is all I will ever ask of you.”

“I am loathe to lose yet another High Priestess of the line of Gorlois and Vivienne,” said the Goddess. The sadness with which she spoke reflected in her nebulous form, which darkened almost to charcoal. “Who will replace you when you are gone, my child? Who will lift the mantle of High
Priestess if I grant this request?"

Regina hung her head, feeling the sting of rejection well up. A faint urge to lie was present but long years of duty had taught her to master any such foolish impulses. The truth is what the Goddess required and it was what she would give.

“I do not know, my Eternal Mother. I have no acolytes and I am the last of my line save my unborn child.”

The Goddess hummed amiably, sounding pleased all of the sudden. “Then I shall wait for her to come of age.”

Startled eyes lifted up to meet a vaporous smile set in now-white cloudy face. Panic welled up in her chest. “I do not regret my service to you, Mother, but I do not want my daughter to share my fate. Please! Isn’t there anyone else who can take my place?”

“None that I care to bestow my gifts upon,” said the Goddess, no censure in her tone, which Regina found surprising. Few possessed the gall to question the will of the Goddess and of those even fewer lived to tell the tale. “But do not fret. To her I will offer a new arrangement. In exchange for her service at my discretion, she will be free to live as she pleases. Uther Pendragon is dead, as is his son. Emrys has exiled himself beyond even my sight. Though limited, magic has its place in Albion once again and thus the need for war to end our long persecution has for a time ceased. It would please me, therefore, that my next High Priestess should live out her life peacefully in recompense for the sacrifice of her forebearers. And so she shall.”

Hope rose in Regina’s chest. Tears sprang to her eyes. “Does that mean you will assent to my request? You will make the exchange? My life for theirs?”

The Goddess nodded once, and when she did thin wisps of smoke trailed behind the movement of her head. “Though it pains me, I shall honor you with this gift,” she said, then reached out her smoky hand. “Take my hand and receive the mark of our bargain as a seal of guarantee.”

“Oh, thank you, Eternal Mother!” Regina’s effusive gratitude spilled out in her words and from her eyes as she met the unflinching gaze of her matron benefactor. As commanded, she then took the proffered hand with trembling digits. Pain lanced through her hand upon contact with the tenuous appendage of the Goddess, but she held it tight, gaze never leaving those uncanny ashen eyes that seared at her consciousness until it was bared, denuded, clear for inspection by a mind more vast than any human could comprehend and a power too mighty to be contained within a fragile vessel of flesh and blood. Judgment was in them now but they did not speak of condemnation. Only love
was present there, and it shone in plumes of bronze and gold that engulfed every inch of her body with warmth and acceptance.

“You are hereby released from service, Elaine of Garlot,” the Goddess then said, note of finality evident. “On the day your babe takes her first breath, you shall take your last. Time to mortal minds is incomprehensible and as ephemeral as the dust from which this form I now occupy is constituted. Spend well, therefore, what remains to you. For your faithful service, I honor you my blessing. Go now, my child, and never return.” And with that the magic maintaining the Goddess’ form was abruptly cut, and the nebulous dust motes petered out into thin strings of smoke that dissipated in seconds, swept away by a warm, gentle breeze.

Awestruck and overcome by emotion, Regina glanced down to the pentagram burnt into the skin of her inner wrist – the seal of her impending demise. But death no longer held relevance to her, not when she knew Eleni and their miracle child would live. To secure their safety, she was more than happy to perish a thousand times over. And as she trudged her way back home through the forest, heart full of joy in the face of her own looming destruction, she sang a song of thanks to the Eternal Mother who made it all possible.

Though Regina woke sluggishly, she noticed she was smiling upon glancing at herself in the mirror mounted upon the armoire opposite the bed. In the reflection, she dimly noted that the clock read five am, though she had to strain her eyes and her brain to translate the reversed image. The dream still lingered, a fragment of memory that had gnarled roots she couldn’t quite trace before they were buried within the fathomless loam of her subconscious mind. She felt at the same time giddy and intensely uneasy, and if it were the first time she’d experienced this phenomenon she might have been genuinely afraid for her sanity. But it wasn’t.

Strange dreams had been plaguing her sleep ever since Ruby’s nightmare the night she’d asked to go back to the Enchanted Forest. In the intervening weeks between that night and Ruby’s departure, Regina had been unable to get her wife to open up to what she’d seen that so disturbed her. Every time she mentioned the nightmare, Ruby clammed up and refused to talk about it, which was unusual. At the insistence of Dr. Hopper, Ruby had started talking through her nightmares with Regina after they happened. The idea, he said, was to process them immediately so they would not gain purchase and become a catalyst for repercussive insomnia. To both their pleasant surprise, the tactic helped Ruby settle back more easily into a sleep in which she actually rested rather than tossed and turned until dawn. The cricket, Regina had discovered all over again, really was good at his job and afterward started giving him earnest referrals.

But there was something about that one nightmare that robbed Ruby of the ability to open up about it. The silence was worrisome but Regina hadn’t let it plague her too much as she’d had much bigger things to fret over at the time, such as her wife journeying to another world – and a dangerous one at that – without her. A dream, however disturbing, was small potatoes compared to the idea of so extreme a separation.
That first night Ruby was gone, Regina had a dream rather like the one she’d just awoke from. Likewise, there was a tangible quality to it that felt more like a memory than a dream, as if the images were a little more ingrained into her gray matter than an ordinary dream. Her two attempts to decipher the conundrum of them with magic failed spectacularly, having induced blistering migraines that left her barely able to function. A part of her had wanted to press on and damn the consequences to figure out what was causing the dreams, but the more sensible part reminded her that she was a mother with the all-important responsibility to take care of two little girls who sometimes more resembled hellions than the angels Granny proclaimed them to be.

Resolve to do right by her children aside, her natural curiosity remained ever present. The dreams were a jigsaw puzzle laying unsolved on the table of her mind, and she was itching to sit down to make sense of the jumble of disordered and misshapen fragments. Maybe when Ruby got back she would do just that. Hopefully she wouldn’t turn her brain into mush in the process.

For the moment, though, she pushed away thoughts of the dream in lieu of getting about her day. She had much to do before it was time to wake the girls. School started at half past seven and before cooking breakfast for three, she would need to shower, dress, then re-read the drafts of a series of memos she planned to send out to the Town Council. Life as a working mother was hectic but rewarding. She smiled at the thought of the girls squealing in delight over being fed proper Regina Mills worthy french toast topped with garden-fresh strawberries in a homemade glaze to go with sides of bacon, eggs, and lightly seasoned hash browns. They deserved a treat after the strain of the past two weeks missing their Mama dreadfully and having to deal with a critically stressed Mommy who occasionally lost her cool with their over-the-top antics.

Getting ready for her morning was a ritual she had down to scientific precision, which meant Regina was dressed, hair dried and styled, and make-up artfully applied within an hour. Reviewing her memos came next, and she spent the next hour and a half amending them to perfection in addition to reading through a portion of her seemingly endless supply of emails. She even got around to responding to half of those before it was time for her to wake the kids.

As if they knew their mother didn’t need the extra hassle that morning, they rose in delightful moods and went about their morning ablutions without protest. In fact, they were so well-behaved and efficient on time that Regina allowed them a half hour to read a book of their choosing while she made breakfast.

She closed her eyes and took a cleansing breath upon entering her Sanctum Sanctorum. The kitchen was Regina’s refuge, the place where she felt most comfortable and in her own skin, able to let her hair down so-to-speak and lose herself in the joy of preparing food for her family or in crafting new recipes to compete with Granny for their culinary favor. Now in her element, she got down to business, sliding into one of her most favorite pastimes so that the passage of time ceased to matter. It wasn’t long before she yelled up at the girls that breakfast was almost ready. The frantic shuffling of socked feet soon followed, which drew a smile from Regina. The race, she knew, was on.
Every morning Amelia and Sophia rushed down to their morning meal, bellies growling as they pushed and shoved with hands, elbows, and shoulders in order to be the first at the breakfast table. Their appetites at times seemed insatiable, which wasn’t at all a shocking development considering they were both werewolves, just ones who had yet to come into their full powers. That Ruby could out-eat any man in town spoke to that expensive reality. Regina spent a relative fortune on groceries every month.

“Holy crap, Sophie! French toast and strawberries!” Amelia screeched as predicted upon rounding the corner.

Regina turned to watch Sophia raise her little nose and sniff greedily at what her mother was busy preparing. Regina didn’t appreciate the oblique oath but let it slide this once knowing that Ruby, if she were here, would have been unable to object due to her laughter. Regina couldn’t help but feel a little sentimental; her wife was an unapologetic enabler and she missed it terribly.

At Sophia’s exclamation, Amelia shouldered past her sibling. “I get to go first!” Raven hair plaited into a braid that ran down her back and looking very much like Regina’s little clone, Amelia had no time to notice her sister’s infuriated glare as she rushed to collect her plate from atop the counter near the stove. Huge chocolate eyes stared up at Regina, innocent if not mischievous grin on display.

“Morning, Mommy,” she said, then batted her eyelashes in a manner far too manipulative for a child of nearly six. “Thank you for making us french toast! May I have mine now?”

“No fair, Amie!” Sophia whined as she stepped up next to her sister, petulant frown tugging at her bottom lip. “You know french toast is my favorite!”

Amelia scoffed, rolling her eyes dramatically. “It is not. It’s mine. You love Mama’s pancakes more.”

“Do not!”

“Do so!”

“Do not!”

“Stop being a brat, Sophie! Gosh!”
Regina ducked her head so that her hair concealed her smile. Her shoulders shook with the effort to contain laughter.

Indignant, Sophia perched her hands on hips cocked out to the side. “I’m not a brat, Wartface! Why do you have to be so mean? It’s not fair! You got to be first yesterday morning! It’s my turn!”

Normally Sophia was the spitting image of her older mother as far as personality goes, which could be confusing to some as she physically favored Ruby. That meant the child could be moody and bossy and often too clever for her own good. Sophia was usually the ringleader and Amelia the follower, except when it came to food. The promise of food made Amelia into a ravenous alpha wolf while Sophia handled her heightened appetite with a dignity Regina hadn’t needed to teach but was all the same proud of. And yet the way Sophia wiggled her butt and shoulders as she chastised her sister reminded Regina so much of Ruby when fired up about something that she instantly sobered.

“Alright, that’s enough.” She interjected using her no-nonsense Mayor Mommy voice just as Amelia was about to sass back. “Both of you to the table, and not another word.” When both girls whine, she flared her nostrils and widened her eyes for effect. “Now! Or neither of you will be eating French toast this morning!”

Suitably chastised, both girls ducked their heads, murmured, “Yes, ma’am,” as they’d been taught, and then shuffled over to the chair. Regina returned to finishing up the French toast as the sound of scraping chairs on the tile floor sounded out. She hefted a sigh as she flipped the piece of sizzling toast. Those girls tried her patience daily and with a boldness that Henry never would have dreamed of at their age. It was official now. She was growing soft with her advancing years.

Sometimes it was hard for Regina to believe she was nearly fifty. Most days she felt the same as she had when the first Curse was broken, a woman in her prime, fit of body, sound of mind, and with no visible signs of youth’s inevitable departure to be found. While her peers of similar age were sporting gray hairs and the beginnings of crow’s feet around their eyes, Regina remained untouched by the inescapable ravages of time, something Maleficent was envious of.

“How do you do that?” the shapeshifting dragon had once asked, pointing to Regina’s face with a highly-manicured index finger that circled the area around her eyes in accusation.

“How do you do that?” Regina had asked, feigning ignorance while allowing the hints of a smirk to tug at the corners of her lips. She’d known what Mal was getting at but enjoyed rubbing it in that her skin was still nearly as smooth as it was when they’d met what seemed to be eons ago.
Mal’s eyes narrowed in hatred that was more playful than serious. “Stay so...” she gesticulated wildly up and down the length of Regina’s body, “disgustingly young. The rest of us are wearing our age, gracefully I might add, but the signs are there just the same. Whereas you seem no older to me than the day I was resurrected from the dead.”

“I have no idea, to be truthful.” Regina shrugged, showing her friend she wasn’t being deceitful or provocative by holding Mal’s piercing blue eyes. “Ruby says it’s my ‘Mediterranean genes.’ My guess is it’s just good luck, or maybe my magic is somehow keeping me youthful. I really can’t say for sure and don’t much care at the moment. Looking gift horses in the mouth and such...”

“I imagine not with that frisky younger wife of yours,” Mal said, eyes dancing.

Regina blushed even though being teased for Ruby’s libido was not an uncommon occurrence in the company of her morally questionable friends. Most of them were just jealous they didn’t get laid on a regular basis like she did. Mal was the exception to that, having recently reunited with Lily’s father. Per their daughter who told Emma who let it slip to Ruby who then gossiped like a schoolgirl to Regina, they were behaving more like newlyweds than responsible adults.

“Oh, stop it,” she said, grinning at her friend’s jest. “Like you can complain in that department.”

“Very true. I am, of late, being satisfied at my every whim.” Mal waggled her eyebrows before settling into a more serious expression. “That doesn’t change my point, though. The sorceress in me is curious. You should be graying at the very least.” She leaned forward then and said lowly, “Say, you’re not dyeing it are you?”

Regina scoffed as if the idea was absurd. Which it was. She was vain but would never stoop so low as to destroy her hair with those atrocious chemicals.

“As if I would do such a thing,” she said then sat back smugly. “I am all natural, my friend. Ruby can attest to that if you care to question my honesty.”

Although Mal hadn’t questioned Ruby, the topic being raised stuck in Regina’s mind. She’d done some investigating the past few months, but couldn’t find anything concrete to explain her lack of aging. Magic could keep a person young, but such power came at great cost and required the casting of a series of spells so complex and dangerous that one incorrect phrasing could cause the instantaneous and explosive death of the caster. Death was not appealing to Regina but neither was killing herself to circumvent it. Which left her to think that maybe Ruby was right and that she had merely hit the genetic jackpot.
Whatever the case, concerns about being free of gray hair and wrinkles at age fifty had no place at the breakfast table. Regina dismissed them out of hand then returned to the business of finishing up the meal.

Thankfully the girls settled down once food was in front of them. Regina tried not to let her pending trip to Warren sully the joy she derived from eating breakfast with her family. They may have been short two members with Henry away at Harvard and Ruby in another world, but the love they shared was still there, woven into the fabric of Regina’s very essence and present bodily in two children whose existence was solely owed to the True Love that existed between her and her wife. That love dwelt within the half of heart beating inside her chest, was inextricably entwined with her immortal soul, was a passenger upon every thought of her mind, and was written up her body in post-pregnancy stretch marks she didn’t have the heart to erase and love bites she cherished of a morning and in the elegant calligraphic tattoo bearing the names of her wife and children she’d had inked upon her ribs on the left side nearest her heart. So while Ruby and Henry were absent in body, they were most certainly present in spirit, and Regina felt them keenly that morning, felt their positive energy in the air and could see their happy smiles in her mind’s eye.

After breakfast, Regina made sure the girls had their packs collected and their lunch pails in hand before ushering everyone out the door. They arrived at school precisely thirty minutes ahead of the morning bell, just as they did every morning. But unlike the usual routine, Regina stepped out of the car with her children and knelt before them after they donned their backpacks. Tenderly she adjusted their hair, Amelia’s braided black and Sophia’s bouncing brunette curls, then pressed kisses to their foreheads.

“Remember to behave,” she said before sending them off. “Listen to your teacher, learn everything they are trying to teach you, and most importantly, have a wonderful, beautiful day. And never forget that I love you both so much.”

The almost desperate look in her eyes must have told the girls how important this was, so rather than reject her affection, they both surged forward to her hug her neck as tightly as their little arms could squeeze. Tears pricked at her eyes that she refused to let fall. She didn’t want to embarrass her children in front of their friends, after all.

“I love you, too, Mommy,” said Amelia, who gave her mother a smacking kiss on the cheek.

“Me, too, Mommy!” added Sophia with an equally wet kiss upon the other cheek. “More than the moon and stars!”

Then they were off running down the paved path toward the entrance of Storybrooke Elementary.
Regina followed their progress, lump in her throat, until they were inside.

“You were so wrong, mother,” she whispered, feeling bolstered by her children’s wholehearted affection. “Love is not weakness. It’s strength.”

She knew that because she carried the strength those hugs and kisses gave her all the way to Warren.

Chapter End Notes

Originally this chapter was twice as long, but I cut in half in order to get it posted on time. Hopefully doing so didn't ruin it.
Regina confronts Albert Spencer.

Fortunately for Regina, the trip to the Maine State Penitentiary was very uneventful. Traffic on the interstate was subdued for a weekday, so she made excellent time to arrive at noon on the dot. The drive being so smooth was a welcome boon considering the stressful encounter ahead.

Even if it were under more normal circumstances, she would not be anxious to see Albert Spencer again. The man never failed to set her teeth on edge. Back in the Enchanted Forest, she’d had to steel herself time and again against the compulsion to melt his face off with a well-placed fireball but staid her hand since regicide, however tempting, was not an efficient way of conducting state business. Not that dealing with him in Storybrooke was a cakewalk in comparison. Albert Spencer the District Attorney was every bit as ruthless and condescending as King George had been. As mayor, she endured his impertinence because he got results, but now with a potential threat to Ruby looming on the horizon, she wasn’t sure how long she could afford such restraint. She only hoped Spencer had the good sense not to push her too far lest the already short leash on her temper snap at a most inopportune moment. The last thing she needed today was an assault charge to weasel her way out of.

After arriving at the penitentiary and exiting her vehicle, Regina smoothed a hand down her clothes to calm her frayed nerves. Showing any form of weakness in front of man who had proven himself to be quite the apex predator was inviting disaster. Once recomposed, she strode toward the prison with the practiced confidence of a woman who had spent most of her life navigating high-pressure situations. Keeping a level head under fire was at least one thing she was grateful to her mother for.

Once inside, Regina presented her credentials to the officers at the reception desk, who received her with all-due respect for her position. Being the mayor of a town in Maine meant that she was afforded more privileges at state-run facilities, and that leeway was only increased where Spencer was concerned, seeing as he was one of her citizens and it was under her authority that he had been remanded to their custody. His transfer from the holding cells in the psych ward beneath the hospital was one of the first things she saw to after a permanent solution to the barrier around town was implemented. Spencer had crowed that the move was a gross miscarriage of justice that Regina hastily quelled by suggesting she would be more than happy to keep him locked away right where he was, a place to which she alone controlled access.

“At least at the State Pen,” she’d said, “you’ll have exercise and phone privileges. But if you keep this up and I’m forced to return you to your cell, I’ll be extremely annoyed. Enough perhaps to instruct our dear Nurse Ratched to start you on a drug regimen to keep you...pliable.” The smile she
leveled at him was nothing short of sharkish.

He’d gone quietly after that.

With her credentials providing ample proof of who she was and what authority she wielded, Regina was promptly escorted by a pair of guards through several sequences of locking doors into a section of the prison dedicated to white collar criminals. As one of the burly guards ushered her through the doors to the visitation area, Regina found herself uncomfortably tensing. The moment of truth was at hand, and she was both dreading and anticipating the coming confrontation with equal intensity.

After leading her over to the third station on the right, the guard gestured respectfully for her to sit. “You can wait here, Madam Mayor. It’ll just be a minute before the prisoner is escorted in.”

Regina nodded, peering at his name tag. “Thank you, Officer Rogers,” she said, and then watched as the guard assumed a stone-faced vigil against the wall. Pulling the chair out, she seated herself and took a deep preparatory breath, steeling herself for the impending battle of wills. She needed to be focused and on her A-game, because if she knew anything about Spencer it was that he had been meticulously planning this meeting since the moment he learned Ruby was his flesh and blood.

While in the Old World, the man once known as George was a shrewd negotiator. It was very likely that whatever happened today, he would find an avenue with which to ensure at least some of his demands would be met, which was fine. Regina was willing to concede certain things so long as they were reasonable. The problem was the likelihood not many of them would be.

For instance, she was absolutely convinced he would demand access to Ruby. Ostensibly this could be seen as logical and well within his rights as Ruby’s parent, but as Charming had well stated, Spencer’s interest would be self-serving at best. A part of him, however small, certainly wanted to be in Ruby’s life for the simple reason that she was his child; but the other parts would be operating on a more insidious level. There were so many ways he might be plotting to leverage his relation to Ruby that there was no way in hell she could allow him any form of contact without first thoroughly vetting his intentions.

Aside from her own protective streak as a wife, whatever part Albert Spencer was going to have in Ruby's life would be ultimately decided by Ruby herself. Regina was determined to see to that. Too many family members had denied Ruby that right, and it was high past time she got some control over getting basic answers about who she was and where she came from – things everyone deserved to know. Granny was more likely than not to object to Ruby learning the truth, and though keeping Ruby in the dark about her origins wasn’t malicious, Regina wasn’t going to stand for it anymore. This was Ruby’s past, her parentage, and the decision as to what she wished to do about it belonged to her alone.
Of course, that all hinged on whether Reila's claims could be verified, such as by Spencer providing Regina with undeniable physical proof in the form of DNA that he was in fact Ruby's father. Having developed an amiable acquaintance with the warden over the years through monthly phone call check-ins, getting a sample from the prisoner was not going to be difficult unless Spencer decided to be obstinate. If the old goat refused to comply, Regina was more than prepared to walk away with no regrets. As the person responsible for protecting Ruby, she required more assurance than the confession of a dying woman to upend Ruby’s life, no matter how sincere it was.

For the next few minutes, Regina distracted herself from the wait by taking out her phone and perusing her schedule for the next couple of days. That it was relatively clear meant she could personally and immediately see to having any potential genetic testing done. There was a lab in Bangor highly recommended for being discrete as well as open to expediting the process with the appropriate incentives. To ensure the impeccable credibility of Ruby’s parentage, Regina was not above bribery.

Soon enough, the door from the prisoner side of the visitation area was being opened and a shackled Albert Spencer was being strong-armed through by a behemoth of a man who appeared to give the former monarch about as much consideration as he did the gooey remains of an insect wedged into the treads of his boots. She let a smug smirk form on her face as she reveled in the disgrace of a once mighty man who had been reduced to such indignity.

*Oh how the mighty have fallen*, she thought, and by the way his eyes hardened, she could tell he didn't appreciate her unsubtle gloating. Regina really didn't care, though, when she was enjoying his plight so very much.

Spencer was then forced with no gentleness into the chair on his side of the partition. The manacles around his hands were removed next, though his legs remained secured, and with them freed, he leaned forward and snatched at the dated phone to his right. After lifting the receiver to his ear, his demeanor shifted from a royal rage at being so disrespected to that of a calm and collected politician. Only the obvious disdain for her remained evident in his eyes.

When Regina fetched her own receiver, she did not have to wait long to hear his haughty, discourteous greeting.

“Hello, Regina.”

“Mr. Spencer,” she said, tilting her head slightly as her smirk transformed into an openly mocking grin. “I see that you've adjusted well to life in the slammer. I have to say, orange really is the new black – at least for you.”
Spencer sneered imperiously. “Always quick with the clever remark. I see your tongue is as sharp as ever. Alas, I really don't have time for your games. May I assume you're here because you've spoken to Reila?”

Regina rolled her eyes. As if there were any other reason she would grace his miserable self with her presence. “Obviously. Do you think I would be here of my own accord? Believe me, this visit is as unpleasant for me as it is for you.”

“Well then,” said Spencer, leaning back a bit, “let's dispense with the formalities, shall we? I want to see my daughter.”

“Which daughter is that?” Regina asked, being deliberately obtuse. Her hope was that in provoking him, he might reveal more about his intentions.

Spencer's eyes hardened. “Don't test me, Regina. I'm in no mood for games.”

“Do you think this is a game for me?” Regina shot back, scoffing. It amused her that the old goat was having such trouble reining in his temper. It was almost too easy. If Spencer wasn't careful, he would slip up without her having to extract information more...persuasively. “Believe me, I'm deadly serious. You're going to have to be more specific than that, because last time I checked, you don't have any children...who are living at any rate.” Spencer’s eyes darkened with poorly concealed rage. It's so delightful to poke the bear, she thought with much more glee than she should have given present circumstances. She could now see the appeal that often prompted Zelena to live so dangerously. It really was fun. Childish but fun. She could hear her sister’s trilling voice in her head. Poke, poke, give a poke. Prod the beast until it's woke.

Nostrils flaring, Spencer took a deep breath and clamped his eyes shut. When they reopened, they were absolutely blazing. “I must speak with my daughter, Regina,” he ground out as if issuing a command to be obeyed. “So why don't you call her right now. She is your wife is she not? I would assume you have her on speed dial.”

“Oh!” Regina cried, as if suddenly he were making sense. She delighted at the tentative hold he maintained on his anger. “Do you mean Ruby? Yes, as a matter of fact I do recall Reila mentioning you believe her to be your biological daughter. Isn't that just the way life is? So very mean with irony. After all, didn't you frame her for murder once? And did you not you lead a witch hunt against her, complete with literal torches and pitch forks and a frothing lynch mob? That daughter, you mean? Honestly, do you really expect me to believe this nonsense about Ruby being your flesh and blood? Please. It's absurd.”
Rather than being angry as Regina had expected, Spencer merely smirked and leaned further back into his chair, seeming unperturbed by what he had done to his own flesh and blood.

“What can I say?” His mouth quirked up at the corners. “The truth is often stranger than fiction. You ought to know that better than anyone.”

Gazing sharply at the man once known as King George, Regina dropped her voice an octave. “What do you mean by that?”

A smug expression settled across the former monarch's face at her annoyance. “Obviously I'm referring to that whole author business several years back,” he said. “To think, if only he wasn't such a meddler, we wouldn't be here today living out this fiction that never should have been. If not for him, my son wouldn't have died and you never would have become Queen. It stands to reason if that had happened, I wouldn't be locked in this infernal cage and my only living child – who was so cruelly stolen from me – wouldn't be married to you of all people. Whatever the outcome of reverting Isaac’s hubris, they are, from my perspective, far preferable to the present reality.”

That the explanation seemed plausible didn’t diminish the blow to her pride. Disapproval of her being so intimately linked to Ruby was something Regina was accustomed to. Countless sacrifices and selfless deeds in the wake of the first curse being broken should have bought her at least a modicum of trust, but there were still those holdouts who refused to let go of the past. Those among that segment simply could not accept that her marriage to one of their most beloved heroes was solely out of love. To them, there had to be an ulterior motive, such as her using Ruby to get to Snow, which was the most common slander on her marriage. Others thought she was secretly hatching some sinister plan and was slowly corrupting Ruby to her side to make her complicit in those machinations; never mind that they’d been together over a decade, had two children together, and were madly in love. For the most part she’d learned to ignore that unforgiving portion of the citizenry, but the disparagement, however clandestine, still hurt. What else did she have to do to for them to realize she had changed? How much more did she have to suffer to earn their forgiveness? The answers to those particularly troublesome questions had yet to present themselves.

With Spencer, though, the reason for his disgust was at being linked to Regina in the familial sense. As straightforward a man as he was, she did not have to wrack her brain to figure out why. Back in the Enchanted Forest, King George had never once bothered to disguise how much he detested her. Even when Leopold was alive to act as a buffer, George sneered down his patrician nose at her. His total disregard of her value as a Queen had been because he, like so many other nobles of his ilk, considered her mere breeding stock, a trophy bride for an aging King who was desperate to perpetuate his posterity beyond his daughter. And while Regina had hoped (more so out of a desire to ally with him than that he approve of her) that his low opinion of her might change when she took power for her own, it hadn’t. Instead, his loathing only seemed to intensify.
Upon her first official visit to his kingdom as reigning monarch, his reception had been cold, which she had anticipated as she assumed they would never be on friendly terms. But she thought herself owed a sliver of respect at the very least for ridding him of one of his chief rivals. There was no love lost between Leopold and George, after all, and having done him such an indirect boon, she’d hoped he would be willing to negotiate the reopening of several trade routes Leopold had shut down between their respective kingdoms. It was no secret that his kingdom was strapped for capital, and she figured the olive branch would be a welcome gesture that might pave the way for an alliance. It was to be cruelly slapped away.

The second they were beyond public eyes and ears, George had turned on her with a withering expression. She could still remember his exact words.

“I learned a long time ago that duplicitous, conniving usurpers such as you are never to be trusted,” he said. “Your mother’s ambition destroyed the integrity of a once proud family, and it seems that you have fallen into her ignoble patterns. Well, let me enlighten you before you get any ideas. Marrying above your station does nothing to change who you really are. And believe me, Regina, I know exactly who you are.

“So, let this be a warning to you, and you would do well to heed it, for it will be the only one you receive. I will stay out of your affairs so long as you stay out of mine, but if your greedy hand should deign to reach beyond the borders of your own kingdom, I will not hesitate to relieve you of it.”

Not one to back down from threats, Regina had returned a few of her own, not giving an inch to the arrogant old man. They had not come to blows that day, but Regina had been sorely tempted to rip his heart out and wield power over his kingdom through him out of spite. The only reason she refrained was that her lust for power was, for the moment, sated in violently usurping what rightfully belonged to Snow. Revenge was all she had needed to complete her happy ending and all of her attention was bent upon achieving it. So, in a display of herculean self-control, she walked away with her head held high and the threat of reprisal hanging between them should he ever again dare speak to her in such a way.

Needless to say, the rest of that official visit was unbearably tense, and when it was over, she was more than glad to return to her own castle, which spoke to how angry she was with George because Snow still lived there at the time. In all the years she ruled, she never forgot that incident and never would. It seemed especially relevant now, though. Knowing how George felt about her, she could see how it would eat at him that a woman he saw as little more than an uppity tramp was married to his daughter.

“Be that as it may,” Regina replied, a smirk of her own forming on her lips, “we are where we are, aren't we? And while I know that you would welcome a chance to alter the past, I for one would not.”
Leaning closer to the glass separating them, Regina allowed her smirk to transform into a full-blown grin. If the old fool wanted to sit in judgment of her from behind bars, well, she was certainly not above rubbing his nose in what was currently offending it. “You see, I am happy...so very happy, indeed. I am a fulfilled woman, Mr. Spencer, in every sense of the word. Ruby – and by Ruby, I mean your...daughter – has almost everything to do with that. She takes care of me in ways that most women only ever fantasize about. You really should be proud. She is amazingly talented.” A lascivious tint to her grin added effect to the purposefully repugnant innuendo, and she delighted in the way he squirmed like the venomous snake that he was. “And while you may not be, Ruby is proud to be my wife, and I am immeasurably proud to be hers. But do you know what she won't be proud of?”

At this, Regina leaned in even closer, so close that the tip of her nose was almost touching the glass pane. She waited a moment for a response from Spencer, and while none was forthcoming, the perilously boiling anger in him was unmistakable via tense lines in his face and the hard set of his jaw. His reaction amused her to no end, and only spurred her on.

“No? Not even a guess?” she chirped gleefully, her pearly white teeth on display as she smiled. “Let me enlighten you, then. You. She would not be proud of you, Mr. Spencer. As a matter of fact, she would be ashamed to learn that a degenerate murderer such as yourself is her father. After all that you have done...my God, you tried to frame her for a murder you committed!”

The well-aimed provocation hit its mark. Spencer exploded forward, blue eyes flashing with fury. “I didn't know she was my daughter! Do you honestly think I would have done that if I knew? Certainly not! If I’d had any inclination as to her existence, I would have turned heaven and earth on end to find her. I would have raised in the lap of luxury, far away from that deplorable rat hole she grew up in with her grandmother. She would have been a princess instead of a pauper.”

“Should have, would have,” Regina taunted, watching with satisfaction as Spencer recoiled back into the chair, his arms defensively crossing over his chest. “Your pretty words are empty and meaningless. Did you know that she's never forgotten what you did to her? To that innocent young man who was sweet on her? You stained the earth with his blood and then blamed it on her, all to secure your petty revenge against Charming. You, my dear – much like I once was – are a monster, and it is for that reason that even if this allegation is true, I will make certain she never learns of it.”

Again she paused, giving space for a reaction, though this time she expected none. Her prediction proved correct, as Spencer simply sat there steaming impotently from the other side of the barrier. She exulted in his hatred.

“You see, unlike you, I actually love her,” she said after enjoying his misery long enough. “I made sacred vows to her that I intend to keep. One of them was that I would always protect her. And let
me tell you something, Mr. Spencer, she would certainly need it if her so-called paternity became
general knowledge. You have almost as many enemies as I do, and that is a rather impressive feat
considering my admittedly colorful past.”

In an abrupt movement, Spencer shot forward, his manacled hand gripping the receiver until his
knuckles turned white. His visage was menacing and dark thunderclouds formed within his piercing
blue eyes. “You can't keep me from my child, Regina, and I'm frankly disappointed you would even
try. After all, as you said, you have done much in your life to accrue an impressive list of enemies.
And yet did you not fight tooth and nail to keep that boy of yours by your side, even when his heroic
mother showed up to undo all of your hard work and publish your laundry list of sins?”

“Don't you dare bring my son into this,” Regina warned, threatening snarl curling her lips.

“I'm not,” Spencer shot back, wearing an equally vicious expression. “You are by being a hypocrite!
Don't stoop to such levels, Regina. It's beneath you. As much as I loathe your very existence, that
was one thing I always admired: you are unrepentant about who you are. So you can drop the act.
Stop pretending to be a hero when you're not. You're a villain just like me, just like you always were
and always will be.”

“I can tell you right now why you're wrong,” Regina said, glaring hatefully because his words had
struck a chord of truth. “If I were the monster you believe me to be, do you really think I would have
allowed you to make such threats without reprisal? Do you think I don't see the danger you pose to
my wife...my True Love? If I really were a monster, I would have shunned your request and simply
arranged a befitting...exit from this place for you – which is well within my power, mind you. Yet
you continue to live quite comfortably considering the severity of your crimes. You should count
yourself fortunate that your situation was not made...intolerable.”

The edges of Spencer’s lips turned up mockingly. “Fortune has nothing to do with you being a
coward. Don’t kid yourself, Regina. You were too weak to do what needed to be done, and that’s
why I’m here instead of where you clearly believe I should be.”

“Am I, though?” Regina asked, her tone bordering on dangerous. “You should know that to be a lie
when you’re fully aware that I protect what's mine. I fight for what's mine...will do anything for
what's mine, no matter the cost, no matter how unsavory. And Ruby? She...is...mine. There is
nothing I won’t do for her. Nothing. So, I’ll ask you once, and for your sake, answer wisely. Do you
really want to test me about this?”

For a moment, Spencer sat there, studying Regina intently in an attempt to decipher whether or not
she was bluffing. Well, he wasn't going to find anything, because she wasn't. If it came to it, she
would do whatever she was necessary to protect Ruby, up to and including arranging the death of
what may very well be the father she’s longed for her whole life. Regina didn’t want it to come to
that, which is why she’d put the fear of God into him, hoping to deter this stubborn insistence of his to be involved in Ruby's life whether Ruby wanted that or not. If he backed down, she was content to leave him alone, but if he insisted on continuing to push her, she would have to put a stop to his interference one way or another.

As she inevitably knew would happen, Spencer sighed and hung his head, suddenly looking tired and defeated. He was no longer a king, but an old, broken man. “You’re right, I don’t want to try you,” he said, his voice losing its edge. “I recognize how you might perceive me as a threat to my daughter, but I also understand the one you pose to me.”

It caught Regina a little off balance to see the once proud monarch looking so worn and disarmed of the anger he had been thrashing about like a sword. Pride was the last line of defense for a man like him, and to surrender it was the ultimate show of defeat. But she knew how he felt. Anger could be all-consuming, so much so that when it spent itself, only an empty void remained in the spot it previously occupied. A person could cave in on themselves with such a gaping hole in their heart.

Though his blue eyes were world diluted from an anguish Regina could hardly make sense of, when Spencer looked back up, he appeared as earnest as she had ever seen him.

“All of this petty posturing is a waste of valuable time,” he declared. “For now, we need to set aside our differences for the sake of someone who matters more to us than such petty animosity. Make no mistake, Regina, I want to see my daughter, but right now there are more pressing matters. Her life is in jeopardy and I’m afraid I’m the one who put it there.”

At that, any idea of further toying with the man vanished in the blink of an eye. “What did you do?” she asked harshly, murder in her eyes at the idea of Ruby being in danger.

Sighing once more, Spencer deflated into his chair. “I set something in motion long before this information came to light. I blamed her, you see...for my predicament, that is. So I hired someone to procure a means to extract recompense for my suffering.”

Though he was deliberately veiling his words for whoever might be eavesdropping on their conversation, Regina didn't require a translator to decipher what he was implying. He had hired a hitman to kill Ruby. Incensed, she gripped the phone in her hand until her knuckles popped in protest. “Who did you hire? And when?”

“At a year and a half ago, I hired Thomas Hatter to acquire a special...remedy I'd heard about,” he said, his blue eyes dulled with pain as he explained his unforgivable actions. “It is targeted to only work on her kind, and after much searching he found it. To my great shame, I gave him the go ahead
Panic crawled up inside Regina’s chest and throat. Eye wide with fright, she all but shouted, “Then contact him! Call it off right now!” Of all the scenarios she had imaged upon Reila’s insistence the matter George wished to discuss was of life and death importance, this was infinitely worse than them all.

Being enamored as she of Snow’s rescuer that day so long ago on the mountain, the day she’d first encountered the legendary Red Riding Hood, Regina had recognized the threat the girl posed, and not only to her heart but to her continued existence within the mortal plane. Thereafter so she sought any and all information she could concerning werewolves. In her woefully limited research, she came across an old tome that made mention of how werewolves did not originate in the lands of the Enchanted Forest, and that in their ancestral home to the north there was a certain rare herb they greatly feared. This herb made them lose possession of their faculties to the beast inside until they were reduced rabid and feral animals unable to control their impulses. In such a state, if they were not put down immediately they would eventually die a most miserable death, punctuated by prolonged suffering.

“I can’t,” Spencer answered, his face pinching with remorse. “I didn't want to chance losing my spine at the last moment, so I told him to destroy the burner phone I provided him. He has, as they say in this world, gone dark. I have no way of contacting him. There’s nothing I can do.”

Now Regina was nearly paralyzed with fear. Without a way for Spencer to halt the ghastly attack he’d put in motion, Jefferson’s conniving and ruthless brother would almost certainly find a way to complete his mission. She was going to have to be vigilant or else she might lose Ruby, for good this time, and the very thought made her physically ill.

“If something happens to her...” she warned, voice strained by the effort to not vomit. And to be sure, if something did happen to Ruby, he would suffer untold agonies, just as Joshua Woods had.

Not that should would have the opportunity to exact revenge upon Ruby’s bastard of a father should the worst happen. Seeing as they shared hearts, Ruby dying would result in Regina’s own death, which only made her feel more sick knowing their demise would leave their daughters as orphans. That the girls would have family to take them in provided little reassurance when Regina knew the unavoidable repercussions being abandoned had on a child; she witnessed them every day in Ruby and Emma. Losing both of their parents at once was bound to have terribly tragic and unforeseeable consequences for Amelia and Sophia. Would they become jaded and bitter like their Aunty Em had? And if they did, would they have the strength to overcome it? Would they blame themselves like their Mama had after Peter’s death? Or would the loss turn them into monsters as Daniel’s had their Mommy? Predicting the outcome was simply impossible.
On top of the horrible possibilities a successful assassination produced was the reality that they were more prone to failure than one might assume. Regina had personal knowledge of this little known fact. As Queen she had been both a target and an instigator of assassinations. Being universally hated and feared produced a lot of enemies, such as the nobles loyal to Leopold she’d stripped of rank, rival monarchs who felt threatened by her powers, and even her own citizens that she regularly oppressed and persecuted for sympathies with their exiled princess. And of course her many attempts to have Snow never once managed to succeed, even when she personally enacted them.

Still, even a failed attempt could result in catastrophic injury. Once, Regina sent her huntsman to take care of a particularly vociferous political opponent who’d been currying favor in the council to openly oppose her admittedly draconian reforms. The man had survived the attempt but was left with wounds that rendered him paralyzed from the neck down. He expired after a year of languishing in the kind of hideous torment that put a sour taste in even the Evil Queen’s mouth. The possibility of that happening to Ruby was very real, and combined with unthinkable potential that their girls might pay the price rather than them, Regina felt such irrepressible anger that she could barely see straight.

“I know,” Spencer acknowledged, scrubbing a hand over his face. “That’s why I’m telling you now, not just out of a sense of self-preservation, but because she’s all I have left in the world, Regina. Both of my sons are dead, as is my wife. I have no one else. And even though I know I am responsible for putting myself in this position, I can’t help the way I feel. I want my daughter to live. And as much it pains me to admit, you’re the only one who can make sure she does.”

Sitting back, Regina regathered herself. Hesitant to trust Spencer as she was, his desire to protect Ruby was selfish in nature in that he wanted to protect his legacy, and that was far easier to believe than any claim he was doing this out of love. That he hadn’t attempted to veil his intentions in a bid to manipulate her into helping him went a long way toward proving this to be an honest a plea for help.

That said, there was nothing Regina could do about this situation in the present with Ruby so far from Thomas Hatter’s reach. So long as that remained the case, Ruby was safe. But as a traditionally proactive person, she wasn’t about to sit back on her laurels and allow a vengeful old man’s ill-advised plotting take her wife away from her.

“Allright. For Ruby’s sake alone, I’ll help,” she said, still unable to totally quench the enmity from her tone. “But first, I need for you to agree to my conditions.”

When Spencer nodded, Regina felt a bit of the tension flow from her body. She then went on to secure his agreement to have a DNA test run, after which he gave her a thorough report of his interactions with Thomas Hatter, concluding with a promise to have his guard – with whom he had come to an agreement including financial compensation – deliver the letters that had been exchanged between them over the course of their business relationship.
With nothing left to say, Regina departed abruptly without saying goodbye. She wasn’t about to spare the slimy bastard any pity for the pain he was currently experiencing, not when he deserved it and more for putting Ruby in danger. Quite on the contrary, she hoped he wallowed in it like a pig in slop slathering himself in his own miserable failures.

Still, as much as she despised the man Regina hoped that at the very least he had learned a valuable lesson from this, otherwise she would remain an impenetrable barrier preventing him from contacting Ruby, and would do so as long as she lived. But in the unlikely circumstance that he managed to reform, the possibility of Regina ever truly accepting him as a part of Ruby’s life – and by consequence a part of her own and her children’s – seemed almost unimaginable. Even before his ill advised attempt to murder Ruby, there was too much history there to so easily brush away.

After leaving the visitation area, Regina went to speak with Warden Sommers, who greeted her warmly and expressed how glad he was to finally put a face to the voice he had heard over the phone through the years. With his help, a DNA sample was in her hand not fifteen minutes later, and she was back on the road toward Storybrooke less than ten after that.

Over the entire drive back, Regina attempted to distract herself from the current predicament. Weeks after she was supposed to have been home, Ruby was still in the Enchanted Forest, and as bad as that was, a bombshell regarding her long lost father awaited her return. Most worrying of all, Thomas Hatter was out there somewhere with a deadly poison in his possession with the intent and discipline of a seasons professional to kill Ruby, all on the orders of a man who might very well be her own flesh and blood.

To aid in blocking her mind from over-analyzing all of that, she made a few phone calls, one in particular to her acquaintance at the Bangor Genetics Laboratory to arrange for Spencer’s DNA sample, along with one of Ruby’s hair she would gather from a brush at home, to be delivered for testing. After that, she contacted Henry, who expressed deep concern over the details she filled him in on about Ruby’s continued absence and her potential parentage. Talking to her son did wonders for her morale, especially when he went on and on about his courses at school.

Eventually, though, the phone calls ended and Regina was forced to find another way to occupy her buzzing mind. Deciding to take a page out of her wife’s book, she blasted the radio in her car so that Ruby’s obnoxious music drowned out the troublesome noise of her thoughts. Being surround by the familiar sounds and memories that came with the obvious music made her feel like Ruby was there in the car with her, sitting in the passenger seat, bobbing her head as she shimmied her torso and sang along with the music while the girls joined in chorus from the back.

With that keep her grounded, the rest of the drive was made without complication. Regina crossed the line back into Storybrooke a little after noon. But as she arrived on the other side and her magic
rushed back into her body all at once, the stress of the past few days slammed into her with the force of a runaway locomotive. Tears began streaming down her face with such abundance that she was forced to pull over to the side of the road lest she have an accident.

Every attempt to recompose herself ended in abject failure when all she could think about was the terrifying possibility of Ruby dying and her being proven wrong about the consequences of the heart they shared. Being ninety-nine percent sure their fates were linked was still one percent shy of absolute certainty, which was technically impossible to reach as there was simply no precedent for her to base her theory on. Snow and Charming were the first to attempt the feat, and they yet lived. There were no other exemplars in the recorded history of the Old World to study. And even though Regina knew how enchanted hearts worked better than anyone alive save Rumplestiltskin, extrapolating that knowledge onto a totally unheard of function was, for all intents and purposes, educated guesswork. There was still a chance, however infinitesimally slim, that she would survive Ruby’s death, and that frightened her more than anything else about this latest in a long line of threats to her happiness.

Regina was a person who had lived through some truly horrific experiences: Daniel’s death, her twisted instruction from Rumple, ripping out her own father’s heart to cast the Dark Curse, her mother’s death after having finally connected with the woman Cora could have been had she kept her heart in place. Each of those tragedies were awful to live through and painful to remember, but they paled in comparison to the day she’d discovered Ruby dead in Joshua Woods’ basement. That was the single worst moment in Regina’s life. She still had nightmares about it that left sweating and panting in the bed, so disturbed she was unable to go back to sleep unless draped around Ruby’s body like a second skin. She couldn’t go through that kind of torment – not again. She wouldn’t make it this time, not when she’d nearly lost her damn mind before.

Back when Ruby was abducted all those years ago, they had only been together as a couple for three years. They weren’t married and they hadn’t yet shared the joyous privilege of becoming parents. And yet she’d become so deranged upon discovering that grizzly scene Joshua Woods produced that she lost an entire segment of her memory. It was nearly crippling to imagine what would happen to her should the worst happen. Ruby had become an irreplaceable fixture in her life, her most important person, and was now ingrained into her heart and soul, like she was an essential part of Regina’s very being and no longer simply a separate entity of her own. Of course, that was all just metaphorical, but that was how much Ruby meant to her. She couldn’t fathom being deprived of that bond without descending into an unspeakable madness that would make the Evil Queen tremble with trepidation.

Considering that, a harrowing question popped into Regina’s mind. Is it even possible for a person live with vital piece of their very essence missing? Because that was what she would have to do if the worst happened, and the very idea of enduring what remained of her life with such a soul-sucking wound always open in her heart made her feel cloistered and smothered as if she was about to suffocate on perfectly breathable air. Clenching her eyes shut, she struggled to calm the raging tides of her thoughts by taking deep, deliberate breaths, just like Archie taught Ruby to do after one of her nightmare-induced panic attacks. To Regina’s relief, the exercise worked, and within a minute she was breathing without pain again.
Unfortunately, the unbearable strain of the current situation remained unabated. Yet again, her happiness was being threatened by forces out of her control. Rage overtook anxiety with remarkable speed, and feeling helpless without a feasible plan to get them out of this godawful mess, she rested her arms against the steering wheel, buried her head into the space between them, and screamed with all her might.
The Queen of the Moon

Chapter Summary

Regina visits Belle, who has dug up some interesting information about werewolves.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to my beta, UnfairestOfThemAll, for looking over this last minute for me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After her little breakdown on the side of the road, Regina scraped up her composure and managed to piece it back together enough to resume her journey back into town. The experience was one she wasn’t keen on repeating any time soon, even though she felt much lighter having purged all that negativity – for a little while anyway. She was pragmatic enough to realize they would return with a vengeance soon enough seeing as Ruby once again landed squarely in the cross-hairs of some demented asshole bent on killing her. And as if the evil machinations of Albert Spencer and Thomas Hatter were not enough, there was also whatever unforeseen obstacle was detaining her in the Enchanted Forest to consider. It was only a matter of time, then, before a seismic shift in the situation occurred which would in turn trigger yet another emotional cataclysm. She was going to have to guard her emotions diligently lest she miss the signs of an impending eruption, lest the Queen make an untimely appearance around her friends, or worse, around the girls. That facet of her personality was one she prefers they never be exposed to.

In what was becoming a bothersome habit of late, she was indebted for Snow and David’s steadfast presence in her life. Without them, she might have truly been isolated as if she were floating alone on an island of agony, powerless to prevent the potential tragedy that lurked menacingly just over the horizon. But she wasn't alone anymore, not like she’d been after Daniel’s death or right after the first curse broke and she was all alone with a plethora of enemies gunning for her head. Now there were people who loved her that she could rely on and who she knew without need for asking would do whatever they could to help her stay above water. And while that proven, reliable support system didn't completely dispel her worries, she could at least rest a bit better knowing she had multiple shoulders on which to lean.

Regina smiled wryly to herself. What a far cry from how things were a decade and change ago. Then, the thought that she might grow so dependent upon people she had once made open war upon would have been disgusting. That part of her – the one that was the Evil Queen – railed against such domestic weakness, but most days the part which drew comfort from the Charming family was the side she listened to. Today was one of those days.
Just as she had decided to give said couple a visit, the shrill ringing of a phone startled Regina out of her thoughts. The catchy lyrics of a ringtone she had not programmed echoed through the car.

“Look, there she goes, that girl is so peculiar,” the song went. “I wonder if she's feeling well. With a dreamy, far-off look, and her nose stuck in a book, what a puzzle to the rest of us is Belle.”

Regina rolled her eyes and gave a watery laugh. She didn't have to guess who was calling or how the ringtone got there. Ruby was really such a child sometimes. She was going to have to start hiding her phone lest all her contacts be associated with an absurd and/or annoying song Ruby deemed appropriate.

Still chuckling, she answered the call without bothering to look at the screen. “Hello, Belle.”

“Hi, Regina,” Belle's richly accented voice seemed even more chipper than normal. “I was just calling to let you know that I finally found something very interesting concerning that request you made a while back.”

Regina perked up. Before Ruby had left for her trip, Regina had asked Belle to research the archives of the library in a far-fetched bid for information concerning the wolves of the Enchanted Forest. She hadn't really expected anything to come of the request, which seemed to be a correct assessment being that she had heard nothing for weeks. But under present circumstances, she couldn’t help seeing Belle’s call as a fortuitous sign.

“You did?” Regina asked, her tone betraying her pleasantly piqued interest.

“I did,” Belle said, evidently rather pleased with herself. “I had to really scour the library top to bottom to find it, but eventually I stumbled upon a really old section of tomes that had been collecting dust for God knows how long. How I missed them all this time, I'll never understand. Anyway, I know it's a little late with Ruby already gone and all, but if you can swing by sometime soon, I can go over what I found with you.”

After a quick glance at the clock in her car, Regina calculated how much time she had before needing to pick the girls up at Snow's. With it just barely after three in the afternoon and being the type who abhorred procrastination, she decided she had plenty of time to pay a visit to the Storybrooke Library.

That in mind, she pressed on the gas a little more heavily, delighting in the timeless purr of the v8
engine powering her beloved Mercedes. “I'm free now if that's alright.”

“Oh.” Belle sounded surprised. “I had heard you were out of town today. Was that information wrong?”

“No. I was only gone for a while this morning and afternoon, but I’ve already crossed over into Storybrooke. I should be back in town shortly.”

Regina heard rustling that told her Belle had stood and started to move about, obviously in a hurried preparation for the Mayor’s unplanned arrival.

“Alright, well, I'm at the Library now, so feel free to come on over,” said Belle as she continued to shuffle papers. “I'll gather the materials so they’re all ready for you.”

Absentmindedness was one of Belle’s character traits this world’s Disney interpretation captured most accurately. The annoyingly pretty woman really was nose deep in a book half the time, and during the other half couldn’t be bothered to conjure up much in the way of common sense. Belle was one of those people who was too smart for her own good most of the time. That her heart was always in the right place was the only counter to that volatile combination of high intelligence and low sensibility, or else Belle might have wound up a dangerous person. Thankfully for Belle’s sake, few had hearts as pure, though how that was possible considering who she loved was a mystery that Regina didn’t often dwell on since it inevitably circled back to her own relationship with Ruby.

Obvious misgivings from both parties aside, Regina and Belle had managed to settle into a comfortable acquaintance with each other over the years, though initially both recognized it as mainly for Ruby's sake. They would never be so close as to call one another the best of friends, but because Ruby loved Belle, Regina had learned to tolerate being around the erudite brunette. Funny thing, though, that the more she got to know the woman beneath the veneer of Rumplestiltskin’s precious book worm, the more she admired what she saw.

She had underestimated Belle the first time they met. Having reduced her at a glance to Rumple's newest plaything, she’d blinded herself to all Belle had to offer aside from her big blue eyes, pretty face, and rustic charm. An astutely intelligent woman, Belle had a unique way of approaching a diverse array of subjects such as politics, philosophy, religion, and society that often-sparked Regina's own interest in them. Often their debates became so lively and engrossing that hours could pass by without either noticing. Regina's other acquaintances tended to consider such complicated matters both tedious and boring, but not Belle. No, with Belle, the more complex the topic, the more engaged and passionate she became. Although in every other character aspect they were pretty much opposites, in terms of natural curiosity and an insatiable thirst for knowledge, they were very much alike.
It turned out to be a blessing in disguise that Regina was married to a woman who both appreciated and nurtured her intellectual pursuits, so she never received much in the way of complaints from Ruby about these sometimes-lengthy debating sessions with Belle. Quite the reverse in fact, as Ruby would usually just sit back and observe with attentive delight as two of the most important people in her life, having managed to close a seemingly impassable distance that had existed between them for far too long, so amiably and enthusiastically interacted. That intangible ability to bring people together was just one of the many, many ways in which Ruby was special, and it was part of the reason why Regina would be forever prepared to go to such lengths for her. It was also why Belle was so willing to spend countless hours scouring the library for a book she had been aware likely did not exist.

As she rounded one of the sharper curves cutting through the forest, Regina gripped the wheel more tightly, both to maintain control of her vehicle and her concentration.

“That's perfectly acceptable, Belle, thank you,” she said while smoothly navigating the turn, relaxing as she then settled back into a straightaway.

“You're most welcome,” came the immediate reply, and Regina could hear the abounding happiness in it. Belle really was a sweetheart who was at her happiest when she was helping someone else solve a problem that seemed impossible. “I'll see you soon. Yeah?”

“You will, indeed.”

“Kay, then. Drive safe.”

Regina snorted at the idea of her being the reckless driver in the family. “You don’t have to worry about that, dear. My name isn’t Ruby.”

Belle’s chiming laugh carried through the speaker. “She does have a lead foot, doesn’t she? That’s why I refuse to ride with her anymore in that blasted Camaro. I swear, she floors it just to make me squeal like a little girl.”

An honest smile broke through Regina’s clouded expression. “That sounds like her. Unless the kids are in the car she becomes a thrill-seeking teenager all over again every time she gets behind the wheel.”
“All part of her roguish charm.” Regina would bet her last dollar Belle had said that with the exact same dramatic flair Ruby would have, hand on her hips, head cocked to the side, cheesy grin firmly in place.

“That’s a nice way of putting it,” Regina said with a chuckle. “Frankly she’s little more than an adrenaline junkie always going off half-cocked, ever chasing the next fix. Being a daredevil has landed her into a lot of trouble over the years. Ask Emma. But you’re right that it’s what makes her Ruby. And I, for one, wouldn’t have her any other way.”

“Nor would I,” said Belle, and then quiet descended over the line.

There was no doubt in Regina’s mind that Belle was ruminating on where Ruby was right now, whether she was safe or fighting for her life against some horrific creature that had crawled up from the godforsaken pits of that hellish land. Not when she was doing the same. Not when she was being gradually consumed by the possibility that even now Ruby and Emma were embroiled in a life or death struggle with a dragon or an ogre or any other manner of beast or monster that inhabited the Enchanted Forest. The thought was simply petrifying.

A moment later Belle ended the thick silence, providing Regina welcome relief from the awful turn her mind had taken.

“She’ll come back, you know. No matter what she’s had to face or what she’ll have to do, she won’t stop until she’s back home to you and those girls. Plus, she has Emma with her, and I happen to know for a fact that woman would rather die than come back home alone. They’ll watch after each other.”

Regina heaved a forlorn sigh as she weaved the Mercedes through another bendy stretch of road. “I believe that in my heart. I’m...impatient, I suppose. I just want her to come home. Hell, I want both of them back, and not tomorrow or the day after. But now.”

“And that’s not wrong,” Belle said. “She’s your wife, and Emma is your friend and the mother of your son. You’re allowed to be worried. As their friend, I am, too, if I’m being honest. But if I know anything about those two, it’s that they’re too damn stubborn to die.”

Regina couldn’t disagree and said as much. Especially since Belle was one of few on the in with Ruby and Emma’s so-called womance, and therefore ought to know the absurd lengths they would go to for each other.
“Keep that in mind, then, or try at least.”

Belle’s attempt at encouragement was sweet, and prompted a smile of appreciation. “I’ll certainly try.”

“That’s all you can do, really. So just hang on to that. And in the meantime, what I’ve learned might help take you mind off things for a bit.”

Regina hummed her agreement. “Maybe it will. I have to admit; a distraction would be nice.”

“In that case, I’m gonna let you go and finish up here so I’m ready for you.”

“Thank you, Belle. Goodbye.”

After Belle returned the sentiment, Regina disconnected the call and receded into heavy contemplation. She wondered what it was that had Belle buzzing with so much energy. Was it possible that she might have unintentionally discovered the mysterious origins of werewolves? The idea seemed rather unlikely when Regina herself knew almost nothing. Most of the Enchanted Forest didn’t even bother to question what made the werewolf curse work, all they knew was it turned people into raving beasts to be slaughtered on sight, and thus had no interest in underlying causes of the condition. And in Storybrooke, Ruby having her wolf under control meant she posed no danger to the citizenry, and therefore they were uninterested in what made her tick.

However similar lycanthropes were to wolves when shape-shifted, they were otherwise very different. There was a magic about werewolves in their canid form that their natural counterparts lacked, or at least those that Regina had encountered in the Enchanted Forest did. Her healthy fascination with wolves had prompted her to seek them out whenever possible, and it was a likely explanation as to her attraction to Graham, however superficial it had been. As Queen, one of her regular indulgences was to observe the wolf packs that inhabited the forests surrounding the Dark Palace. To her delight, her interest in the beautiful animals seemed to be returned. It was as if the wolf packs sensed that she was trustworthy, for though they never openly approached her, they never feared her and even went so far as to relax while in her presence. A sort of silent camaraderie quickly developed, one where Regina could lounge against a tree for a while to read as the wolves foraged, or engaged in playful behavior with their pack-mates, or rested within her general vicinity. In all that time she spent among the wolf packs, she never once got the slightest hint of magic. They were ordinary, albeit magnificent creatures, and nothing more.

But when Ruby was her wolf, she practically oozed an ancient aura of power that was so potently wild that it assaulted Regina’s delicate magical senses to the point of utter intoxication. There was a
raw, untapped potential in Ruby that her werewolf wife was ignorant of, which went a long way toward explaining how Ruby could perform the superhuman feats of strength and endurance she regularly exhibited even outside of Wolf’s Time. She even theorized it was well within the realm of possibility that Ruby could learn to wield that magical power consciously if properly instructed, though Regina didn't dare to breach the subject. Her own memories of learning magic and the terrible price it had incurred along with the gray hair she’d accumulated trying to beat some knowledge into Emma’s titanium skull stifled those desires.

Of course, that didn't mean she would never change her mind. It was a woman's prerogative to do so, after all. And just as with Emma’s white magic, an unforeseen circumstance might arise at any moment in which she had no choice but to reveal her suspicions to Ruby and instruct her. She hoped that day never came, but if it did, she was ready to do whatever was necessary, even if it turned her hair a snowy white.

Still, even though there were vast differences between werewolves and wolves in the Enchanted Forest, she supposed that there might yet be an undiscovered branch of the lupine family tree that was magical in nature, which might explain where werewolves originated. However, if such a branch existed, they were very well hidden to escape the notice of some of the most powerful practitioners of magic to ever live in the Enchanted Forest.

There was one species that posed an intriguing fit to the conundrum, as they were both frighteningly intelligent and inherently adept at operating unseen. At one time, she’d believed those wolves would either prove a formidable foe or a powerful ally, so she’d reached out to them to secure an alliance. They had, of course, declined her overtures, but were graciously willing to barter with her to ensure their safety in exchange for their sworn cooperation should her kingdom ever fall under attack. As warped as she’d been back then, she was able to recognize a good deal, so accepted and honored it until the end of her reign. But although those creatures held some magic within them, it paled in comparison to the sheer magnitude of energy required for werewolves to shapeshift, which effectively ruled them out.

If Belle had found the missing link, as it were, she was soon to find out, for as her thoughts on the subject came to an end, she arrived at the Library. As eager as she was to learn what Belle discovered, she wasted no time in parking, exiting her vehicle and making her way inside.

Regina found Belle at one of the small reading tables provided for citizens, seated with a large tome in hand. Her hair was bunched up into a sloppy bun held in place by a number five pencil and she was absently twirling a pen with her fingers as she chewed on her lip as she read.

Crossing over to the table, Regina's heels clicked loudly on the floors, causing Belle to glance up and smile upon catching sight of her. Idly, it dawned on Regina that Belle now smiled at her approach rather than the former frowns or scowls. She wondered when that disconcerting but not entirely unwelcome shift had occurred.
“Hey,” Belle greeted as she gestured to the chair beside her on the left. “Right on time as always. Why don't you have a seat here and we can get started.”

Nodding, Regina stepped around Belle and slid primly into the chair, then scooted up to the table so she could peruse the various scrolls and books scattered haphazardly on the surface. Most of what she could see within the organize chaos was well-aged material – the scrolls in particular looked very old – so Regina was doubly impressed at Belle's thorough nature in conducting the search.

Glancing over to Belle, Regina picked up a brown leather-bound book with a slightly cracked surface to examine. It was a relatively useless compendium of the wildlife inhabiting the Enchanted Forest.

“So,” she said as she brushed her fingers over the tome, “over the phone you sounded rather eager. What in particular caught your interest?”

Belle flushed with exuberance. “Oh! It was this one.” She picked up the book to her immediate right. Its cover was black as midnight and it was unadorned of any distinctive markings, titles, or labels save the name of the author, a person Regina had never heard of: Athanatos the Wanderer. Without explaining further, Belle began thumbing through it until she found the section she was looking for. Putting down the book she had been examining, Regina gave Belle her full attention, her eyes taking in the glimpses of crudely but artistically rendered creatures depicted upon each page.

“Here it is,” Belle said at last upon landing on one containing a drawing of a massive wolf next to a beautifully statuesque woman who was holding a bow and arrow. A diadem rested upon her head, adorned by a crescent moon. Thick curls cascaded down the woman's back, bound at the temple in intricate braids. Regina's breath caught in her throat; the woman reminded her very much of Ruby as she’d been in the Enchanted Forest, though she chalked that up to how much she was missing her wife right now. Glancing at Belle, she prompted for an explanation by quirking an eyebrow.

Belle took the hint. “This is a book of legends from our land,” she said. “I'm not sure what its title is – as you could see it is unmarked. But I can tell you that it is very old. In fact, I can't even begin to guess how old it is. I'm frankly amazed that it's still holding together, but I suspect there might be magic at work.”

Leaning towards both Belle and the book, Regina lifted her hand over the yellowed pages. “May I?” she asked. With Belle's permission, Regina closed her eyes and summoned her magic, allowing it to reach out toward the book. At first contact, it appeared no different than any other mundane object, but as her magic delved further, it brushed against a very faint string of magic the book was imbued with. In all her years practicing the craft she had never needed to probe so deeply to uncover so
simple a ward. Whoever cast had to have been extremely skilled and inordinately precise, the magical equivalent of a modern brain surgeon.

Narrowing her eyes, she refocused herself, homing in on the magic preventing her from identifying whatever enchantment lay beneath it. Coaxing her magic to slowly and gently feel along the string, she tried to make sense of how to undo without causing some catastrophic chain event, but the more she explored it for openings, the more frustrated she grew. Just as she was nearing the point of giving up, she clenched her eyes shut to reign in any stray thoughts and one last time summoned all her concentration on her task. Upon her next pass of the string, she at last felt something that caused her to pause. Upon further examination, she noticed that there was an infinitesimally slight disturbance along the string that began to resonate in her brain as if some kind of catch, not at all unlike the clasp of a cloak. After giving it a tug or two, she felt it unfurl, revealing an elegantly woven preservation spell more complex in nature than any she had ever encountered.

Opening her eyes, she stared at Belle with profound astonishment. “Your suspicions were correct, dear. This book is preserved by magic, a very old and powerful magic. Where did you find it?”

Belle shifted in her chair, then pointed towards the back of the Library where a small room was located.

“That room back there is full of old books like this that I just haven’t had time to go through,” she said, turning back to Regina. “We discovered them a few years back in the Sorcerer’s mansion, but life got hectic with my pregnancy, raising a daughter, then with what happened to Ruby, and you guys having kids. I just forgot about them. But the other day I got the oddest feeling. For some reason, I just knew I had to look in that room. I hadn’t been in there at all in months, but as luck would have it, this book was the first I picked up.

“From the first page, I was gripped. Most of the mythologies discussed in here are unheard of, and believe me, I’ve read through much of Rumplestiltskin's collection, which is quite extensive.” Belle's eyes grew even more expressive as she continued. “There are even stories and legends in here which describe deities visiting the Enchanted Forest. How amazing is that? But anyway, I was reading through this when I came to this particular entry and I just knew I had found something incredible.”

“What does it say?” Regina asked with much the same awed curiosity as Belle was exuding. She couldn't help it. Belle's excitement was contagious.

Biting her lip, Belle looked over at Regina in a sheepish manner. “Would you like a paraphrase or did you want to actually read it for yourself?”
Reaching over to pat Belle's shoulder, Regina smiled indulgently. “A summary would be fine, dear.”

“Right,” said Belle, who then pointed to the picture of the woman with the bow. “This is Diana, Queen of the Moon, matron goddess of nature and of wolves in particular. In the ancient days, she was revered and worshiped as the goddess of the hunt and of fertility.”

The name was familiar to Regina from the knowledge of this world supplied to her by the Curse. “Diana? As in the Roman goddess?”

Belle gave her a pleased smile. “Very similar, actually. I guess it’s not just fairy tales in this world that are based on reality from our world. There are differences, though, as the book points out that in all likelihood she was not so much an actual deity as a being of great power who hailed from some unknown realm. This particular mythology also states that she had a particular affinity for wolves, and that before humans populated the Old World, she regularly visited to sponsor and compete in hunting contests with greatest of them.”

Pausing, Belle then pointed at the drawing of the wolf before continuing with her summary. Regina listened on in rapt fascination.

“Because of this, or so the story says, she blessed the alpha she most favored along with his pack so that they could communicate with and protect the children of the moon that would soon appear in the land. It’s no great risk assuming this is speaking of the origin of werewolves, which is extraordinary in and of itself. But it goes on to say this blessing also gave these wolves great size and strength as well as access to vast stores of magic and wisdom. For thousands of years after, they were sought out for advice and healing among particular populations.”

Belle looked up from the book to catch Regina's eyes. “I can’t say for certain, but I believe it's possible that there might be a grain of truth in these legends and that these wolves may have really existed. They were known as the Dire Wolves.”

At the mention of the Dire Wolves, Regina hoped she could hide her reaction. The Dires were the species she had thought of as potential links in the chain of evolution between wolf and werewolf. The only reason she’d never mentioned them to Ruby was because she’d sworn a solemn oath to never discuss her dealings with them or their leader. As much as she loathed keeping that secret from her wife and the inquisitive woman who was so eager to help Ruby, an oath was an oath. And what’s more besides, she really couldn’t see how confirming the existence of the creatures would help now with Ruby already beyond reach of the information when it might make a difference. There might be a time when Ruby got home she would revisit the decision, but for now she resolved to keep quiet. Regrettably, she schooled her expression a second too late to avoid Belle’s keen blue eyes.
With narrowed lids, Mrs. Gold said, “I know it seems absurd, but we can’t discount the possibility. I mean, look at us. To this world, we are these creatures.”

“That’s true,” Regina said, relieved that Belle had misinterpreted her unease. She nonetheless recognized the fact that all legend is rooted in at least some truth. “Maybe these Dire Wolves really do exist, but I see nothing of value to the present situation to warrant such enthusiasm.”

Belle’s eyes twinkled merrily. “Well, that's because I didn't get to the best part yet!” Returning her attention to the book, she turned the page and pointed her finger at one of the lower paragraphs. “Let me actually read this part,” she said. “It's worth it, I promise.”

Regina gestured with her hand. “By all means.”

After clearing her voice, Belle began to read. “In the days before the Great Schism, a sorcerer king from the north made a propitious pact with Diana. In exchange for her blessing, the king offered his realm as an eternally protected sanctuary for the beleaguered Dire Wolves, who by that time had been hunted to near extinction. Diana agreed and it is said that for the occasion of the binding of this pact, the Queen of the Moon last set foot upon the earth to personally oversee the affair, conducting the ritual herself.”

For a moment, Belle paused, her finger holding her place on the page. She again glanced up at Regina, this time her eyes gleaming so brightly as to shine. “Now listen to this,” she said and then returned to reading. “When the ritual was concluded, the sorcerer king was endued with power beyond imagining, wisdom beyond compare, and the ability to transform into a wolf of such monstrous size and power that he became feared the world over. In accordance with Diana’s blessing, this power was tied to the tides of the moon. From this king, a new race was spawned, for this gift was passed down from generation to generation and could be given by a single bite in his altered form.”

“Werewolves,” Regina breathed.

This was it, the mythology behind the beginnings of the werewolf race and it was more glorious than she had ever imagined. The blessing of a goddess, a pact between a great king of old and mythical beasts of lore, it was the stuff of legends and rightfully included in such a volume. She had to wonder just how much truth there was in the tale, but hoped for Ruby’s sake that it was more accurate than not.
“Indeed,” Belle chirped happily. “Oh, but wait, it gets better!” Again she returned to the book and read. “At the conclusion of the night's ceremonies and feasting, the Queen of the Moon departed the world forever, but not before speaking one last promise. To Dire Wolf and human alike she said:

When Kingdoms fall and packs be scattered,

When darkness sweeps the land asunder

A King of darkened soul will come,

His conquest being all but done.

When his triumph is at hand,

And hope seems lost to beast and man,

The moon shall rise in color red

With she who lives yet once was dead.

Of kin are we in blood and name,

In spirit that no man can tame,

Yet joined with shadowed sovereign's soul,

Her light and dark shall be made whole.

From greatest shame, she bears my mark

To lands of birth she shall embark,

Encount'ring there an ancient past

That seeks to end all light at last.

A stone in moonlit valley waits,

The key to open prison gates.

Daughter, sister, lover lost,

Redemption at uncounted cost.

Chosen, beloved, tried and true,
“‘Remember these words,’ she said in parting as she ascended into the heavens, ‘for I am not leaving you without hope. The Once and Future King shall return as promised in the hour of greatest need. And though I shant be seen again upon this plane, an eternal home at my side awaits you all.’

“And with that, Diana, Queen of the Moon, passed away from history, her prophecy unfulfilled. Her legacy, however, remains to this day.”

When Belle finished reading this portion of text, Regina sat back in chair stunned and speechless. Her mind was whirling. She now understood why Belle was so animated; the clever woman had obviously made the same connections as she did. But it just couldn't be possible. Could it?

“I don't know what to say,” she finally spoke, glancing over to Belle who was staring with a knowing expression. “I realize the implication, but it just can't be possible.”

“You're a pragmatist, Regina,” Belle said. “I can see how you might be skeptical. But the similarities are simply undeniable. Tell me you don't see them.”

Shaking her head, Regina sighed. “I can't. I do see them but I also see a lot of veiled language. That's the thing about prophecies, Belle. They are intentionally vague so as to be self-fulfilling. You should ask your husband about that, he has firsthand experience.”

Tilting her head, Belle pursed her lips at the reference to Rumple's powers as a seer. He of all people know how prophecies were tricky business, and were never given with clarity for that very reason.

Belle rolled her shoulders in concession. “I'll give you that, I suppose. That being said, everything here is so clearly pointing to one person. Werewolves, looking like Diana, passing through death...” Pointing down at the book, Belle outlined the words “From greatest shame, she bears my mark; To lands of birth she shall embark” several times. “I mean, look at this. Ruby doesn’t always wear her pendant when she dresses down, Regina. I've seen the scar over her heart. Tell me: what shape is it?”

Wincing, Regina tried not to think back to the moment she had discovered the reason that scar marked the person Belle was referring to, but she couldn't help it. It was emblazoned upon her brain,
etched in it like the ancient cave paintings of this world, left to endure when all else faded away. And she could never forget the shape of that scar. She rested her head over it on many a night.

Looking down at her wedding ring, Regina felt hot tears forming in her eyes. “A crescent moon,” she then answered Belle, her voice strained by rising emotion.

“And what is this?” Belle again asked, tapping her finger over the diadem worn by the Queen of the Moon.

Regina's answer was the same as before, though she found that Belle did not look at all smug at being at least somewhat vindicated in her deductive associations. In fact, Regina could not quite place the look on Belle's face for it was somewhere between distant contemplation and acute fascination, as if she was having trouble reconciling her own logical leaps. It was understandable. It was hard to accept that an ancient book contained a prophecy concerning someone you loved dearly and had predicted events that Regina had lived through and still had trouble understanding. But still, even with all of the parallels, there were inconsistencies.

“Look.” Regina paused to straighten up. “I can see what you see, I really can, but there are other things that don't add up.” She pointed to a phrase of the prophecy. “Most glaringly, her name is not Diana. So you see, while there are certainly strong consistencies, this just can't be talking about Ruby.”

Sitting back in her chair, Belle took a deep breath as she thought through what Regina had said. “I see your point,” she eventually agreed. “But even if it isn't directly referring to Ruby, you've got to admit that this is good. It's a starting place at the very least, a foundation to build our future searches on.”

“So you intend to continue your research?” Regina was a bit surprised that Belle was so willing to persevere, though she probably shouldn't have been. Other than Rumplestiltskin, her son, and her father, Ruby was the person Belle loved most in the world. And when Belle loved someone, she went to extraordinary lengths for them.

“Of course,” was the matter-of-fact response, as if there had never been another option.

Feeling strangely sentimental, Regina reached for Belle’s hand, and after giving it grateful squeeze, said, “Thank you. You're a good friend, and I don't just mean to Ruby.”
Belle ducked her head as she returned a squeeze of her own. Blushing prettily, she met Regina’s eyes through her lashes. “I care about you guys. I’m glad to help.” A heartbeat later, she released Regina’s hand to pick up another book, and as she cleared her throat she flipped open the cover. “I’m not sure how long you planned to stay, but I could use a hand sorting through a few more of these. If you want, that is.”

Regina smiled. “I’d love to.” She then grabbed a tome of her own and dug in.

As if through an invisible hourglass, time slipped by like so much sand as they perused tomes and discussed what little relevant information they learned and some of the interestingly irrelevant as well. So engrossed did Regina become in her studies that she didn’t spare a thought about the time until Belle gasped aloud. When Regina followed the brunette’s eyes, she noted that the small clock on the opposite wall read ten til five in the afternoon, which meant the library would be closing soon.

“Oh, wow,” Belle said as she made to stand. “Time got away with me. I need to get going here before long, but I’ll continue looking through the rest of this material tomorrow and let you know if I find anything else.”

Pushing back her own chair, Regina stood and then quirked her lips up at Belle who had begun to gather the papers, scrolls and books strewn about the desk into a neat pile.

“Yes,” she said, “I should be on my way as well. Again, thank you, Belle. I appreciate all you’re doing for us.”

Belle shrugged indulgently while stacking one of books. “Like I said before, it’s no trouble at all. I’m happy to help.”

Never one to be impolite unless absolutely necessary, Regina pitched in to tidy up the mess she helped Belle make. Only after the pile was presentable did she head for the door. But just as she was about to set outside, Belle’s voice called her name. She turned to find the petite brunette dashing towards her brandishing the book of mythologies they’d begun the afternoon with.

Once Belle slid to a stop, she extended the book out to Regina. “I meant to ask, did you want to take this home with you? I’ve already read it cover to cover myself.”

Regina accepted the proffered tome with a nod. “I will, thank you. I’ll read over it as soon as I can. There’s so much going on, though, that I don’t know when I’ll be able to return it.”
“That's quite alright,” Belle said, bouncing on her heels with an understanding smile. “I know how it is with kids, especially when you're on your own for a while.”

Regina chuckled ruefully. “Yes, I do have my hands full.”

Still smiling, Belle gestured back to the check out counter where there was yet another mountain of material yet to be put away. “Well, I'd best get hurrying if I'm going to get the rest of this mess cleaned up by six. I'll talk to you later, though, okay?”

“Oh indeed,” Regina said, grasping the handle of the door and pulling it open. “Good afternoon, Belle.”

And with that, she exited the Library and headed for her car. After climbing in, she allowed herself a moment to reflect on what she had learned. Having never given much stock to prophecy, she was doubtful as the relevance of the one that might possibly be referring to Ruby. The likelihood of so ancient a volume predicting events so far in the future was laughably remote. However skeptical she was, though, she had to admit that it was alarmingly accurate. And hell, if nothing else it certainly shed an interesting light on the possible origin of werewolves.

The story recorded in the book actually made a lot of sense from a certain perspective. There were many magical creatures in the Enchanted Forest such as unicorns and griffons and dragons, and just as well there was beings of transcendent power that existed beyond the planes of the known world. It was not hard to imagine, then, that a subset of chosen humans had been ‘blessed’ with the ability to transmogrify. Possible, but unheard of at least by her, and Regina had been a diligent student of any and all magical creatures due to their potential usefulness. Still, it was a start, as Belle had said, which was more than she'd had to go on before.

She just wondered what Ruby would think of all this. Even more than that, she prayed that she got the opportunity to find out.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the week long delay. To be frank, my engagement with this story is at an all-time low for a lot of reasons I won’t go into. Normally I can edit even when I’m blocked as far as writing goes, but this one gave me a hell of a time. Needless to say, I can’t guarantee weekly updates from here on out if this kind of thing keeps happening.
For those that are still following along, I do promise that I'll try my best!
A Good Name

Chapter Summary

Regina meets with Snow and Granny to discuss what she's learned about Ruby's parentage.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Having departed the Library, Regina headed straight to Granny's diner. Once there, she retrieved her phone to sift through the contacts, and then thumbed Snow's name.

“Hello?” The familiar voice of Regina’s former stepdaughter was slightly winded upon answering, which had Regina a little concerned.

“Snow? Is something the matter?”

“Huh?”

Regina shook her head ruefully at Snow’s clear confusion as to the purpose behind her worry. Like Belle, the woman could be painfully oblivious, just in her own unique way.

“You sound completely out of breath. Did I catch you at a bad time?” Though careful not to let any innuendo slip into her tone, Regina couldn't help but wince, feeling she was less successful than she would have liked.

“Oh! Oh, goodness, no,” said Snow, sounding slightly flustered at the implication. “I was just chasing three little hooligans around the loft!” This last bit she stated loudly as if directed at said hooligans.

In the background, Regina could hear a flurry of footsteps nearby accompanied by the sounds of rambunctious laughter. She grinned, both at the infectious sound and the self-evident reason for it.

“Are they making you be the Evil Queen again?” she asked, and then clenched her teeth against
flashes of Isaac Heller's alternate reality conjured up by an otherwise innocuous question. Judging by the brief silence that ensued, Snow was thinking the very same thing.

This was not the first such instance of Snow being roped into playing the vindictive Evil Queen who relentlessly chased after the innocent and virtuous bandit princess Regina. And even though Snow was glad to sacrifice to make the children happy, she’d told Regina once that she would often struggle with memories of their time in *Heroes & Villains*, a warped story penned by a rogue Author drunk on power and desperate to escape judgment for his gross abuses.

It was still strange to think that Snow could now somewhat relate to how she felt when mired in those latent thoughts and feelings from her own time as the Evil Queen. Years had passed and it was still rather surreal that she wasn’t the only one who flinched anymore when someone in town mentioned that old moniker. That Snow had yet to adjust could be attributed to the fact that her experience was a story lacking any substance, but at the same time, having some company in regrets was not unwelcome. As an added bonus, the relationship between herself and Snow had markedly improved after that brief stint in the faux Forest. It was funny how perspective could produce sympathy, which is exactly what *Heroes & Villains* provided for Snow.

Present understanding aside, Regina still did not approve of blithe references to her previous villainy. She sometimes had to give the stink-eye to people who were blatantly rude to her based on old grudges or casually mentioned her crimes when they were unaware of her presence. Reform, she’d learned, did not come with a ready made salve to past wounds, and even with time and patience and diligent treatment, some of them refused to be mended. And while she could have taken offense at the game as the ultimate provocation, she couldn't find it in herself to do so as it was just childish fun whose innocent nature soothed the offense. Mainly, though, she tolerated it because it was Ruby that started the whole business in the first place.

In Storybrooke, the standard fare fairy tales of this world were largely ignored outside of moral value in favor of the real ones from which both the town and almost all its citizens originated. Like every other child in town, the girls were taught the same universal stories that left out all of the unsavory and explicit details in an effort to preserve innocence where possible. She and Ruby had been especially careful to shield their children from the unwholesome facets of their own tales with the intent on telling them the unfiltered truth only when they were old enough to understand why their mothers had acted as they had. So together, they devised watered down versions of their tales, especially on Regina's side of things; after all, it would be hard to explain to the girls why their Mommy had once tried to murder their beloved Aunty Snow. But as with all things, Ruby had to go and make a game of it, thus the birth of the generic tale of the Evil Queen and the bandit princess. Much to Regina's chagrin, it became a playtime staple in her house.

Annoying as it was to have her past mocked, even if it was innocently, she did find it greatly amusing whenever the girls made Snow participate in their game. Just because she and Snow had reconciled didn’t mean she couldn’t enjoy her former enemy taking a stroll down memory lane regarding her own time as the Evil Queen.
“Yes, and don't think I'm unaware of how pleased you are by it,” Snow said after a moment, exaggerating her displeasure for effect accordingly as if having discerned Regina's thoughts. Unfortunately such tactics didn't work on her seeing as she knew Snow far too well and could practically hear the smile in her voice.

“I could deny it,” Regina said smugly, “but you play the part so well, dear.”

“Takes one to know one.”

Regina laughed at that. “Touché. Anyway, I was calling to ask you a favor. But first, is David in from work yet?”

“He is. Did you need to talk to him?”

“No, but I do need to speak with you about what I learned on my trip. I would prefer to do so in person and out of the vicinity of prying little ears.”

“I see. Well, let me ask him if he can watch the kids for a little while, alright? Just hang on.”

“Very well.”

Regina rolled her eyes when Snow loudly sat the phone down and then again when she thereafter bellowed for her husband. No response came. With a huff, Snow called out, “Be right back!” and then stormed off in search of Charming. After about a minute, she returned to the phone.

“He said that's fine,” Snow said, no sign of annoyance in her tone. Whatever David had been doing, he obviously had a good excuse not to answer his wife. “Where did you want to meet?”

Regina peered into the Diner, pleased to note that she had arrived during a lull. “I'm sitting outside Granny's right now,” she said, “and there is only one other person inside. Would that suffice?”

Regina could hear the brushing of Snow's cheek against the phone which indicated she was nodding.
“That’s fine with me. I’ll be there in five minutes. Go ahead and grab a booth for us if you want.”

Without bothering to exchange pleasantries before ending the call, Regina simply concluded with, “I’ll be waiting,” and then disconnected the call. After depositing her phone in the pocket of her overcoat, she exited the car and made her way inside. When she stepped through the doors to the chiming of that accursed bell, she glanced at the counter to see Granny at the register busily refilling the cash drawer. At the alert of a possible customer, the silver-haired matron looked up, surprise evident on her face at seeing the Mayor present at that hour. She waved her over.

“Regina,” Granny greeted, a smile easily overtaking her face as Regina approached.

The pleasant salutation was a far cry from the deeply suspicious scowls and terse exchanges Regina had once been accustomed to with Ruby's grandmother. She could honestly say they were family now, and not just because of technicalities. Affection beyond Ruby bound them together now.

“I didn't expect you back so soon,” Granny went on. “Trip went well I take it?”

Regina cocked her head to the side, not wanting to read Granny in quite yet. There was no predicting how the aging werewolf would react to her news aside from assuming it wouldn’t be pleasant. The woman hated Albert Spencer almost as much as she did, and for good reason.

“I suppose you could say that,” Regina said, trying unsuccessfully to disguise her grimace. Though Granny's razor sharp eyes had dimmed through the years, she was still more perceptive than any human, able could detect even the slightest facial tics to discern what a person was feeling or thinking.

In response to Regina's shifty behavior, the lines around Granny's eyes tightened and she pursed her lips. Regina's heart faltered for a brief second.

“What's wrong?” Granny’s inquiry was pointed in that manner that told Regina a lie would be inadvisable.

Sighing, Regina averted her gaze for a moment, looking over to the table beside the door. In that moment of indecision, her mind wandered back to life under the curse when, for twenty-eight years, she had been a morning regular at the Diner. Often during those years she was graced with the opportunity to admire Ruby Lucas's striking form as she hovered at that very table, dutifully taking orders from a captivated patron with that gorgeous smile of hers on full display. In her mind's eye,
Regina could see Ruby so clearly, with her red streaked hair always interestingly coiffed and her pretty feet stuffed into those bright red stilettos that made her tower over every other woman and many of the men in town. And who could forget the boldly revealing uniform she worked in that proudly displayed her tantalizingly long legs and deliciously flat tummy. As the fanciful musing played out in Regina's mind, she could even hear Ruby's twinkling laugh echo through time to find purchase in her ears and burn a path down into her heart, which leapt in recognition of the sound.

Though unaware of it back then, there was a reason Regina had frequented Granny's diner for coffee each morning and it wasn't for the sophisticated atmosphere or the quality of the beverage being served there. To be sure, Granny made good coffee, but it wasn't any better than Regina could make herself at home. No, she'd wanted to get her day started out right with a healthy dose of Storybrooke's own fallen Artemis, resplendent in her earthly glory and so achingly close to perfection as to be beyond even Regina's lengthy reach.

Many times she had entertained the idea of taking Ruby as a lover, only to talk herself out of it with the lamest excuses, such as Ruby was beneath her, or that she was long past requiring carnal pleasure to gain satisfaction seeing as she was living her happily ever after after seeing her enemies in constant torment. But deep down she'd know the truth was she didn't want to sully the girl's beauty with her darkness. That didn't change the fact that Regina knew she could have had Ruby at any time, though, not with the way the girl had so shamelessly flirted with her and brazenly declared her openness to "some much needed stress-relief in the form of a little mutual gratification." But Regina never returned the advances in order to maintain, with some difficulty, the detached neutrality of her new situation.

Of course, there was also the not-so-insignificant detail that Ruby was not the kind of person for her to be having an affair with. Without needing to test the waters, Regina recognized that the ridiculously beautiful waitress was much too dangerous for that, being as fearless with her heart as she was with her body and passionate about life in a way that was systematically infectious. If she'd succumbed to temptation, she would have wound up breaking both Ruby and herself in the process – a line she was unwilling to cross no matter how much such an entanglement might torture Snow White. As much as Regina believed Ruby to be her enemy in a general sense, she still respected the brave werewolf who had single-handedly torn her men to shreds time and time again, and also admired the woman's steadfast loyalty.

Denying herself the tantalizing pleasure of bedding such an unequaled specimen of beauty was not easy, but Regina managed to do just that, mostly by throwing herself into work and on top of Graham. She never really moved past her little crush on Ruby, though. Rather than being banished as she wished, it instead lay dormant during the long years that followed in Storybrooke, waiting for the chance to spark back to life. And though she tried to stay away from Ruby as much as possible to avoid temptation, there was something about the girl that kept her coming back, a magnetic draw she'd felt from the moment they'd met all those years back in the Enchanted Forest that even her famously iron will could not fully resist.

Learning the underlying reason she had always felt so connected to Ruby came at the horrific price
of scars that lingered and memories that haunted them both, but ultimately Regina believed the cost was worth while. Ruby was worth every wound she’d received and every tear she’d shed in the aftermath of the events precipitated by Joshua Woods. Ruby was worth the loss of Daniel, her innocence, her sanity, and Robin, and despite the enormous volume of pain that Regina had lived through in her lifetime, she would endure it a thousand times over to love and be loved by the woman she was so immensely privileged to call her wife.

Right now, though, feeling such assurance did little to ease her disquiet at having to explain to Granny – the woman who had raised Ruby from a baby into a woman – that there was yet another threat lurking in the shadows, awaiting the first opportunity to strike at the object of their mutual devotion. But she had to. If for no other reason than what all Granny had done for Ruby, she owed the woman the truth.

Looking back up at the elder Lucas, Regina asked, “Can you spare a few minutes to talk? Snow is meeting me here shortly to discuss what I learned on my trip. Seeing as it concerns Ruby, it’s only fair that you should be privy to it as well.”

Granny’s eyes narrowed into slits as her posture stiffened, but she did not reply other than to nod tersely before setting about finishing her previous task while Snow was en route. Regina left her to it, making her way to the back of the diner and the corner booth that provided the most privacy. After sitting, she folded her hands in her lap, back ramrod straight, and waited.

A few minutes later, the doors to the diner flung open and Snow White fluttered through in a manner befitting her namesake. She quickly spotted Regina in the back, then made her way over.

“I got here as quickly as I could,” she said, as breathless as she had answered the phone earlier. Sliding into the booth opposite Regina, she ran a tentative hand through her short locks to straighten them while catching her breath. “So,” she then said much more composed after a moment, “what did you find out?”

Holding her hand up, Regina tilted her head toward the direction of the counter, where Granny was finishing up her accounting. After the elder Lucas closed the register drawer, she made ambled over as well. Smiling up at Granny, Snow scooted over to make room. Granny obliged the gesture, giving Snow’s hand an affectionately pat as she settled in.

The silver-haired woman then turned to Regina, her glasses in their conspicuous place at the tip of her nose. “Alright, spill.” Abrupt and demanding as always, Granny leaned forward with her arms crossed over her chest. “You said that this trip concerned Ruby. How so?”
In a concise fashion, Regina went about explaining what had happened the day before with the strange phone call and visit from Reila. She then went on to divulge what the woman had claimed regarding King George being Ruby's father. The only part she neglected was the warning that Ruby's life was in danger, figuring she would deal with that later once Ruby was back home.

Surprisingly, Granny seemed to take the news with smoothly, showing no reaction aside from sitting back with a huff.

“I remember Reila,” she commented, though her expression told Regina she was doubtful as to the veracity of said woman's information. Regina couldn't blame her when she had been doubtful as well. “She's the one that brought Ruby to me a few days after she was born. Never thought much of a woman who could promise to take care of a baby and then turn right around and abandon her, even if it was to the child's kin.” She eyed Regina carefully. “But I get the feeling you believe her.”

Nodding, Regina bit her lip as she felt her tension levels rise at Granny's unhappy tone. “I did and I still do. But you know me, Granny. I wouldn't take something like this at face value – not when it concerns Ruby. Thus the reason for my impromptu trip. I went to visit Spencer myself.”

At the mention of that name, Granny shot forward, her eyes hardening. It was as if George's cursed name finally registered the complicated implications of Reila's tale. “You visited that...that bastard? I don't care who he is. After what he did to Ruby? I can't believe you would do such a thing!”

“I had to, Granny,” Regina said, pleading with the woman she had come to love as her own flesh and blood rather than a mere marital relation. “He's the only one who could verify what Reila said.”

Making a noncommittal sound, Granny sat back once more. “And did he?”

“He did.” Regina raised her folded hands to the tabletop, and after unfolding them went about fiddling with her wedding band as she talked. It was a nervous tic she'd developed shortly after her second – and final – marriage. “He explained how he met Anita,” again Granny sat up, this time at the mention of her deceased daughter, “how they fell in love. They had an affair, but when he broke it off after his wife found out, she didn't take it well. He suspects that she killed his infant son before she absconded.”

While Snow gasped, Regina's focus was on Granny, gauging her reaction. She was saddened to see that the elder werewolf apparently considered the possibility to be legitimate. That Anita might well have done what Spencer was accusing her of meant she was more of a monster than Regina had previously thought. Poor Ruby. With their overabundant mommy issues, they really were quite a pair.
And now Regina was forced to consider how was she going to explain *that* piece of information to her wife. Ruby's memory of her mother was already irreparably tarnished, but if this was true, it would be all but obliterated, reduced to a pile of smoking ashes that even the most resilient phoenix would be unable to rise from. And what's worse, particularly to Regina, was that once Ruby learned of her mother’s murder of a helpless and innocent infant who just so happened to be her half-brother, it would eat at her sensitive conscience until she became so consumed with guilt she would feel obligated to let Spencer into her life as some form of undue reparation.

The situation being impossible as it was made Regina feel cornered with no good option of escape. For while Ruby deserved the truth, she was undeniably better off without the man who was very likely to be confirmed as her father in her life. All Regina could do was hope that clarity came by the time Ruby returned, because at the moment, she wasn't certain what she was going to do.

“I want to say that's impossible, but I can't,” Granny eventually said, recapturing Regina's attention. The older woman's voice was gruffer than usual. “I don't know how it happened or what I did wrong, but once Anita shifted for the first time, she changed. After that, she was a slave to the passions of the wolf. She loved the power and the wild disregard for morality it gave her. I tried everything I could to reel her back in, but she slipped out of my grasp. That's the reason why I didn't tell Ruby about her...condition. I just couldn't take that happening again.”

Reaching out over the table, Regina offered her hands to Granny, who took them with an expression that was as sad and weary as it was grateful.

“It's not your fault,” she said. “People make their own choices. Sometimes no matter how much we want to help those we love, we can't. After I became Queen, I watched my father die a little every day with each step I took into the darkness. He knew what was happening to me and was powerless to stop it, but that didn't mean he didn't love me or that he’d stopped wanting to protect me. He tried as much as he could, but I had made my mind up and there was no convincing me otherwise. Even so, I still loved him. So I'm sure in her own way Anita loved you, and I can see how much you loved her through how you love Ruby.”

In all of the years Regina had known Granny, she had only ever seen the woman shed a tear once and that was when Ruby was in the hospital after being abducted. But as she gazed earnestly into those piercing blue eyes, she saw them water until a solitary tear broke free from her lids to meander down a rosy cheek. Deep, abiding affection for the woman before her stirred in her heart. And although she hated Granny was hurting because of this information, she was glad that she had been able to help. However little difference her words made, it felt good to have returned some of the comfort and encouragement that Granny had selflessly given to her over the years.

“Thank you, Regina,” Granny said as she sniffled, though she tried to play off her emotional
response by clearing her throat.

Regina smiled warmly, both at Granny's gratitude and her brave attempt at keeping a stoic demeanor. She chose not to comment on the latter both out of respect for her elder and out of a keen sense of self-preservation. Granny might be old but she was still dangerous. The target in her backyard littered with holes from crossbow bolts served as ample proof of that.

So Regina gave Granny’s hands a squeeze before releasing them, and said, “You're welcome.”

“So, what did Spencer say about being Ruby's father...specifically?” Snow then spoke up, making her presence known while veering the conversation back on subject.

“As I said, he confirmed it was probable,” Regina said, surprisingly not in annoyance at Snow butting in. She had called her there for a reason, after all. “In fact, he adamantly believes it to be true. And while I am inclined to do the same, I require more concrete proof than a dying woman's tale to serve as the basis for upending Ruby’s life. So I made him agree to a DNA test.”

Granny's eyebrows rose at that. “And he agreed?”

Regina's own eyebrow rose, though in a much more Queenly fashion. “Of course not. But he really had no choice. It was either submit to my demand or I walk away and this information dies with me.”

Snow gasped in disbelief. “You would have done that? Let Ruby go the rest of her life without knowing who her father was?”

Regina leaned forward, her face passively angered. “If it meant protecting her from that monster? Yes. Yes, a hundred times. Spencer is a liar and a manipulator. If he's going to be in Ruby's life, it's going to be on my terms...” When Granny scowled, Regina hastily corrected herself, “and on her terms, of course. But not his. Never his. I had to clearly establish that to put him in his rightful place. However callous a tactic, it worked. He gave in without a fight.”

“Okay, okay,” Snow said, relaxing a little. “I just don't like the idea of this being kept from Ruby even being a possibility. I still remember those days on the run, talking late at night by the fire. She was always so supportive and kind whenever I lost myself in memories of my father, but I could see how much it hurt her to not even know who her parents were. She would never admit it, but I could tell she was ashamed at being an orphan. And even after she met her mother, that never really changed.”
Turning to Granny, Snow offered her a pained smile. “Without telling Ruby, I actually conducted a search of my own for her father after we took George's castle. I didn't find anything, so I didn't tell her. But I did that because I never forgot that look in her eyes. I remember thinking that someone so beautiful should never look so sad.” To Regina, she said, “So, I'm sorry if I offended you, but if it were me, I couldn't have lived with making such a decision.”

“Well, it's a good thing you're not me then,” Regina said, carefully modulating her tone so as to not sound angry.

Obvious as it was the tenderhearted woman was coming from a place of love for Ruby, it was neither the same nor as much as Regina’s. Sure, Snow had fought alongside Ruby, lived with her and been her best friend for years until they lost one another to the curse, but she was not Ruby's wife. Snow hadn't slept in Ruby's arms for the past ten years, made love to her countless times, or woke up to the sight of those crystalline eyes gazing at her with so much unbridled adoration that it made her feel like Icarus, so full of hope and love and assurance that she could take up wings and fly to the sun, heedless of her wings being made of wax. Snow, as close as she was to Ruby, hadn't danced around the living room in her pajamas together, laughing until she cried all because Ruby was in a silly mood and wanted to share her joy with the person she cherished most. Snow hadn't created two children with Ruby out of True Love, a feat so rare that even Rumplestilskin had only heard of a handful of such occurrences.

But Regina had done all of those things with Ruby, and because of them (and unlike Snow), she was willing to go to almost any length to protect the woman she loved more than life, even if it was from a piece of information that had she had desired all of her life. Those were the kind of sacrifices and decisions that she was prepared to make even if everyone else, Ruby included, hated her for it.

“And I'm not offended,” Regina continued, hoping to dampen Snow's evident hurt at her comment. “But I don't regret what I did either. I'd do it again. I'll do whatever I have to do to protect Ruby. You know that. You've seen it firsthand.”

Visibly deflating, Snow heaved a sigh as her shoulders drooped. “I do know that. I'm just saying that, for good or bad, I'm not you, Regina. And maybe that's for the best, because right now, I think you're right that Ruby needs protecting from Spencer.”

“I agree,” Granny said. “For my part, I understand where both of you are coming from. I don't fault either of you for your opinions. What I'm concerned about now is my granddaughter and what we're going to do to keep Albert Spencer out of her life.”

“Thus the reason for this meeting,” said Regina, shifting in her seat to recross her legs. “I really don't
see any need to implement any plan of action until I get the results back from the DNA test, but I thought we could talk through our options to be prepared for that eventuality.”

“How long will it take to get them?” asked Snow.

“I haven't mailed them off yet,” Regina said, “but I personally know the individual who runs the DNA lab in Bangor. I won't go into details, but I had need of him years ago. He's discreet and efficient. I talked to him on the drive back and he can have the results within a few weeks.”

Both Snow and Granny looked a bit taken aback, though Snow was the one to speak first. “So soon?”

Regina smiled tightly. Their reluctance to have a definitive answer was shared. “Indeed. It would have been sooner had there not been an enormous backlog and several deadlines hanging over his head.”

“Well, then,” Granny then jumped in, “what do we do after that? If it's positive, we have to tell Ruby. I know Spencer is an evil, conniving dirtbag, but she deserves know if he turns out to be her father.”

“I agree,” Regina said, “which is why I will tell her the second I know for sure. I will also take care to remind her of all he's done to her in the past and to warn her about the danger of letting him into her life, and advise her against visiting him until some time has passed. But if I know my wife, she is going to brush off those concerns as overprotectiveness. She'll reach out to the both of you for your opinions.”

“Sounds like Ruby,” Granny agreed with Regina's assessment. “She always was quick to forgive. Nothing like her mother – or me for that matter.”

“Or her father,” Snow chipped in, grimacing as the words passed her lips.

“Yes, she is a compassionate person,” Regina said, “but that makes her vulnerable. I'd never accuse Ruby of being naive, but she can be kind to her own detriment at times. I won't let Spencer be one of those who takes advantage of her gentle heart. So be diligent in stressing to her that she needs to let time pass before even thinking of reaching out to him.”

Leaning back into the cushioned booth, Regina sighed. Pinching the bridge of her nose, she tried to rationalize her fears as best she could, hoping Snow and Granny would understand. “I know that
sounds like I'm being a controlling bitch, but I can't explain to you how much I feel this to be necessary. There was something lurking behind Spencer's eyes whenever he talked about her...something that made my skin crawl. I believe he already has designs on her life, that he sees her as his last chance to stake out a legacy in this world, and I just won't allow it. Ruby must be the one to dictate the terms of her relationship with him, and she won't be able to that so close to the news. She'll be emotional and feel compelled to finally fill that void in her life for good. Spencer will use that to his advantage. It's what he does. I've seen him do it with my own eyes. He's a smooth-talking manipulator who will worm his way into Ruby's trust and then exploit her without mercy.”

Snow had the uncommon decency to give Regina a sympathetic smile. “Oh, honey. You don't have to explain yourself. Not to me. Like I said, I know Spencer can't be allowed to be in Ruby's life – at least not right now. After what David’s told me, the man can't be trusted.”

“I'm with you both on that,” Granny then said, “but I know my Ruby. She's stubborn as a mule. She won't easily turn loose of this if it’s true.”

Regina heaved out a weary sigh. “You’re right. She won’t. But I'm hoping a united front will at least give her pause. I think it's safe to say that – aside from Emma and Belle – the three of us hold the most influence over her. Hopefully that will be enough that she'll see reason.”

Making an affirming noise, Snow nodded. “I think at the very least she’ll hear us out. But I’d like to make a suggestion if that’s alright.” When Regina indicated with her hand to go on, Snow said, “I think you should let me tell Emma so that I can explain our reasoning to her. As you well know, she's very protective of Ruby. I think in the last few years, she's grown closer to Ruby than I ever was. Most importantly, Emma knows how much it hurts to not know who your parents are and to be separated from them. She'll want to side with Ruby initially, but I also think that she’s enough of a realist to understand keeping Ruby away from Spencer is for the best right now. If we’re unable to, her support of our decision will go a long way toward convincing Ruby, I think.”

While Regina was amenable to including Emma, she wanted to make sure Granny was as well. “What do you think, Granny?”.

“Makes sense,” said the prickly woman in her direct way. “We might need Emma, too. She's almost as tenacious as Ruby is.”

The three women shared a laugh at that. It was very true. Emma could be downright obstinate when she wanted to be. It made for some interesting antics while partnered with Ruby. When the two of them locked horns, it was a sight to see. As a matter of fact, whenever Ruby and Emma got in a serious disagreement about something, bets would begin as to who would cave first because they got so lucrative. Sometimes days went by before resolution came, causing the pots to grow absurdly high before either woman backed down. But though their disagreements could reach epic status, their
friendship was never irreparably damaged. Rather their ability to strongly oppose one another without crossing any lines only strengthened their bond even more. Theirs was a true friendship that Regina kind of envied.

“Good thing, too,” Granny added, “cause once my girl makes up her mind about something, she’s not easily swayed.” Eyes twinkling with memories, Granny relaxed into her seat, a faraway smile on her face. “I can remember when she was 13, she hit a rebellious and angry stage. I had just given her the cloak and she was so proud of it, but I didn't dare tell her it had belonged to her mother first. She had grown so bitter towards Anita by that time that I couldn't really blame her.”

At that, Granny shrugged and then made a waving gesture with her hand. “Anyway, at school, her friends started calling her Red, mostly because of the cloak, but also because it’s derivative of her given name. She took to it like a duck to water. It wasn’t long after that that she stomped into the house and declared, ‘my name is Red now and don't call me anything else! I don't ever want to hear the name she gave me ever again!’ And I didn't. She's been Red ever since.”

“Wait a second,” Snow said, leaning closer to Granny. “Her given name? You mean Red isn't her real name?”

“Heavens no,” Granny said, peering at Snow strangely. “I would have thought you knew that. She didn't tell you?”

Looking a bit wounded, Snow shook her head. “No, she didn't. I wonder why?”

Shaking her head, Granny shrugged. “Can't say. Maybe she's still bitter about it because of Anita. It might even be because it embarrasses her or maybe she just put it out of her mind. I don't really know. I learned a long time ago to let that sleeping dog lie.”

Regina meanwhile looked on in disbelief. Was there anything else she was going to learn in the next few days that would turn her life even more upside down than it already was? First she found out Ruby's father was King George, then she learned there was some ambiguous prophecy that might point to Ruby, and now she was learning that Red was not even Ruby's given name. All of this upheaval in what Regina had previously known to be true of her beloved wife had her head spinning with vertigo.

“Did she tell you, Regina?” Snow asked, still hurt at Ruby’s secrecy, though it was clear her main concern was for Regina, who had gone rather pale. Regina shook her head but did not respond. “Really? You're her wife! And I'm her oldest friend! How could she not tell us?”
“I don’t know,” Regina croaked, her mind buzzing. All the sudden, a line of the prophecy in Belle’s book came back to her mind: ‘In likeness she comes, bearing my name.’ They began to echo in her head over and over and over again until she they were all that filled her mind.

“Granny, you must tell me,” she said, her eyes wide and insistent as she peered at Ruby’s grandmother. “What is Ruby’s given name?”

Making a conflicted sound, Granny appeared to be wrestling with her duty to her granddaughter and the urgency she saw in Regina’s eyes. There was a time Regina wouldn’t have imagined the elder woman sharing such sensitive information about Ruby without consent, particularly to the woman who was once as conniving and manipulative as any she had ever met. It was yet another sign of how far they had come in the decade plus spent making a family with Ruby as their bilateral center.

“Alright, I’ll tell you,” Granny said, once she’d made a decision. “But you have to swear not to tell anyone else at least until you talk to Ruby. Alright?”

Typically, Snow agreed immediately. “Deal.”

“That’s only fair,” Regina acknowledged not long after. “I can agree to that stipulation.”

With a deep breath, Granny sighed. “The name she was born with – the one her mother gave her before abandoning her – is Redelle Diana Lucas. I always thought it was a good name.”

The name hit Regina square in the chest like a ton of bricks. The prophecy. Could it really be true? There had only been one obstacle to prevent it from being glaringly obvious that it was referring to Ruby. Now, that obstacle had been obliterated. Ruby’s name was Diana.

But before Regina could even comment, the door of the diner burst open and Belle came rushing in

“Someone saw a portal open at the well!” she exclaimed as she skidded to a halt. A giant grin split her cheeks. “They’re back!”

Forgetting for a moment all that she had learned over the past twenty-four hours, Regina spared a glance to Snow and Granny, who were both beaming just as luminously as Belle.
“I don't know about you two,” she said, “but I've got somewhere to be.”

And with that, she wasted no time in exiting the booth, not bothering to check and see if either Granny or Snow or both were following her. To be perfectly honest, she didn't care. Her thought process had been reduced to merely one track, so everything else was simply allowed to fall by the wayside in her haste to get to the portal. Ruby was back and Regina was not going to let anything or anyone hinder their reunion. Everything else could wait.

Chapter End Notes

I didn't spend much time in editing on this. Still slogging through. Hopefully it's passable.

Thanks to everyone who reads, leaves kudos, etc. Back to Ruby next week...hopefully!
A Mysterious Host

Chapter Summary

The Terrific Trio meet Belmordan, a mysterious figure with even more mysterious motives.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Unable to conjure up a response due to the surprise of being expected, Ruby gaped at the fearsome man hovering in the doorway. The halfway point of her mission lay just through the threshold, down the winding hallways of the Palace, and within the Queen’s chambers. She was so close to her objective now that she could taste it. And yet her feet were glued to the floor as if cemented there by an almost childlike fear and awe of the statuesque man before her, which seemed to have temporarily hijacked her senses.

She felt ten years old again, insignificant in comparison to this undeniably intimidating figure who had announced himself as Belmordan. Tall and domineering of posture, his deeply rough and commanding voice only added to the otherworldly aura that seemed to surround him. Could this be the infamous sorcerer of whom Esperanza spoke with such grave concern? Ruby had known many magicians in her time, Regina, Zelena, and Rumplestiltskin foremost among them, and of that cream of the crop only the Dark One made her hackles rise and her spine tingle by merely being present in the same room. Belmordan gave her that same eerie feeling, only amplified by a thousand. And as his ominous greeting echoed around the enclosed chamber containing the spiral staircase which connected the tunnels below to the castle proper, the tiny hairs on her forearm and the back of her neck spiked up.

Ruby stood dumbly as Belmordan patiently studied her. Whoever he was beyond his grim moniker and nearly tangible magic, she could sense that he was an individual not to be trifled with. The way he carried himself, the way he spoke, and the glint of an enormous store of power lurking behind his eyes lent credence to her initial impression that this was a man accustomed to seeing his will carried out explicitly. Not exactly characteristics she hoped to encounter on this leg of the journey. She’d been hoping for any easy in and out, snatch and grab affair to retrieve Regina’s maps, but Belmordan exuded a brand of danger that was impossible to categorize and foolish to ignore. And though it would have been nice to think that she was imagining things or overreacting to the unexpected situation, her initial assessment of their host was confirmed when she glanced over at Emma.

The unmasked trepidation shadowing Emma’s features was nothing short of disturbing. Over the years Ruby had spent working side-by-side as Emma’s Deputy Sheriff, she had watched her friend face down many intimidating and scary people without any hesitation whatsoever – and not just run of the mill criminals, but the type that would send any sane person scurrying for the hills in abject terror. Not Emma, though. Where normal people fled from the insanity of evil villains hellbent on
inflicting indiscriminate destruction and achieving worldwide domination, Emma ran towards it, sword or gun in hand, nary a tremble, with a steely glint of resolve in her eyes that measurably bolstered Ruby’s already high confidence in her partner.

Ruby liked to think it was the Savior gene at work that gave Emma such fearlessness when opposing monstrous enemies that took on shapes and sizes grotesque and intimidating enough to give a person nightmares for weeks. Nightmares of the sort Ruby had personally experienced a time or two after a particularly harrowing encounter. Emma had thus far proven to be enviably immune to such a petty human weakness as PTSD; the blonde always slept like a rock in the aftermath of life and death encounters as if completely unperturbed by what she’d seen and done. Archie would say that was unhealthy, that Emma wasn’t processing properly. Ordinarily Ruby would agree, but she’d become convinced that Emma didn’t know an other way of coping with trauma than to shrug it off and soldier forward lest she look back and tremble at the trail of destruction and pain she’d marched through. So many years enduring heartbreak after heartbreak and tragedy after tragedy was bound to leave a mess of such immense proportions that perhaps Emma was smart to avoid confronting them. Maybe that was why she challenged her enemies head on. It wasn’t bullheadedness or a patented lack of self-preservation as it was a justified fear of looking back over her shoulder.

But before Belmordan, Emma was visibly unnerved, and that shook Ruby down to her core. If the Savior was afraid, the threat was suddenly terrifyingly real, and she didn’t quite know what to do with that. Even the hellbeasts they encountered in the forest hadn’t shaken Emma, and they were the foulest creatures Ruby had ever laid eyes on. And while Belmordan was by no means conventionally handsome, he was far from an aberration as those warped animals were. That said, the most dangerous enemies often are the ones that appear the least so, something Emma seemed to sense from the man who now occupied Regina’s castle.

On the other hand, Esperanza seemed to be perfectly at ease, nonchalantly leaning against the railing at the top of the stairs to Emma’s right. Her visage was inscrutable in a way that once again reminded Ruby of Regina. Regina had perfected the mask of insouciance, but Esperanza donned it admirably, once again illustrating that some of that unflappable Queenly demeanor was undeniably genetic. And yet while Ruby appreciated the calm resolve she was sure would translate into making her wife’s kinswoman an excellent poker player, she couldn't help but wonder if wasn't motivated by bravado rather than discipline. Often Regina hid her insecurities behind indifference, and Ruby couldn’t help but make a connection when the cousins already possessed so many other similarities. Whatever the case for Esperanza's display of steady nerves, it certainly helped to ground Ruby’s suddenly unsettled nerves from seeing Emma so rattled.

After taking a deep breath to further steel herself, she turned to Belmordan, ready to face the daunting man standing between her and the next step in her journey. She found him still deliberately staring at her, his head cocked to the side as discerning gray eyes bored into her own. The gaze was so intense as to provoke an unpleasant flutter in Ruby’s stomach that she deliberately ignored. She was determined to make a good first impression because she recognized the man for what he was: a predator in front of whom she could show no weakness. Intimidation was a favorite tactic to demoralize prey, which she knew being a predator herself, and she could not allow him to gain any advantage over her.
“You’re the Big Bad Wolf. You’re not anyone’s prey,” she thought in a marginally successful attempt to jump-start her flagging courage.

As if privy to her thoughts, Ruby saw Belmordan's face shift from its hard-set expression to one of amusement. Last she heard from Regina, reading minds was a talent that required active magical effort, and that Belmordan gave no indication he was using spells to do so meant that he was more powerful than she could imagine, could read body language which presented a whole other set of potential problems, or his change in demeanor was coincidence. Whatever the case, she was inclined to dismiss her concerns for now in the interest of expedience, so she hooked her head, apologetic for what may be perceived as a rude reaction to his introduction.

She extended out her hand with a polite smile. “Hello, I'm Ruby.” Bad protocol or not, she was too tired and tense for decorum. If he wanted a demure curtsy accompanied by a ladylike fluttering of eyelashes, he wasn't going to get one from her, no matter how formidable an individual he was. “It's good to meet you, Belmordan.”

Ruby deliberately neglected to include her surname in the introduction, figuring it best to feel out her hosts intentions before revealing more than was absolutely necessary. Thankfully, he didn't seem bothered by the omission. With a disarming smile that did a great deal to relieve the general tension in the room, the robed man took her hand and grasped it firmly. The strength behind his grip caught her unprepared. If she hadn't been a werewolf, he might well have crushed her hand, and with minimal effort judging by the lack of visible strain in his forearm muscles.

As she returned the handshake with her own firm grip, Ruby got the distinct impression she was being tested. For what reason, she didn’t know, but she filed the information away as a curiosity to be ruminated upon later.

After extracting her hand from Belmordan's, Ruby waved behind her with her toward her companions. She pointed first to her blonde best friend. “This is Emma.” Next, she gestured at the newest member of their little trio, “and that is Esperanza.”

“Pleased to meet you, Ruby,” Belmordan said, his eyes twinkling with delight. “And you as well, Emma and Esperanza.”

They each nodded to accept his seemingly genuine salutation. Belmordan then paused to sigh as he dramatically rubbed at his bearded chin.
“In the spirit of friendship, I must confess something,” he said. “As I said, I have been expecting you since the moment you arrived in these lands, which is why I preempted your entry to the castle. Truth be told, I have been tracking your progress magically, which is also the reason I did not send any of my soldiers to investigate the breach in my barrier.”

Sheepishly shrugging, Ruby bit her lip. “Yeah, sorry about that. It's a long story, but the short version is that we're here for something my...spouse left in the castle before the second curse. It's only to help us along on our journey. We have no intention of staying here.”

“And you thought sneaking in to remove said item the best course of action?” The rhetorical was complemented by a thick brow raising in slight disapproval that faded quickly into a smoothed out calmness. “While thievery is most certainly a crude method of retrieval, I can't say I blame you considering where we are. This land is...unpredictable to say the least. I take it you wish your journey to be expeditious?”

While Belmordan did not seem angered or agitated at their intrusion, Ruby still winced at being so blatantly called out on it. It was the second time she’d broken into someone's home on this trip and she didn’t feel particularly good about either incident. The more she was around Belmordan, though, she was beginning to see the prudence if not the outright wisdom in attempting to infiltrate the Dark Palace without being detected. She would rather have avoided running into the disconcerting man altogether.

“That was the hope,” Ruby said after recovering her briefly interrupted composure. She tilted her head with a wry smile, completely unaware of how much her body language favored Belmordan’s, that they moved alike and produced the same distinct yet nearly undetectable scents. “Regrettably, story of my life, things haven't quite worked out the way I hoped. We've lost a day already.”

A strange look passed over Belmordan's face that Ruby did not miss. She was just about to prompt him about it when he spoke.

“That is not entirely accurate.”

“What do you mean?” Emma asked, stepping up to Ruby's side so that their shoulders were brushing. A united front, like Butch and Sundance or Thelma and Louise. The gesture made Ruby's insides warm even though the comparisons were unfortunate...and hopefully avoidable.

“Have you noticed how askew the passage of time is in this area?” Belmordan said, and when they both nodded, he went on. “An unfortunate side effect of my inter-dimensional travel. As you might have noticed, I have a large contingent that accompanies me on such journeys, which greatly limits
my feasible options for moving between worlds. Normally the methods I employ are benign, but for some unforeseen reason those more conventional means have stopped working within the planetary system in which we reside. Thus, I was forced to resort to utilizing brute magical force alone, an inelegant solution to be sure. Opening such a portal by magic alone required such enormous amounts of energy that the perception of time in this region has been altered – and will continue to be so long as I remain here. I hadn't anticipated such a side effect, but I was in a hurry to reach this realm. Alas, there is little I can do about it now.”

Ruby's eyes in a half-panicked expression at the potential implications of this news. “Are you telling me it hasn’t been a day?”

A curt nod from Belmordan. “Correct.”

Ruby’s heart grew heavy as if dipped in lead. “How long have we been here?”

“It's hard to say exactly without detailed calculation.” Belmordan scratched his chin thoughtfully. “From what I have been told by my soldiers who have journeyed beyond the region, a day here is roughly equivalent to a week for the rest of this world. Give or take a few hours.”

“Oh, my God!” Ruby groaned, her hand flying to her forehead. Brushing a worried hand over it, she clenched her eyes tightly shut. “A week gone already?”

“Almost two,” Belmordan interjected. “Night will be upon us soon enough.”

Ruby began pacing like a caged animal pent up far too long. If what Belmordan said was true, that meant time was literally working against her. She realized that it was going to take at least another full day – if not more – to locate a pack suitable to transport to Storybrooke, and that meant the passage of yet another week back home.

“My wife is going to be out of her mind with worry,” she said. “I was only supposed to be a few days. But two weeks? She’s had the kids alone all this time with no idea what’s going on. Jesus, she must think something terrible happened!” Looking up at Belmordan with pleading eyes, Ruby began to entreat him, emboldened by the abrupt need for haste bordering on recklessness. “Please, just let us get to her chambers and collect what we need. I swear we won't touch anything else. Please! I can't afford to waste any more time!”

Shaking his head, Belmordan sighed. “I'm afraid I can't let you do that, and not because I am unsympathetic to your plight. Were it possible, I would allow you the freedom to acquire what you came here for. But my barrier is only at half strength during the day. I keep it sealed tightly at night,
as much for the protection of those under my care as for my own peace of mind. Because I tied the barrier to a stabilizing spell – an anchor that helps to counteract the portal's residual time dilation – to undo it would risk irreparable damage to the entire region. I will not break the protocol, even for such honorable guests as yourselves.”

Seeing the incoming protest of all three women, he held up his hand. “I'm sorry, but on this, I am absolutely firm. You must stay the night in the castle. However, to assuage this inconvenience, I will make Queen Regina's chambers available to you at once. Out of respect, I have kept it wholly intact and have taken up residence in another wing of the castle.” Pausing, he smiled at Ruby, an unsettling smile that was more calculating than friendly. It made her skin crawl. “And besides, you are the rightful Queen consort, so technically speaking this castle belongs to you.”

The way Belmordan casually dropped that information had Ruby grasping for straws, her mouth opening and closing several times in a vain attempt to form a reply. Esperanza gave her a pointed look, just on this side of smug, as if to rub Ruby’s face in the validation of her initial response to finding out Ruby was technically royalty. Ruby’s face flushed with heat as she was caught between glaring at her new friend and making an idiot out of herself in front of her host who was, quite frankly, a scary man. Thankfully, Emma came to the rescue and intervened by stepping in front of Ruby, forming a shield against Belmordan’s eerie gaze.

“No one told you that she was married to Regina,” Emma said, forceful on the verge of being downright threatening. “In fact, no one in this world knows that besides Esperanza, who only knows because we told her. So I have to wonder how you came by this information. I would love to hear an explanation.”

Instead of being offended by Emma's tone and posture, Belmordan appeared once again amused. “It wasn't all that difficult to deduce should one pay careful attention,” he said in a condescending manner, as if it should be obvious how he drew such a conclusion. “I discovered that this castle belonged to Queen Regina by a simple search of her quarters. She left ample evidence there of her former residence in the form of signed documents and such. And then there was the poorly veiled statement that Ruby, here, made: that she is visiting at the behest of her 'spouse' to retrieve something of value left behind. Everything of value in this castle was stripped by bandits and thieves long ago, except that which was carefully concealed by the one person who might have cause to secret away such sensitive and valuable items for protection. I’m sure the Queen has secret caches all around her residence that she would only reveal to her most trusted confidante. Such as, say, her wife.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Emma said, giving a semi-satisfied nod. Still, she was wary about Belmordan. She hadn't liked the way he was staring at Ruby when they first met.

Her usually reliable sixth sense was screaming at her that Belmordan wanted something from Ruby, and that perception seemed to be confirmed by the way Esperanza tensed as her hands surreptitiously sought out the pommels of her rapiers. There was just something about his casual interactions with
her friend that struck Emma the wrong way. It was subtle, as if he was trying to analyze Ruby, to
determine her potential value to him without alerting her to what he was doing. There was nothing
subtle, however, about the way his eyes devoured Ruby when she wasn't paying attention. It wasn't
a stretch to assume he desired Ruby, he was a man after all, but Emma didn’t think it was quite so
simple as that. Plenty of men – and women for that matter – did little to disguise their lust for Ruby,
but none of them had studied her with such keen investment as Belmordan. It was almost like he had
been waiting all his life for Ruby to arrive at his doorstep, and now that she was here, he wanted to
determine if she measured up to his expectations.

Still, even though his interest in Ruby disturbed Emma, she wasn't about to go casting about
accusations just yet; if she was going to do her job and protect Ruby, she was going to have to try
and keep things civil. To do that, no matter how hard it might be, she needed to keep a level head.
So, the best thing she could do right now was to help refocus Ruby on the task at hand and on
completing it as quickly as possible. To do that, they needed to get those maps and sit down to
formulate a plan of attack.

Since their host had been nothing but accommodating thus far, Emma was willing to concede that
Ruby was safe, at least for the time being. So she resumed her place by Ruby's side with a side-long
glance of warning directed at Belmordan, who tipped his head and smiled in a placating manner to
indicate he understood that she would be watching him carefully.

Turning slightly askew, Emma laid her hand on Ruby's back and when Ruby turned to give Emma
her attention, the Savior began to gently rub a circular pattern there. Her friend’s apparent distress
was understandable. After all, Regina wasn't the only person back home waiting for someone to
return. Both Killian and her parents were going to be as concerned about her as Regina was Ruby,
but at the same time Emma recognized the futility of working herself up into a tizzy about things she
couldn’t control. If life in the system had taught her anything, it was that swimming against the flow
only made things worse. Best to ride the waves for now, see where they took them, and hopefully
they would land in a better spot than they now occupied. If it turned out they were being lead astray,
they could always make a mad swim for the nearest bank.

“Listen,” she said, “I know it's a setback, but I think we should take him up on the offer. We can use
tonight to rest up and gather what we came for. We can also formulate a plan of action now that we
know what we're up against. And so we don't waste any more time, we’ll set off first thing in the
morning. Going back out there all wound up like this at night will not get us back home any faster.
We need to be smart about this.”

Ruby heaved a breath of pained acceptance. “You're right. You're right, I just…” She sighed again.
“I've missed two whole weeks with my family on this completely unnecessary quest. And not only
that, I've wasted yours, too.”

Emma didn't like Ruby's defeatist inflection, particularly considering that Belmordan was closely
monitoring the conversation with only partially disguised curiosity. There was no room for such negativity in his presence; it was a chink in Ruby's armor that Emma feared he would ruthlessly exploit. She needed her upbeat, perky friend back, the one who had never met an obstacle she couldn't overcome.

“Hey, don't talk like that,” Emma said, drawing Ruby into a sidelong embrace. “You've not wasted anything. Regina knows why you had to do this and so do I. I'm here because I want to be. You're my BFF, Rubes. Where you go, I go, and I wouldn't have it any other way. And don't worry about Regina and the kids. My Mom and Dad will take good care of them. So will Zelena.”

It required great effort to do so but Emma hid her distaste at the mention of Regina’s half-sister being entrusted with caring for Amelia and Sophia. It wasn’t that she hated Zelena, either, when quite to the contrary she actually liked the woman. Zelena was sassy just like her sister, just in an unsophisticated way, and had, dare she say, a wicked sense of humor, both of which Emma was more comfortable with than Regina’s dry wit and regal sarcasm. Also unlike Regina, Zelena was the kind of girl to spend Ladies Night at The Rabbit Hole – on nights her kid was secure with her beloved aunt, of course – in her jeans and a t-shirt to cut loose with some rowdy dancing and slightly drunken singing of tunes from various plays and musicals they both adored. So while Zelena was surely a pill to deal with at times, she was also a riot that Emma had grown admittedly fond of. It was just difficult not to flashback to the day Zelena activated her time portal whenever the ex-Wicked Witch cast even a sideways glance at Neal, and by virtue of god-motherly affection, that extended to Amelia and Sophia as well.

But if Regina Mills, the reigning Queen of grudge-holding, could get over what Zelena did to her, then Emma really had no leg to stand on.

“Besides,” she continued, “like Esperanza said earlier, we're here for a reason. What that is, I don't know, but I kind of want to find out. Don't you?”

Nodding, Ruby wiped her eyes of the hint of moisture there. “Yeah. Okay. We'll stay the night, then. But at first light, we're back on the road.”

Emma smiled. “Deal.”

Clapping his hands once, Belmordan grinned widely enough to put his almost inhumanly white teeth on full display. “Splendid!” Turning back into the hallway, he gestured down the eastern corridor and then took a step back. “Why don't you all come in, then? Dinner is about to be served and seeing as you are my esteemed guests, I would very much appreciate the opportunity to show you my hospitality.”
At the word dinner, Ruby's ears perked up. Straining her head forward, she breathed in deeply, catching the scent of a delicious meal in the distance. It was a heady mix of meats, cheeses, and fresh fruits, which when mixed together, had her salivating at an embarrassing rate. It had been too long since she'd had a decent meal, though if Regina could hear her now, she would say that Ruby was just spoiled, which was true. Which was all Regina's fault! Ten years of living with a woman with every bit as much genius in the kitchen as in politics meant that Ruby had a lead a very privileged life in dietary terms, of which she was not the least bit ashamed.

“I could go for some grub,” said Emma from behind Ruby's right ear. “God knows one meal of freeze dried fruit and MREs is enough.”

“I, too, am famished,” added Esperanza, who had moved to linger at Emma’s side.

Feeling a bit more positive at their circumstances, Ruby quirked her lips up at their host. “It would be our honor. Thank you.”

“Splendid,” said Belmordan, and then turned to lead the way inside. The three women followed him silently down the long hallway, making several turns before arriving before a large oaken door, a detailed carving of a reared horse adorning its surface. Without bothering to speak, Belmordan flung the doors open, and as they swung on squeaky hinges, a scene fit for some epic fantasy film was revealed.

All around the edges of the room hung shields and swords, banners of various colors and heraldries, lending a medieval feel to the castle that had Ruby reminiscing of her youth in the Enchanted Forest more than at any other time during the trip. On the left-hand wall, there was an enormous window that spanned half the length of the room, covered with exquisite curtains with intricate needlework depicting a multitude of vines and fruits. To complete the picture, a grand table occupied the middle of the room, long, clearly heavy, and well-crafted of the most exquisite maple. Upon it was set a veritable banquet consisting of roasted duck and smoked ham, scalloped potatoes, boiled cabbage, and other vegetables and fruits too abundant to name. It was more food than Ruby had seen in one place since the feast right after Snow and Charming’s wedding.

Her stomach growled rebelliously and very loudly at the prospect of so much rich food, causing her to blush. “Sorry.”

Belmordan merely smiled indulgently, though Ruby was surprised there were no snide comments coming from Emma. When she turned to look at her friend, she realized that Emma was every bit in awe of the spectacle of ingestive bliss as she was. So was Esperanza for that matter. Ruby was suddenly struck by the thought that they must appear like a pack of half-starved hyenas.
Clearing his throat, Belmordan gave the women a disarming smile, his face looking more kind and patient than ever. “I will leave you ladies be while you eat so that you may enjoy your meal in comfort. I will, however, return shortly, as there are some things I would like to discuss with you before you retire to the Queen’s quarters for the night.”

Nodding, Ruby smiled gratefully at Belmordan for the unexpected freedom to dine with her friends alone. It was a luxury most hosts would not afford, and the thoughtfulness of the gesture went a long way toward dispelling her initial misgivings of him. For obvious reasons, though, she remained on alert. It was still very possible that all he was doing was buttering them up for whatever he had planned, much like Regina’s old, deceased friend, the Blind Witch. If that was the case, Ruby was keen to keep a clear head as she filled her belly, that way her wolf would have plenty of energy to draw from should the need arise.

“Thank you. That's very kind of you,” she said, then made the tremendous sacrifice of dipping into a dignified curtsy that she was proud of herself for pulling off. Ruby had never been very refined during her life in this world, but if Belmordan was willing to extend such a considerate courtesy to her, she felt she owed a return in kind by observing decorum.

Tilting his head slightly, Belmordan bowed deeply. “It's my pleasure, your Highness.” The title being directed at her made Ruby flush uncomfortably, but rather than correct him, she accepted it with a curt nod after he straightened back up. Belmordan then gestured toward the table. “My table is your table, miladies. Have your fill.”

Ruby didn't need to be told twice. Straight to the table she went the second Belmordan disappeared behind the great doors, and after snatching a plate, she proceeded to load it down with every last morsel that appealed to her greedy eyes. By the time she was done, her plate was piled so high she had to carefully balance it so as not to spill her precious victuals upon the stone floor. Looking around at her companions, she saw Emma’s plate looking similarly full, which wasn't surprising considering Emma was the only woman Ruby knew who could keep up with her in the eating department. When Henry was still living at home, Regina often liked to joke when Emma came over for dinner that she felt like she was hosting the three little pigs, which was very amusing to everyone because Ruby was the Big Bad Wolf – which incidentally lead to Emma and Henry often belting impromptu renditions of Green Jelly’s infamous song regarding that very subject, much to Regina’s chagrin.

Esperanza, on the other hand, was showing a bit more restraint, having delicately placed several items of food on her plate, all carefully ordered by food group then arranged so that nothing was touching.

“Oh, my God, Esperanza,” Ruby said to the olive-skinned woman. “If you act any more like Regina, I'm gonna develop a complex.”
Cocking her head curiously, Esperanza frowned. “I don't understand.”

At the same time, Emma glanced over, eyeing Esperanza's plate critically before bursting into laughter. “I totally see it,” she said around her mirth. “It's almost uncanny!”

Chucking, Ruby nodded. “It really is.” Seeing that Esperanza was still lost in confusion, Ruby walked over to her and patted her on the forearm. “It's okay, sweetie, we're just being obnoxious.”

Giving Ruby a wry look, Esperanza cracked the barest hint of a grin. “One would think I ought to be used to that by now.”

The quip had them all in peals of laughter. After they settled down, though, they tucked into their meals. Everything Ruby put in her mouth was beyond delicious, and she thought that much of what she tasted would put Snow's chef to shame. The food was so good that she thought even Granny and Regina would have a hard time matching its quality, which was very high praise from her discerning palate.

All in all, Ruby put two plates of food away, not including dessert, all without the slightest hint of shame. She had been famished. Upon reflection, she supposed the earlier battle with those hellbeasts had depleted her stores of energy more than she thought. It was a good thing, then, that so much food had been prepared. She made a sizable dent herself, not counting the similar servings Emma helped herself to and the relatively spartan plateful Esperanza consumed.

Leaning back in her chair, she sighed and sipped at her wine, rubbing her full belly with her free hand. “Well, that was good. Where's the bed?”

She was joking of course, but the thought occurred to her that she would probably have trouble sleeping tonight. Firstly, she was still on edge around Belmordan. Sure, he had been nothing but cordial and eerily kind thus far, but she could not shake her unease. She still believed he was after something and as is, she was having to delicately balance her desire to figure out what that was with a need to maintain at least a cordial rapport with her host. Mostly, though, she wouldn’t rest because she wasn’t home.

Once again, much like the night before at Esperanza's cabin, she missed Storybrooke so much that felt like she could cry. She missed her house and the ambient sounds it issued at night. She missed her bed, so large and soft, and the twelve hundred thread count Egyptian cotton sheets that felt like silken clouds against her skin. She missed her kids’ presence in the room next to hers, missed the
assurance of hearing their regular breathing and gently thrumming heartbeats with her hyper-sensitive ears. But mostly, she missed curling up around Regina to fall asleep blanketed by the sweet smells of lavender scented shampoo and body wash while wrapped up in a cocoon of warmth generated by the petite frame of a woman she loved past the point of description.

After so many years together, sleeping without Regina was an exercise in almost utter futility. Being separated from her mate was hell on both the woman and wolf alike, as exemplified on the rare occasions Ruby had to travel out of town for work, such as the infamous FBI computer forensics seminar in Boston that Emma had insisted she attend a year or so back. The entire week away she’d slept no more than ten hours, and those fitfully. To pass the time at night she either studied and re-studied the material assigned to her or took lengthy walks around the city to quell her troubled mind. None of it helped, really, not when Regina was so physically distant.

But at least Boston was in the same world. And even though it was foolish and impossible, all she wanted at that moment was to be back home with her family. Whatever the purpose for this inadvisable undertaking, it seemed inconsequential in retrospect when Ruby knew there would be no peace for her until she was in Regina's arms again.

Chapter End Notes

This is the setup for a slew of anvil-drop revelations. Hold on your asses! It's about to get real. =P
With a most gratifying dinner behind them, Ruby found herself lounging in her chair between Emma and Esperanza as they openly discussed whether to trust Belmordan. The tense conversation in which Emma and Esperanza found themselves at odds was conducted in modulated voices in case of magical eavesdropping – they’d all agreed a person of Belmordan’s power and cunning should never be underestimated. Ruby didn’t much like the discord the subject was sowing amongst their little party, but held her peace as the two butted heads. It was important for her to consider each opposing view, knowing that in the end, the decision would be hers to make.

While Emma had argued patience, Esperanza was very open with her distrust, stating plainly that the strange sorcerer was hiding something and needed to be confronted at the first opportunity of strategic and numerical advantage. She went on to remind them of the whispers overheard from Belmordan's soldiers, how he had promised them conquest, riches, and glory across multiple worlds.

“Such a man,” she had just said seconds ago, “will surely go to any length to achieve that. He will lie, betray, and murder with impunity. And to fulfill his promises, he must figure out a way to reach other worlds.”

“But he already did that multiple times by his own admission,” Emma then countered.

Nodding, Esperanza peered at the Savior with heavy eyes, a sage wisdom behind them that ran counter to her relative youth. “And look at the effect it had this last time. He is having to expend his power to maintain the integrity of this region, lest it collapse back upon itself and be utterly destroyed. How is that not terrifying?”

Startled by the bold declaration, Ruby gaped. Esperanza had told them she had a rudimentary
knowledge of magic, but the way she talked revealed a depth of knowledge that went far beyond the basics.

“How do you know that?” she asked, wondering whether this was actual knowledge or just conjecture.

“I don't for sure,” Esperanza said with a shrug. “But Belmordan is not the only person capable of making deductions. I listened very carefully to every word he said. When he was explaining why we would not be permitted to leave, he called his barrier an anchor and had earlier stated that the effects of his portal would remain so long as he was present in this realm. That leads me to believe that his spell is preventing a catastrophic reaction from being unleashed. Incidentally, this also explains his lack of direct intervention to conquer the entirety of this world.”

“Okay, say I buy that,” Emma said, frowning a little. “Why do you think the barrier prevents him from acting?”

“I believe much of his power is tied up in it,” Esperanza replied kindly without any hint of mocking or derision toward Emma or Ruby, neither of whom had seen the connection between the shield and Belmordan keeping himself sequestered in the Dark Palace. Absently licking her lips, she re-crossed her legs and shifted in her chair. “Without access to the lion’s share of his powers – which I must say are enormous, I could feel them lurking darkly within his eyes and radiating from his body – he cannot subjugate an entire world. Also, because he revealed that conventional means of interplanetary travel are inaccessible to him at present, he must find a method of creating portals which does not incur such terrible side-effects. And don't forget, he already knows that the two of you arrived in this land from another world.”

Now it dawned on Ruby. She felt both ignorant and stupid. If Esperanza was right, she had unwittingly provided Belmordan with proof that such a method of travel existed. While she knew he would never find out how they arrived from either Emma or herself, Belmordan was not the type to accept defeat. If he so desired, he would tear this world apart until he discovered the existence of magic beans, as knowledge of them was a carefully guarded secret across the channels of power in the Enchanted Forest.

Ruby felt sick. She was suddenly reminded of the stories relating to the Spanish conquest of the New World that she was given with the curse (along with a very colorful high school career that included an unfortunate leather-clad biker chick phase). Often, the conquistadors would make promises to those they encountered, extending a hand of friendship to the natives, lulling them into a false sense of security until breaking the bonds of fellowship to get what they wanted, which in many cases involved slaughtering entire indigenous populations outright. Betrayal was an unfortunate aspect of humanity that persisted across worlds, and in the light of what Esperanza had revealed, she was forced to admit the increased likelihood that Belmordan's intentions were not so benevolent as his current actions, that he was merely biding time to find the right moment to turn on them.
“Listen,” Emma sighed, rubbing her forehead, “I get what you're saying, and you're probably right. I don't trust the guy either. I just think it's important that we put on as good a show right now as he is. If it comes to it, I'm ready to fight, but I want that to be our last option. I don't want to start something with someone who is obviously more powerful than anyone any of us have ever encountered. So, let's be cool about this for the time being.”

Hearing Emma say that Belmordan was the most powerful individual she had ever encountered did little to comfort Ruby. She was already on edge after what Esperanza had said, but to hear the Savior confirm those dire suspicions made her gut twist and her throat constrict.

Leaning forward, she rested her elbows on her knees and dropped her head into her hands, letting out a prolonged groan. “Can't anything be easy? This was supposed to be a simple trip. But here we are having lost two weeks of time on the first leg of our journey, and we’re in the clutches of an incredibly powerful sorcerer of questionable intentions who might just be the Sorcerer everyone kept harping about for so long. What else can go wrong?”

“An appropriate question,” answered Belmordan's booming voice, startling all three women out of their chairs. They stood together beside the grand table, side-by-side in defensive postures, facing Belmordan, who stood at the head with his hand resting upon the crown of the chair there.

“There is no need for alarm,” he said, hands raised as if to prove he was not a threat. “If my intentions were malicious, I would've acted the moment you came through the door. Instead, I extended my welcome and have been truthful when I could very easily have lied.”

He was right. He didn't have to explain himself about the barrier or that he'd been expecting them, but he had chosen to do so. Hopefully that spoke to his character more than Esperanza believed, but Ruby doubted it. Despite the mollifying words and easygoing demeanor, his eyes were veiled and there was slight tension in his forehead and temples that a normal human eye would not have picked up. But she did, and it spoke volumes as to Belmordan’s true state of mind.

Still, Emma had been right that they needed to conceal their suspicions lest he be provoked to act out of a sense of self-preservation. The likely result of such a strike would undoubtedly be a messy death for herself and her companions, an outcome Ruby was eager to avoid.

Allowing her body to relax, she shot her host an apologetic look. “I'm sorry. I was being a baby. I didn't mean to offend you,” she said, trying to cover her words and hoping that he'd only caught the very tail end of their conversation. “I just really want to go home.”
“I understand...and sympathize to some degree,” he responded, sliding into his chair and resting comfortably against its back. A neutral expression adorned his face. Gesturing toward them to sit, they obeyed without a word. Ruby took the chair closest to him with Emma next to her and Esperanza next to the Savior. “I, too, long for home. Many moons have passed since I last laid eyes on my native shores. Just a glimpse of the craggy cliffs and fields of heather would do my heart much good. But I am a man set upon on a quest from which I cannot stray. I assure you, though, I won’t be an impediment to your returning home. I also should apologize for eavesdropping.” Sitting forward, his expression suddenly became engaged with interest. “I only caught your mentioned of the Sorcerer. May I ask what you know of him?”

Emma drummed her fingers along the surface of the table. “Not much. We know that he had an apprentice that lived in this world, an old man that he delegated tasks to. We encountered him a few years back. Nice guy, but sadly now deceased. We also know that the Sorcerer is responsible for naming the Author. We don't know much else, though, other than that he is powerful and mysterious.”

Belmoran chuckled darkly. “He is powerful indeed.”

“Wait a minute,” Emma spluttered, shock on her face. “You know him?”

“I do.” His visage was unreadable aside from visible interest in their knowledge. “He is the only being with powers that rival mine, which is fairly ironic.”

Emma arched a golden brow. “How so?”

Smiling crookedly, Belmordan tilted his head and rested his right hand on the table, fingers splayed out. On his index finger was a large golden ring, decorated with swirling vines that merged in the center to curl around a large red gem. The gem glinted along with his eyes.

“He is my cousin.”

“Wait a sec,” Ruby interjected, leaning toward Belmordan. With her curiosity piqued, she momentarily forget all about her misgivings. “The Sorcerer is your cousin? The Sorcerer? The one with the hat that sucks magic into it, people and all? The one who commissioned the insanity that is the Author?”

Looking a bit amused by her descriptive language, he said, “The very same, though for many long
years, we did not know of our relation. Our fathers were estranged, you see. I only learned of his ascendance long after my own rise to power. We were already rivals by then. Not much has changed in that regard, to my great disappointment.”

“It sounds like there is an interesting story there,” Esperanza spoke up from her position furthest away. Ruby was glad to hear that she too had put away her suspicions for the moment and was genuinely intrigued. “I always loved a good tale. Perhaps such a kind and generous host as you might be inclined to share for his guests?”

Laughing, Belmordan’s eyes twinkled, crinkling at the edges with pure delight. “My dear, you have been most quiet. I was beginning to think you a reserved person. I never imagined you to possess such a silver tongue.” Esperanza smiled at him coyly, once again proving how adept she was at wearing a mask and how very strong the genes on Regina’s paternal side ran. “Very well, since you asked so nicely, and since I am in such a pleasant mood, I suppose I could elaborate.”

Settling back into his chair, Belmordan looked to each of his guests in turn before starting to speak, and as he did, he was careful to maintain eye contact with everyone. “My father and his brother grew up inseparable,” he began, folding his hands up in front of his face, “in a world far away from this one, though not so different as one might expect. It was a land teeming with magic as elemental and timeless as the foundations the worlds. The very air was alive with energy.”

Ruby wanted to stop his story to ask where he was from, but didn’t dare break the spell that was starting to descend upon the room as Belmordan told his story. His voice was hypnotizing, as if laden itself with magic, and it seemed as he spoke that she could almost see his story playing out. Looking around, she noticed he was having the same effect on Emma and Esperanza.

“On our world, there were many diverse kingdoms and peoples, some which embraced magic while others remained ambivalent to it. All, however, respected the gift and those who openly wielded it. At least until magic caused the death of one King’s beloved wife.” A dark, foreboding cloud descended over Belmordan’s features that made Ruby’s stomach twist. “On the very day the Queen died, the King decreed the practice of magic to be a capital crime, and in his vengeful rage, actively persecuted and slaughtered magicians. Women, children, and elderly individuals burnt at the stake for merely possessing what he considered to be the irredeemable curse of magic. Even those who utilized the most simple and benign forms were not spared his wrath.

“Being that my father and his brother were born with magic, they both were at risk of falling victim to the insanity spreading throughout the land. Whereas my father chose to stand against the tyrannical madman bent on extinguishing magic from every corner of the realm, my uncle chose hope over reason. He had once served the King you see, and considered him a friend. That choice drove a wedge between the two brother, one which was never mended. And despite my uncle’s faith and friendship, the King betrayed him out of fear. In the end, my uncle lost all that was dear to him and was forced to go on the run.
“My father, on the other hand, died alongside his magical brethren in a final battle with the King’s armies. I was only a young lad at the time and had inherited my father's gift, so my mother spirited me away by night, escaping far to the north. I have few memories of my father beyond what my mother told me, but I know that he died grieved by the division with his brother.

“When I grew older, I made it my purpose in life to accrue as much power as I could, that no one could ever do to my people what that mad King had done. Along the way, I was a bit more zealous than I should have been, but I was driven by anger and hatred. Eventually, my power outgrew my hatred, and not long after, I discovered my uncle had fathered a child out of wedlock.

“Eager to reestablish the bonds of blood, I attempted to track him down in the hopes our family might be reconciled. Sadly by that time, he had ascended into his title of the Sorcerer and openly opposed me, having just suffered a great loss of his own and having heard tale of my less savory actions in the defense of my people. That was many, many years ago. We remain at odds to this day.”

“Wow, that's kinda intense,” Emma said, “and really sad. And I must say, it sounds just like this TV show I used to watch.”

Cocking his head to the side, Belmordan unfolded his hands and frowned. “What is a...TV?”

Ruby looked over at Emma and they grinned at one another. “Where we come from, it's a device used to watch entertaining programs.”

Belmordan nodded, though his frown remained in place. “I see.”

“Listen, I hate to be nosy,” Ruby then said to get the conversation back on track. “Does the Sorcerer have a name?”

Sighing, Belmordan looked almost reluctant to say anything, but Ruby's surprise, he chose to be generously forthcoming once again. “He does. His name is Merlin.”

“Oh, my God!” Emma exclaimed, her face a priceless mixture of shock and excitement. “It's real...how can that be possible? I mean, it's literally a freaking TV show!”
“What on earth are you raving about?” Ruby asked, looking at Emma as though she had grown two heads.

The Savior pointed at Belmordan and then gesticulated wildly with her hands. “His story! It's just like on that show I watched. I told you about it a few times. The details are too close for it not to be.” Sitting up straight, Emma fixed Belmordan with an expectant look that dared him to defy answering her question. It was brave, Ruby thought, and a little reckless, but that was Emma. “Answer me one question. Your uncle, could he talk to dragons?”

Laughing, Ruby placed a hand against Emma’s forehead in a teasing manner. “You sure you're feeling okay, Em? I mean, c'mon, our fairy tale stories are wild at times, but talking dragons? It's silly, right?” She had asked that question of Belmordan, but when he didn't respond, she looked back at him to see a stricken expression on his face. “Are you okay?” she asked him.

His response was to stare at Emma in bewilderment for a moment before surging forward to grip the table until his knuckles were white. “How did you know that?” he demanded harshly. “No one in these lands ever learned of such things. Knowledge of Albion was protected by Merlin himself!”

“Chill, dude,” Emma replied tartly, reacting instinctively to Belmordan's accusatory tone. “I told you, it was on a TV show back home. I don't know how they could have got those details right, but they did.”

“And what else did this...TV show...reveal?” he asked, still gripping the table with a stern, almost irate expression.

After Emma relayed a very brief general synopsis of the show from beginning to end, a process which took about five minutes, Belmordan sat back in his chair, his anger having been muted and dissolved.

“Much of this information is indeed correct. I do not see how it is possible except that Merlin himself disseminated it. What caused he had to do so, I couldn't guess. He's up to something, though.”

“It sounds to me like you're implying we shouldn't trust Merlin should we encounter him,” Ruby said, having heard the subtle inflection of suspicion in Belmordan's voice. “Or am I wrong?”

At that, Belmordan gazed at Ruby – his eyes the most penetrating and ominous gray they had ever been. “The better question is,” he said, and then spoke four words that permanently confirmed her
assessment of him. “Who can be trusted?”

Her stomach dropped into her feet. At that moment, she was very glad that she had eaten a sizable meal, because she knew that he was going to make a move. When, where, and what that move might be, she couldn't say, but Esperanza had been right in assuming their supposedly friendly host was after something. Ruby could only assume at the moment that he was seeking entrance to Storybrooke, and if that was true, her and Emma dropping so fortuitously into his lap must have seemed like the opportunity he had been waiting for.

As such, Ruby was now presented with a dilemma with only two choices as to how to address it. One, they could press forward as planned and use the bean despite the risks, or two, they could remain trapped in the Enchanted Forest indefinitely to prevent Belmordan from gaining entry to Earth. The latter was not an option as far as she was concerned, and she was sure Emma felt the same way since they both had families to get back to they loved more than life itself.

Although still determined to see her mission through, Ruby knew that after finding a pack to shepherd back home, they were going to have to find a way to use the bean without Belmordan discovering them. With how he seemed to have eyes and ears, it seemed unlikely that such a window would presented itself, but nonetheless, she prayed for exactly that. If the worst happened, though, and if it came to it, she was prepared to sacrifice herself to get Emma and Esperanza back to Storybrooke. Regina would be devastated, of course, but she would live on for the girls' sake. Ruby just didn’t think she could do the same if Emma got trapped in this world for the regrettable mistake of being her friend.

Caught within her tormented thoughts, Ruby didn't hear Belmordan speaking until Emma nudged her with her elbow. “Hey, you okay?”

Ruby nodded. “Yeah, sorry, got lost in thought.” Looking up to Belmordan, she gave him her attention. “What were you saying?”

“I was just suggesting that should you encounter Merlin that you should exercise caution.” He repeated himself patiently, apparently not bothered by her rudely zoning out. “But enough talk about Merlin. I want to inquire as to what your purpose is in traveling to this land.”

Distracted as she was by her troubling contemplation, Ruby replied without thinking. “I'm searching for a pack of wolves to bring back home with us. Where we live, our local population is dying. I tried integrating native wolves outside the area to spur growth, but it didn't help. I was desperate, and I remembered how resilient the wolves are in the Enchanted Forest. I figured it was my best chance of saving the pack.”
Making a noise in the back of his throat, Belmordan's eyes narrowed into slits. “Interesting that you would risk so much to save a population of animals, no matter how noble they may be. It almost seems as if this is personal for you.” His tone left no room for misinterpretation.

Smiling almost savagely, Belmordan stood, his chair grinding against the wooden floor as it was pushed back. Holding out his hand, he waved toward the great window spanning the wall opposite of where Ruby, Emma, and Esperanza were sitting. As he smoothly moved his wrist, the curtains were swept back with a rush of magic.

Ruby peered out through the now-revealed glass panes, her heart suddenly thudding loudly within her chest. She froze in place, unable to reconcile what she was seeing with the fact that she had felt nothing. There in the distance, coming up over the horizon, was the moon, full and beaming. Its pale light flooded through unobstructed, bathing the room in soft tones. And as it shone upon Ruby, the urge to transform slammed into her, bombarding her mind and body to the point that she felt as if she were transported back to the days she had little to no control over the wolf.

Eyes mystified and half-panicked by how she was being affected, she stared at Belmordan, pleading for an answer she knew was soon to come. Still grinning in a feral way, his eyes began to glow an ethereal yellow that left no room for interpretation. She could feel his power calling out to her, the same magic that fueled her own transformations slithering towards her like invisible tentacles meant to draw her methodically to him. To her absolute horror, she felt her wolf giving way to the unyielding tug.

Belmordan's posture and demeanor radiated an intense aura of command. He was an alpha presence greater than any she had known, demanding that she recognize him. Reeling as she was, Ruby was barely able to restrain herself from falling to her knees before him like some weakling beta who felt no shame in exposing her throat and belly to curry favor. She had never experienced her wolf feeling so inferior, and the prospect of her being so effortlessly subdued terrified her beyond the capacity to truly comprehend.

Jumping up out of her chair, Ruby made a startled noise as she backed away from Belmordan, her arms stretched out as if to ward off a physical assault. The action spurred Emma and Esperanza to tear their eyes away from the rising moon and return their attention to Belmordan. Upon seeing his glowing eyes, they were up out of their chairs and in a combat posture, ready to fight should the sorcerer choose that moment to spring his trap.

A thick atmosphere of tension descended over the room as Ruby and Belmordan stared at each other, sizing each other up, one calmly and one frantically. Ruby could feel the moment her wolf rose to the surface, her influence turning Ruby's eyes the very same eerie yellow as Belmordan's. The standoff lasted for only a brief minute or two, but in that time, she became cognizant that Belmordan was a werewolf of greater power than herself, and that if he so chose, he could tear everyone in the room apart with very little effort.
“You're a werewolf.” She stated the obvious to open up a dialogue, though she remained tensed up and ready to react at a moment’s notice.

“No, my dear,” said Belmordan, his voice having grown even deeper and inflected with the ancient power that made Ruby who she was. “I am not a werewolf. I am the werewolf, the first of our kind and your progenitor.”

Ruby stumbled back as if struck, her eyes returning to their normal color as her wolf retreated to the background. “What? How can that be?” Her face hardened as she considered the absurdity of his declaration. “You're lying! I don't know much about the history of our race, but one thing I did learn was that it began nearly a thousand years ago. You look barely forty.”

Belmordan's eyes tightened as the gleaming yellow of the wolf faded, but his menacing smile remained in tact. “You of all people should know that looks can be deceiving where age is concerned. Shouldn't you be nearly seventy by now? Yet, you don't appear a day over thirty. Time has been very kind to you, my dear.” The last sentence was made with a purposefully sarcastic tone and expression.

“That's beside the point,” Ruby said, not liking him turning things back on her, even though he was right.

“Is it? Your mate's curse stopped time for twenty-eight years and would have continued on indefinitely had our lovely Savior here not broken it.” He indicated his head toward Emma, who stiffened at his mention of her title, but remained otherwise silent. “Magic is powerful. Powerful enough to bend time and powerful enough to subvert time’s effects on the human body. The curse of the Dark One is a fine example. Rumplestiltskin has lived for over 200 years under its sway.”

“You seriously expect us to believe you're over a thousand years old?” Emma appeared to be in total disbelief. Having heard a lot of malarkey over the years, Ruby was sure her friend believed this whopper took the cake.

Belmordan shrugged his shoulders as if unaffected by their doubts. “Whether you believe or not is irrelevant to the facts. I am not the only being of power to have lived to such an advanced age. Merlin persists just as I do and I know of many others on alien worlds who have far exceeded the average human life span. Some exceed even mine.”

Moving from his spot, Belmordan approached the group of women standing shoulder-to-shoulder in
a defensive line. His robes swirled about his feet as he walked, his hands raised in a placating gesture. When he came to within a foot of them he stopped, hands still extended. His face softened to lose its edge, doing much to dispel his earlier aggressiveness, and Ruby could feel the overwhelming aura of power he had been radiating diminish.

Since Belmordan had made himself somewhat vulnerable, Ruby allowed herself to relax just a little, but not enough that she couldn't react should he attack. She could feel Emma and Esperanza follow suit.

“Why are you telling us this?” she asked, wanting to know why it was so important to him that she accept this truth.

“So that you will remove the blinders you wear,” he said. “They prevent you from comprehending the true nature of life and of magic. They keep you from fully grasping your potential. They hold you back from recognizing your true place in the order of the universe.”

He could not have given a more convoluted reply. She scoffed. “And just what is my place?”

All of the sudden, Belmordan's face lost its earnestness. A looming shadow descended over him which made Ruby's spine tingle.

“That is for you to discover on your own,” he answered vaguely. “But know that you are limiting yourself. You are capable of so much more, if only you would embrace who you really are.”

“And who is that?” she retorted, feeling as if all she was doing lately was asking questions. But she couldn't help her curiosity.

“A Queen in her own right. A woman of unimaginable power, born to rule over lesser peoples. You are an alpha of alphas, and not just of wolf-kind, but of people as well.”

Ruby barked out a laugh. “You're mistaken. I'm none of those things. But if you're looking for a Queen, I just happen to be married to one.”

Smiling, Belmordan ignored her deflection. “Deny it if you like, but the truth is plain to see for those who care to look. See how your friends follow you and obey your every command. There is more to you than you know, girl, and I can teach you how to harness it. I can enlighten you. But you must be
willing.”

While part of Ruby wanted to laugh in his face, something else inside of her was screaming at her to give in. It was that hollow part of her that she had longed to fill for as long as she could remember, the one that was empty of parents and origin, and was perpetually desperate for whatever scraps of heritage she could claw up. Despite her distrust of Belmordan, she realized that part of herself was drawn to him, instinctively certain that he was being honest with her, at least so far as this conversation was concerned. And though she knew neither that Emma nor Esperanza felt the same, that vulnerable part of Ruby, that abandoned little girl who didn't know her place in the world, was currently winning out. Her subconscious wasn't alone in being convinced either, because her wolf had immediately accepted Belmordan as the original werewolf, her elder, and her kinsman.

Driven momentarily by that long suppressed orphan inside of her, Ruby recognized that there was an opportunity here to discover details about herself that she had been dying to know since becoming one with the wolf. If what Belmordan was saying was true, he could fill in the blanks no one else could, including one of the most meaningful mysteries of her life, namely the origins of the werewolf race. Such information was worth more than gold to a person who had grown up believing she was an unwanted misfit, and who had spent far too long as an insecure woman who hated who and what she was.

The only problem with learning her history was that it came at the expense of time, which was ticking away more rapidly than reality would lead her to believe. For every day lost, a week went by at home and that was too steep a price to pay for information that she could live without. Leaving this potential source of knowledge untapped would likely plague her for a long time, but she could live without learning the secrets of her origins. What she couldn't live without was her wife and children. So no matter how curious she got, she couldn't afford to get sidetracked by Belmordan's tantalizing offers.

She shook her head in the negative. “While I would love to sit and chat about the past, time is a luxury I don't have. I have two young children at home who need their Mama, and a wife who is probably getting ready to tear this world apart to find me if she must. So, I'll have to graciously decline your offer.”

“That's unfortunate,” was Belmordan's rather muted reply. “However, I understand. If you'd like, I can take you to the Queen's chambers now. I just ask one thing of you.” Ruby quirked an eyebrow. “Consider what I've said. Don't waste what has been given to you. I'm sure that once you speak to her, even your beloved wife will agree: you were meant for more. Fate has its hand on you. Fighting against it's direction will only lead to sorrow. Take it from someone who knows.”

All Ruby could do was nod. Truth be told, Belmordan had given her a lot to think about, and he was right that she should discuss what he had said with Regina. But beyond that, she could offer nothing else to him, which he seemed to understand, because with that, he turned and headed for the chamber
doors.

“Follow me,” he said, and Ruby, Emma, and Esperanza fell in line behind him, too stunned to talk.

Chapter End Notes

So, Bel is the original werewolf and Ruby is his descendant. Or can it really so simple as that considering what we learned from Diana in The Price of Destiny? Guess everyone will have to wait to find out! Muahaha!

P.S., I had to reference my beloved BBC show Merlin because OUaT's version was atrocious. Seriously, OUaT, stick to Disney stuff. Considering how I feel about that whole arc, consider any Arthurian characters who may or may not pop up in this story the versions belonging to BBC's Merlin.
A Dire Warning

Chapter Summary

Ruby gets what she came for in the Dark Palace.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After escorting the ladies to the Queen’s chamber, Belmordan took his leave with a deep bow and a few short words bidding them goodnight. His expression was tightly reined in so that Ruby could neither tell what he was thinking nor gauge his mood. The only thing she was certain of was his disappointment that she had not taken him up on his offer. Though he shrugged off the refusal smoothly, his shuttered behavior told the true tale. Belmordan was probably unaccustomed to being rejected. Even so, she was glad that he hadn't made an issue of her refusal lest matter be made unbearably awkward.

Again and again the fearsome sorcerer seemed to exceed Ruby's expectations, which prompted her to reconsider her initial impression of the man. Could it be that he had no ulterior motives beyond what he had openly expressed? His conduct to the present seemed to indicate that was true; still, something in her gut protested that assumption. While she was willing to give Belmordan a bit more latitude regarding their interactions, she wasn't ready to so easily cast off her misgivings. For as long as her little company of adventurers was in the Dark Palace, she would remain optimistically wary.

Absent of the towering presence of their frighteningly powerful host, the women were finally able to relax and unwind from the grueling journey. Ruby suggested that they take a few minutes to poke about Regina’s chambers, and while Emma thought it a fine idea, Esperanza declined. Rather than poke her nose in her cousin’s belongings, she’d chosen to busy herself by cleaning her prized rapier of the hellhound blood she’d stained it with earlier in the day.

Very casually, Ruby began to inspect the few pieces of furniture and works of art that decorated the Queen's bedchambers. There was not very much remaining of value to speak of. A lounger sat next the fireplace, draped with an expensive looking fur blanket, and the thought struck her that Regina had once made an unfulfilled promised to turn her into a pelt should she ever again be caught aiding Snow White. Thankfully, whenever Ruby heard those kinds of threats these days, she knew it was just Regina’s unproductive way of blowing off steam. Back then, though, there was a frighteningly real chance of the threat being realized, and the very thought made Ruby shudder at how easily it could have been her pelt decorating the lounger.

Next to the comfortable looking lounger was a tiny wooden desk that was very plain for a Queen's use. Or so Ruby thought. She wondered why Regina had not indulged herself more in regards to
extravagant furniture, but then thought of the mayor's office back in Storybrooke. While Regina was certainly trendy and enjoyed the finer things of life, she was never ostentatious about her preferences. Regina had a sense of style that was timeless and elegant, which was more than Ruby could say for herself. After all, she'd spent nearly three decades running around Storybrooke baring most of her assets for all to see, and while it would be convenient to blame it on the curse, such a deflection would be disingenuous.

Ruby never was a flashy dresser. In the Enchanted Forest, her dresses and corsets had been standard fare. Even the sole exquisite item in her collection, her famous cloak, was less for aesthetic than function. These days, she was more likely to be seen in jeans, boots, and a plain t-shirt or button-up, much in the vein of her best friend and professional partner. In their line of work, Emma once told her, dressing practically was more important than being fashionable. When at home, Ruby normally liked her skimpy gym shorts, yoga pants, or daisy dukes and then complemented them by an assortment of flimsy tops and tanks, whereas Regina remained presentable at all hours save those at bedtime...or when one of them was feeling frisky, which was frequently enough for Ruby to walk around town with an airy smile on her face most days.

Granted, Regina initially disliked Ruby’s lax dress code at home, but she’d long since stopped commenting on how much skin Ruby liked to display since she was the sole beneficiary. That tolerance obviously did not extend into the public sector, where her sophisticated wife insisted she up her sartorial game. Being the Mayor’s significant other meant attending official functions and such at which she’d be rubbing elbows with former royalty. A few of those were genuinely nice people that Ruby enjoyed conversing with, but most were quick to sneer down their noses at both of them for having coupled outside of their stations. Apparently the modernity of this world only counted so far in Storybrooke, where as The Eagles song, “The Last Resort,” so aptly described, “the Old World shadows hang heavy in the air.” It had been an adjustment for Ruby to get used to fancy dresses and pant suits that cost more than she made in a month, but she’d done it because most – if not all – of the visual criticism of the elites were directed Regina’s way. When there was so much more Ruby would willingly sacrifice to deflect unwanted negative attention from the woman she loved, she was only too happy to comply with wearing clothes she might otherwise have avoided for the sake of her own comfort.

The truth was that if Regina would allow it, a part of Ruby – however tiny it was – would be happy to prance about town in a very similar manner to how she had during the curse. While in the Enchanted Forest, she’d been reserved almost to the point of self-repression, mostly because of Granny but also because she was a timid girl who labored under mountains of insecurity. The curse had freed Ruby from the prison of her former awkwardness, awakening a sense of adventure and freedom she’d never truly embraced while on the run with Snow. Her cursed self hadn't dressed in such a risque manner just because of some all-powerful spell. Rather, there was a wild facet to her personality she’d never got to explore, caught as she was between the control freak grandmother who raised her and the prudish, young, exiled noblewoman she eventually hitched her wagon of loyalty to. Ruby had liked to put herself out there, to flaunt the physical assets she’d so long hidden under layers of clothing, social stigmas, and a familial repression. There was an awesome power in being able to reduce eloquent men to jabbering idiots and in provoking irrational jealousy in her female counterparts. She was the hottest woman in town and wasn’t at all ashamed to show it.
The Curse breaking changed that attitude somewhat, but even with her memories of being modest, backward little Red returned, she still loved to be daring. It made her feel alive knowing she was brave enough to do things, say things, and wear things that other wouldn't, someone who was not confined by the oppressive chains of socially acceptable restraint and yet a functioning and contributing member of society. Such boldness made her stand out in a town full of big personalities that might otherwise have relegated her back into the shadows she’d once so eagerly occupied. It was *that* part of her that attracted Regina in the first place.

“You're strong enough to give and strong enough to take,” Regina had once told her, “and that's what I want in my life. In you, I've found a soft heart to love me and a bold spirit to challenge me. You're perpetually interesting to me, Ruby, and that's a very rare thing indeed.”

Regina had gone on to explain how she'd carried a secret torch for Ruby for many years, and had always admired her ability to express herself despite the constraints of the curse. “Your personality,” she'd commented, “your desire to be free and uninhibited was something that even the most powerful curse ever cast could not contain. You should be proud of that, Ruby. I know I am.”

Hearing such gushing approval from Regina made Ruby's heart soar into the clouds, but it also had an unforeseen benefit of helping her to reconcile herself to the seemingly divergent aspect of her character that most saw as defective. For too long, she had passively ignored the judgmental expressions of disapproval and endured all the snide comments to her cursed personality being little more than a drunken whore. The people of Storybrooke had long memories and Ruby had given them plenty of ammunition to use over nearly three decades. But thanks to Regina’s unconditional acceptance, she could look back on how she'd behaved during the curse without feeling debilitating shame.

Under the Curse, Ruby expressed herself in a variety of...interesting ways, such as dyeing a strip of her hair red, wearing too much make-up, and by leaving too little of her body to the imagination. Looking back, she could recognize that she'd never done such things to gain attention, but as a way to assert her freedom in a way that straddled the fence of acceptability. But while Ruby was independent and untamable, acceptably wild just like her wolf was, Regina most certainly was not. No siree. Regina did not leave their bedroom of a morning unless she was dressed to the nines. She did not wear skin-tight clothing or do fun and experimental things with her hair. Regina was the definition of a classy lady who exuded a confidence that lacked the typical elitist pretentiousness of the upper class. Though far removed from the throne, Regina was still the Queen, she had just exchanged the crown and the amazing dresses for power suits and perfectly coiffed hair.

In that aspect, the Queen’s chambers very much reflected Regina, as it was thoroughly aristocratic, just with a degree of austerity that Ruby was unacquainted with. The Queen had not been a happy person, and that misery was evident in the upscale yet muted appearance of the room. Ruby could tell at a glance that this place had been more of a prison for Regina than a sanctuary, and she didn't need to guess as to why.
Aside from Daniel's death, most of the deeply scarring events in Regina's life had happened in this very castle, some of them likely in this very room. It made sense that Regina did not embellish the room as a means to dull the pain of recollection but rather kept it dark and broody, as if the very memories were kept alive as haunting shadows upon the walls. Those events, terrible as they were, drove Regina’s every waking moment; they were what motivated her to stay alive, to keep fighting until she finally obtained vengeance for all the perceived wrongs visited upon her. Without them, her anger would have fizzled out until she had all but lost that burning desire to avenge herself on Snow, an outcome that was unacceptable to a woman literally lived and breathed to exact her revenge.

Knowing the purpose behind the elegant yet monotone nature of the room depressed Ruby. She could imagine Regina all alone here lounging by a fire to nurse her battered heart or sitting at her tiny desk, accompanied only by her horrific memories as she stared hatefully at her own reflection in the mirror. In that moment, Ruby wanted more than anything to go back in time just for an opportunity to comfort the broken Queen, to kneel at her feet and offer herself freely. Sure as she was her love would be rejected or, worse yet, abused didn't change her desire to give it. If Joshua’s insanity had proven anything to Ruby, it was that there wasn’t much she wouldn’t voluntarily endure if doing so meant ending Regina's pain.

“God, I can't believe Regina lived here,” Emma said, her hand tracing down the blackened surface of what Snow had told Ruby were once resplendently white walls. “It's so depressing. I can almost feel the loneliness and smell the pain and darkness in the air. It's suffocating.”

“She was all of those things at the time, and more,” Ruby replied, not bothering to hide how being in this room was affecting her. Emma’s mention of metaphorically smelling Regina’s emotional suffering brought along with it notes of very real scents. Among them, faded as it was, she could still detect that intoxicating blend of apples and coconut and danger that typified her wife. Homesickness gnawed at her chest, at odds with a palpable relief that Regina was still back in Storybrooke away from this place...and from the potential danger Belmordan presented. “I'm just glad she doesn't ever have to come back here again,” she then said, eyes briefly closing to savor the smell of Regina – of home. “This place reeks of bad memories. She's worked too hard to put them behind her.”

“Agreed,” Emma said as she wearily shuffled her way over to the lounger next to the fire and plopped down with a satisfied groan. The way she was laboring to move made it appear as if her feet were encased in concrete. “Hey Rubes,” she called out once she was settled into a comfortable position. Ruby looked over with a raised brow. “Would you mind working on getting those maps while I take a catnap? After taking down the shield and eating all that food, I'm getting cross-eyed over here.”

Ruby chuckled. To be fair, she was impressed Emma had made it this long before crashing, because she sure didn't make it so long at Thanksgiving last year. Thirty minutes after her second plate, she was laying across the couch, head in Hook’s lap, snoring softly as the rest of the group chatted away.
“Sure,” she said, smiling softly at the happy thought. That had been a good day. “I'll wake you up when I've got everything.”

Emma yawned loudly, her eyes watering due to the intensity. “Thanks. You're the best.”

“Don't I know it,” Ruby quipped as she turned her attention from where Emma was already nestled up under the furs with her eyes closed to the wardrobe against the opposite wall.

After approaching the impressively carved piece of furniture, Ruby dug through the pockets of her cargo pants until she found the amulet Regina had given her. She pulled the object out of the thigh pocket of her cargo pants and then held it up to the wardrobe and waited. Almost immediately, the clear crystal of the amulet began to glow purple, and as it intensified, the wardrobe began to shake under the power of whatever magic Regina imbued it with. Ruby’s eyes widened as she backed away from the cacophonous reaction. But within seconds, it was over, and the wardrobe was still once more.

After heaving a breath of relief, Ruby glanced over to Esperanza, who was now standing out on the balcony and peering vacantly into the distance as she polished her blade with a napkin she’d rustled up. She called out to her new friend.

The striking woman turned and gave Ruby a questioning gaze before returning from the balcony to stand next to Ruby. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said, indicating toward the wardrobe with her thumb. “I need your help to move this down the wall. It’s covering up the alcove we need to access.” If she’d needed to, Ruby could have moved the wardrobe herself, but she wanted to involve Esperanza in the process. The woman had looked bored out of her mind.

“Alright,” said Esperanza, nodding.

Ruby moved into position at the side of the wardrobe, and after placing the amulet back in her pocket, she planted her feet firmly behind her and braced her hands on the wardrobes sides. Without needing to be told, Esperanza mirrored Ruby's pose.

“On three,” said Ruby and then counted down.
As one, they both leaned into the wardrobe, pushing it forward a few inches at a time. Ruby had greatly underestimated how cumbersome it was, and its bulk had her wondering what kind of wood the thing was made of. None she knew of none that could account for such density. Perhaps it had been magically anchored? But if that was so, why hadn’t the amulet released it?

Shaking her head from such inconsequential thoughts, Ruby redoubled her exertions, grunting with effort as she pushed on the wardrobe once more. This time it budged, sliding down the wall with a loud, ear-piercing screech. Wincing at the dreadful noise, Ruby glanced over to the lounger, afraid the racket would have disturbed Emma. But the Sheriff was utterly dead to the world with one arm flung over her eyes and her legs crossed at the ankles.

Laughing to herself at Emma's enviable ability to sleep on command, Ruby turned back to approach the now exposed alcove. It was a very small space, comprising half as much height and width as the wardrobe itself, and if she hadn't known differently, she would have falsely assumed it was carved in such a way to serve as some form of book shelf. It was an optical illusion, though, meant to deter closer inspection. Regina always was a clever woman.

After pulling the amulet back out of her pocket, Ruby took a deep breath and then held it up against the alcove. Like a magnetic attracted to its opposite, the amulet launched from her fingers, settling itself neatly into a very small indention near the top of the alcove. As soon as it made contact, it began to pulsate, continuing to do so for about a few second. Then, just as suddenly as the process had begun, it halted and everything grew still.

Ruby waited with baited breath for something to happen, as did Esperanza who was standing next to her. A moment later, a square portion of the alcove about two feet by four feet began to undulate and shimmer, like the gentle waves of the sea at sunset. The waves grew and grew until at last that whole portion of the wall disintegrated into dust and fell to the floor with a whoosh. The amulet fell along with the debris, clinking as it contacted the ground.

After picking up the pendant and replacing it her pocket, Ruby noticed the wall had given way to reveal a deep cavity, lined with shelves and filled to the brim with papers, books, various baubles, and pieces of jewelry Regina had left behind. She gaped at the pile of papers in particular. Along with an impressive collection of scrolls, stacks upon stacks of loose documents were lined up going all the way to the back of the cavity.

“There must be a thousand documents in here,” she lamented, knowing her work was cut out for her if she was going to find them. Luckily, she would not have to face the task alone. Ruby glanced over to Esperanza and grinned. “Say, how do you feel about doing some digging?”

Esperanza groaned.
Two hours later, Ruby and Esperanza were sitting cross-legged in the middle of the floor, sifting silently through the vast pile of documents. On Esperanza's side, the discarded papers were neatly stacked and organized, which — much as her adorable eating habits — fit the woman's personality to a tee. Or so Ruby thought. But her own assignment of documents were strewn haphazardly about as if a tornado had blown through her work area. To be honest, the mess rather resembled her desk at the station, and if Regina had been there, she would have chided Ruby endlessly about her chaotic disorganization. But Regina wasn't there and Ruby was in too big of a hurry to care much about tidiness, so she decided to do things the efficient way instead of the neat one.

Over the two hours of laborious searching, it seemed like she had waded through a hundred boring documents. There were trade agreements, labor contracts, tax reports, arrest records, sentencing records, execution records (those Ruby promptly crumbled up and tossed away), and various other documents of official state business. God, she thought, who knew being a Queen could be filled with so much mind-numbing drudgery? It was really no wonder Regina had passed her recess time slaughtering entire villages; Ruby might have felt tempted to do the same if she'd had to endure such tedium on a daily basis.

After another hour of dull searching, her eyes were beginning to blur and she pressed her fingers to her temple to soothe away an embryonic headache. But as she discarded a scathing letter Regina had composed to a councilor accused of embezzling from the seasonal tax haul, Esperanza cried out, diverting her attention.

“I found something!” the raven-haired beauty said, waving a long piece of parchment at Ruby.

Grasping the proffered page, Ruby turned it over to study it. She gasped at what she saw. It was a map of the White Kingdom, expertly drawn and intricately detailed down to minute levels, such as approximate elevations, obscure mountain and forest passes, and the locations and names of extremely remote villages. There were x-marks all over the map indicating places of import. One was made at the mountain pass heading to George's kingdom, another close to village Ruby had grown up in, and yet another at a village just north of Sherwood forest. There were others, too, which Ruby also studied, her brow furrowed as she tried to make sense of why she felt she should recognize what the marks meant.

At last, it hit her with all the subtlety of a brick through a glass window that they were locations to which Regina had tracked down Snow and made personal appearances in her pursuit of the bandit princess who continued to elude her. This was not just a map of the White Kingdom, but Regina's personal map, the one she had instructed Ruby and Emma to consult. They had found what they were looking for.
With a cheer, Ruby shot up from her seated position. “This is it!”

From behind her, she heard a stirring and a prolonged whine. She had awakened Emma in her excitement, which was amusing because she’d made a scant percentage of the noise the wardrobe had when she’d touched it with the amulet.

Emma rubbed furiously at her bleary eyes as her naturally frowny mouth turned even further southward. “Wha...?”

Ruby grinned and waved the map in Emma’s direction. “We found the map.”

“Yay?” Emma’s sarcasm was due to sulking from having been awakened. As she sat up, she yawned loudly and scratched her belly.

Ruby had to hold back a giggle. Waking Emma up was a very different experience from what Ruby was used to with Regina, which is why she found it so amusing. Regina tended go still and silent when she woke, blinking a few times to clear her eyes before awareness returned. Immediately after there was always a tender smile for Ruby – though the intensity of those smiles often depended upon Regina’s state of mind or how much sleep she had been allowed to have, which was sometimes not very much thanks to an overly energetic wife and two equally tireless daughters who all arose at the crack of dawn.

But Emma woke up all sarcastic and rude, which Ruby found inexplicably precious. In the few times they had worked the night through and crashed on the couches at the station, Ruby got treated to an entertaining show of the Sheriff grumbling and complaining as stumbled about the next morning, perpetual scowl in place until she had at least two cups of coffee in her. Unfortunately, Ruby had no coffee at her disposal with which to invigorate Emma, so her friend was just going to have to be a big girl for a few minutes and suck it up.

“However much I know you'd rather curl back up and sleep,” Ruby said, ignoring the way Emma looked at her as if she had just joyously declared that canaries were yellow and the sky was blue, “we need to game plan first.” She walked over to the lounger and nudged Emma over. Grudgingly, Emma moved down toward the end of the lounger, though not without an annoyed glare. “Alright, you big baby,” Ruby shot at her cranky friend, smiling crookedly, “I'll hurry this along.”

Emma rubbed her eyes again. “Please do.”
Spreading out the map over the empty space, Ruby gestured to where the castle was. “We're here, obviously, but we're looking for wolf dens. Regina told me she'd marked most of them out for Graham's benefit during his time as her Huntsman. They should be marked by a crescent moon.”

From behind Ruby, Esperanza moved around to the other side of the lounger and knelt, scanning over the map with her keen eyes. “I see several already,” she said, pointing out a few locations along the edges of the map. “However, they appear far away and many are labeled as abandoned.”

“Yeah,” Ruby nodded, “I saw those at first blush.” She pointed her finger at one den nearby, about five miles out from Esperanza’s cabin. “I think we should start here. Have you been in this area, Esperanza?”

“I have,” Esperanza said, “and I can tell you that there are no wolves in that area. They have been driven out by trappers and hunters that operate nearby.”

“Damn. There's nothing else close by.”

“Just this one up here,” Emma spoke up, gesturing to a crescent moon filled in with thick black ink that was marked inside a long valley hemmed in by large mountains. To the north of it was a small town, but there was not much else of note in the area. What worried Ruby the most was that it appeared to be at least two days hike from the Dark Palace. “It's marked with writing, too, but I can't make it out.”

Frowning at the thought of losing two more weeks, Ruby leaned down to get a look at the writing Emma had mentioned. It was a rune of the same shape as the one that protected the rest of Regina's things. Thinking of the pendant, she pulled it out and touched the tip of the gem it contained to the rune. Just like the other times, the rune lit up a brilliant purple, but this time, rather than falling away, it rose into the air as a cloud of dust, swirling around until it began to shape letters, which then formed into words.

“The Selenian Valley,” Ruby read as the words became legible, “home of the Dire Wolves. An accord has been made. Access to this area is to be forbidden to all.” After she had read them aloud, they disappeared in a puff of smoke back into the sealed rune.

“Sounds dangerous,” Emma commented as she watched the magical dust settle back into the parchment. Her frown was still in place, though for a completely different reason now.
“Maybe,” Ruby said, cocking her head to the side in thought. “This rune was obviously sealed by Regina and it says that she made an accord with these wolves recognizing their sovereignty.”

“How can an accord be made with an animal?” Esperanza inquired, perplexed at such an idea. They were all so tired they had forgotten their discussion with Belmordan and what he had revealed about dragons.

“I don’t know,” Ruby replied, shrugging. “It makes no sense to me either. I mean, the best I ever get out of them is respect and obedience, but I’m a werewolf. And an alpha at that. It's strange, I admit, but I think this is where we should start.”

“Are you sure?” Emma asked from her place at the foot of the lounger, looking concerned. “’Cause it kinda sounds to me like Regina thought these things were dangerous and ought to be avoided.”

Making a noise of protest, Ruby tapped the black crescent moon with her long, unpolished fingernail. “That may be so, but my gut is telling me these wolves are the ones we’re looking for.” She looked up to Emma, giving her best friend a comforting smile. “As far as danger goes, don't worry about that. I can handle these guys. I never met a wolf in the Enchanted Forest that didn't accept me as their leader. And if they don't, well...I doubt they’ll be much of a match for me.”

“True,” Emma conceded, her brow losing its creases as she relaxed. “Your girl has gotten rather huge over the past few years. I didn't really realize it until we fought those...things...earlier.”

Ruby nodded, her own expression growing curious. “I know, she has, hasn't she? Regina was asking me about why my wolf was growing, but I'm just as clueless as she is about it. It's not an unwelcome development though. Came in handy.”

“That it did,” Esperanza agreed. Pushing back away from the lounger, she stood. “Well, whatever you decide, I will follow you. So, while I agree with Emma that this could be dangerous, I also trust your judgment.”

Ruby gave Esperanza a grateful smile and then turned to Emma. “Em?”

The Savior shrugged. “I just think we need to be careful. If Regina warned against approaching these guys, it was for a reason. If you're taking that into account when you decide to approach them, then I'm with you.”

“I am,” Ruby said. “I promise, I won't put either of you in any unnecessary danger. When we get
there, I'll go alone and try to establish myself in a pack. It make take a few hours, but once I get their trust, it'll just be a matter of leading them to a spot where we can use the other bean to get back home.”

Leaning down over the map, Emma pointed to an unobstructed area situated somewhere between Selenian Valley and the small town to the north of it. “We can use this clearing here. It's not too far away. I'm pretty sure that if we scout it out first, I can transport Esperanza and myself there magically.”

“That's not too far?” Ruby asked, knowing how much trouble Emma once had with transportation spells. She had much better control over her magic now, but she'd once translocated a wounded horse into the diner rather than the veterinarian's office because she was hungry and had been craving a grilled cheese sandwich. Ruby never heard Granny cuss up such a storm as she had when Ruby and Emma sidled in for lunch. That had been an adventurous day.

“I don't think so,” Emma said, her expression sure. “I've not had an accident in a long time. And don't even think about mentioning the horse incident!” At that, Ruby snickered, but made no further comment. “Anyway, I've gotten really good at focusing for that spell and a mile is no problem for two people. I can do it.”

“Allright then,” Ruby said, clapping her hands together in anticipation. “We've got ourselves a plan. Now we just need to figure out how to cut down our travel time. Two days is much too long.”

All the sudden, Belmordan's voice boomed out from the door, and all three women startled in place, turning to look at him with wide eyes.

“Perhaps I could help with that.”

Willing her heart to slow down, Ruby silently cursed his alarming ability to sneak up on her. No one she knew could accomplish that feat as her senses were too sharp to circumvent, even for Regina using magic. But somehow, Belmordan could effortlessly slip past her sense of smell and hearing, and it had Ruby off-kilter. The worst part was that if – God forbid – he became an enemy, he would be have a distinct advantage beyond his already overwhelming power.

If she hadn't already been both intimidated and frightened by Belmordan's deeply mysterious nature, she would be now.
“And how do you propose to do that?” she asked, proud of the fact that her voice was steady in spite of her uneasy nerves.

Belmordan smirked, eyes heavy under dark brows. “Isn't it obvious, my dear?” he said, giving a flourish with his hand. “Magic.”

“Why?” Emma asked, suspicion marring her pretty features.

Belmordan deliberately quirked his head. “Why what, my dear?”

“Why help us?” Emma elaborated with an aimless hand gesture, then crossed her arms over her chest. “I know you're trying to be all magnanimous, and I don't want to sound ungrateful or anything, but there's always a catch to offers like yours.”

Ruby held her breath, wondering whether Belmordan would be offended. Her fears seemed unfounded, though, as he easily shrugged off Emma's doubts.

“There is no catch in this instance,” he said, face betraying little emotion. “I am helping because your friend here,” he pointed at Ruby, causing Emma's eyes to narrow, “is my kin. What's more, you are my guests, and royal ones to boot. What kind of host would I be if I denied my aid when needed? Though, if it helps you to reconcile yourself to my offer, I will admit I am curious as to how you will be received by the Dire Alpha. He is not known to be either friendly or helpful to interlopers.”

“So we're cannon fodder. That's nice,” said Emma, her sarcasm highlighting how very displeased she was by the answer.

Belmordan laughed, a barking sound that was harsh and abrupt. “Nothing of the sort, I assure you. It has been centuries since so powerful an alpha of our kind was among the Dires,” he turned to fix his gaze upon Ruby, a chill shooting up her spine as his uncanny gray eyes locked on her. There was an indiscernible expression on his face, but it felt to Ruby as if he were testing her willingness to help him and she didn't much like the feeling that came along with it. “I'm quite sure you will be welcomed. I only ask that you put in a good word on my behalf. I would very much like to visit them some day in the near future.”

“I don't know how much help I'll be with that,” she said, unaware she uncertainly shifted her weight from one leg to another. “I've never even heard of the Dire Wolves, I sure as hell have never met one. I doubt they'll be keen to take the advice of a perfect stranger.”
A strange, knowing grin twisted Belmordan's lips, which parted to reveal pearly white teeth. He seemed very much a wolf at that moment and very little a man. She could feel his magic wafting out from him in latent waves that were nonetheless potent, and she was stricken once more by how carefully he maintained control of such terrific reserves of power. Such restraint spoke of an individual who was not quick to act in anger, but if he did, the consequences would be unimaginable.

More than anyone else she had ever met, Ruby found herself afraid of Belmordan, which made her nearly desperate to not make an enemy of him. Here, in the Enchanted Forest, untold miles away from the people who she could count on to make a stand with her, Ruby knew that it was pointless to fight against a clearly superior opponent. At best, they would prove a paltry resistance that he would crush with minimal effort. Belmordan knew it, Emma knew it, Esperanza knew, and Ruby knew it, too. There was really no reason, then, to resist his aid and risk provoking his ire. All she could do was hope that his intentions were more honorable than everyone else believed them to be. If they weren't, none of them would be making it back home alive.

"Don't be so sure," were the words Belmordan next spoke, and as Ruby listened to him go on, she could hear the weight of significance in them. "As I said before, you were meant for more. If I know it, so will they, if only because they have been waiting a very long time for your arrival."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked, her chest growing heavy.

Belmordan stepped closer, his figure imposing with an enigmatic power beyond her comprehension. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Emma and Esperanza tense, their weight shifting forward in preparation to fight. Almost imperceptibly, she bade them to halt with a slight movement of her head and hand, which they immediately picked up on. Their stances straightened, but remained coiled in readiness.

"Your arrival was foretold long ago," Belmordan then said, coming to stand a foot away from Ruby. He was close enough that she could see the fibers of his irises blazing with an intensity that was positively otherworldly. "This was always going to happen. You were always going to come here. What soon follows will echo through the ages, for history is being made as we speak. An ancient power is awakening. This realm is going to be shaken to its very foundations by the events your arrival has precipitated, and the effects will be felt in worlds more distant and in ways more astounding than imagination can comprehend. Everything that has happened to you is for a reason, to prepare you for your destiny. To be a Queen. It's who you were born to be."

Ruby gaped, stumbling backward a step to put some distance between herself and a man who so clearly had unwelcome designs on her life. All of that initial dread came clawing back up into her chest before she banished it with indignation. No one told her who she was! She was her own
woman who made her own choices, and she didn’t care who it was that wanted to tell her otherwise.

“I'm not a Queen,” she insisted, though her voice was initially hardly above a whisper. “I never have been and I never will be.” As her mind registered one of his intimations, her resolve hardened instantly. “I didn't ask for any of this. I didn't ask for this damned curse. I didn't ask to turn into a monster who ate the boy I loved. I didn't ask to be abducted and tortured by Peter’s crazy-ass brother! All I ever wanted was to be happy, to find someone to love. Now that I have it, nothing else matters.”

Stepping forward, Ruby met Belmordan’s eyes, daring him to challenge her objections as she stepped into his personal space. She was tired of his innuendos and talks of destiny. All she wanted was to get back home to her family. As far as Ruby was concerned, destiny could get stuffed and so could Belmordan.

“I don't care if you think I'm destined for greatness,” she continued, almost snarling in a way that would make Regina proud. “I'm a mother and a wife and a friend. That's as great as I need to be. So thanks, but no thanks. We'll make our own way.”

Belmordan shrugged, seemingly unaffected. “I fear you will come to regret your decision but I will accept your decision.” With well-practiced smile, he then turned for the door. “I bid you goodnight then,” he said as he walked, and just as quickly as he arrived, he disappeared down the hall.

Ruby, Emma, and Esperanza looked at one another in his wake, baffled and gravely concerned. They had more than just logistical problems now, Ruby knew. Belmordan and his unrevealed intentions loomed larger than ever, an enormous anvil dangling from a precariously thin rope that was fraying and coming unraveled faster than she could keep up with repairs. That he was all but blatant in his desire to have a hand in shaping her future made her skin crawl and her gut twist.

Pressing herself up against the wall next to the fireplace, Ruby collapsed down to the floor. Drawing her legs up, she buried her face between her knees as the familiar bite of tears stung at her eyes. Regina, the kids, and home seemed further away than ever, and for what felt like the hundredth time since stepping through the portal, she found herself lamenting her decision to journey to the Enchanted Forest. She would rather be the only werewolf for a million miles than put the happy ending waiting for her back home in jeopardy. If the lead they had just discovered did not pan out, they were going back home. Mission be damned. It wasn’t worth this level of anxiety.

Not caring that Emma and Esperanza were watching her closely, Ruby let her tears fall.
Having not been the least bit annoyed at Ruby's display of passionate bravado, Belmordan grinned as he passed down the long, dark hallway towards his chambers. That was precisely the type of reaction he was driving his progeny toward. Slowly but surely, he was breaking her out of the shell she had built for herself to exist in. For too long she had been content to live so far beneath her potential. It was time for things to change. It was time for Ruby to change, and the change that was coming would shake the foundations of the realms.

If nudging it along was what he had to do to speed things up, well, he was more than willing to do so. Expedience was key considering he had less than a year before the spell he'd used to travel to the Enchanted Forest started to degrade the very fabric of reality. If that happened, he would have to abandon most of his army to save his own hide, an expense he was unwilling to incur. Too much planning had gone into realizing his objective for it to fail now at the final hour.

Just the same, he also realized that he couldn't afford to push Ruby too far too fast or she would shut down completely. Just from interacting with her, he could tell that she had struggled with her identity a great deal in her life. It was obvious to Belmordan that his distant offspring possessed an innate power and leadership quality that drew people to her, that commanded loyalty and fellowship. Yet she seemed so ill at ease holding the responsibility of other lives in her hands. That was an insecurity that had to be banished if she was going to rise to take her rightful place at his side. There were other issues at play to contend with as well, but he had long since put wheels in motion to correct them.

Suddenly, all his long years of biding his time as he methodically accrued power were about to pay off. It all hinged on unlocking the gift that Ruby had kept hidden inside herself for so long. That was the reason why his only goal for the moment was to put Ruby in a position in which she would be compelled to reach beyond herself; thus his extending an offer to transport Ruby and her companions to the Selenian Valley. Whether she was willing to accept it or not, he would ensure their prompt arrival, transporting them there against their will if he must. It was necessary that Ruby stand before the Lunar Stone, for there she would either rise to meet her destiny or be crushed under its heel.

Belmordan might have been afraid, but he had long since passed the days of such mortal fragility. Nothing frightened him anymore save the prospect of another thousand years sundered from the one he loved, and with Ruby having fallen almost literally into his hands, the possibility of that occurring was dimmer than ever. An encouraging sign, to be sure, as was his confidence in his descendant.

Ruby’s was a life tried by fire and battle tested. She was a warrior who gave everything she had for those she loved. She would succeed not only because she was born for it, but because the tragedies and hardships that shaped her life had prepared her for what was to come. And once she finally blossomed into the flower of delicate beauty and unshakable roots she was meant to be, once she at long last embraced her true self and her destiny, no power in the universe could prevent him from reuniting with his beloved and conquering the last of the Nine Realms. With his family at his side, anything was possible! Even the faint mysteries of the cosmos he had yet to uncover might finally be revealed. He could become a god!
Now all that remained was to ensure a way for him to follow Ruby and her companions back to the world they now occupied...to this Storybrooke in the land without magic. He had an idea as to how to accomplish that but needed confirmation. To get it, he would practice his most dearly won characteristic: patience.

He would watch, unseen and undetectable, as Ruby met with the Dires. If what he predicted would happen came to pass, she would not leave that place as she came. The Selenian Valley was the most sacred of all lands to Diana, which was why the High Alpha of the Dire Wolves occupied it. With Diana's namesake there among the goddess' most favored friends, she would be compelled to act in concordance with her own prophecy.

The weight of destiny would move Diana to touch the mighty alpha female with her powers and thus begin the process of transforming Ruby Mills, a self-proclaimed ordinary woman into something extraordinary. Unbound, the girl's power would rival Belmordan's own, which was why he had to be careful in the way he handled her. He couldn't risk such power opposing him. When combined with the formidable persons of the Savior and the former Evil Queen, it was possible for an empowered Ruby to defeat him. Belmordan could not allow that to happen. He had sacrificed too much to fail so late in the game.

After the passage of more than a millennium, his beloved was at last within reach. Merlin and Diana merely thought they had won when they separated him from Artemis by locking her away within the bowels of the one planet to which he had no access. It still enraged Belmordan that Diana had betrayed her own twin sister in such a way, but the heat of that anger was not so scorching in the face of victory. His rage had been tempered by hope.

He could almost see Artemis now, her face so beautiful and strong, with striking features that were mirrored so much in the young woman that was his kin. It was the ultimate irony and almost tragic that Ruby should so favor his beloved. In reaching Artemis, he was going to have to mercilessly use the girl who just so happened to be his distant progeny, his and Artemis'. Had there been a viable alternative that would allow him to spare Ruby the agony ahead, he would have chosen to do so. Sadly, the only way to free Artemis was to use her. So be it.

Part of Belmordan knew that Artemis would never forgive him for such an action, but he was past the point of caring. He had spent far too long and expended far too much of himself to be stopped now. And while the girl had thus far resisted his attempts to ply her, his patience, while extraordinary, had its limits. He would try once more to convince Ruby to submit to spare her undue pain, but if she refused, he would force her hand. One way or another, she was going to help him free Artemis. After that, all resistance would soon crumble.

Whistling an almost happy tune, Belmordan made his way to his own chambers, where he retired.
And as he laid his head down upon his pillow, there was an unusual smile upon his face. For the first time in nearly a hundred years, he slept like a baby.

Chapter End Notes

I'd meant to include a note earlier in the story regarding Belmordan and Esperanza. As I was writing, I picture them as, respectively, Michael Shannon’s look as General Zod in Man of Steel and Roselyn Sanchez. YMMV with these internal depictions.

Next week, Ruby meets with the Dires. Stuff happens. Tune in if that's of interest.
Romulus

Chapter Summary

Ruby meets a new, very interesting friend.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To say Ruby was shocked was an understatement. She thought she'd heard it all after Belmordan's little tale back at the Dark Palace about his uncle talking to dragons. Apparently not. As if that were not enough freakishness in one trip, she was now in the presence of an honest-to-God talking wolf. It was so surreal an experience that she almost shifted back to two legs just to pinch herself and ensure she wasn't hallucinating.

“I assure you, you are not imagining this,” Romulus stated, his lupine lips curving with amusement. Ruby eyes bulged wide in disbelief. *Could he read her mind too?* “And to answer the next question: no, I cannot read your mind. I can however, read your body language as I'm sure you could mine. I recognized your unease, which was to be expected. Our kind are used to such reactions, though it has been decades since an outsider has visited our Valley, thanks in large part to Queen Regina, who to our great surprise honored our agreement.”

Wanting to speak to the wolf but unwilling to shift just yet, Ruby gave a bark, which prompted a chuckle from Romulus.

“I see you have not been taught to speak in your bestial form.” His tone and expression shifted with profound disappointment. “It pains me to see that your kind has fallen so far. Even so, I would not be offended if you wish to commune on two legs rather than four.”

In a move meant to put Ruby more at ease, Romulus then lowered his muzzle in recognition that she was his superior. The gesture was not necessary since he had her at a disadvantage. As perplexed as she was, he could have easily used the opening to strike. Instead he had chosen to submit himself to her, a total stranger, when it was obvious she knew nothing of his kind.

Also, alpha or no, Ruby felt she had yet to earn such deference. Among normal wolves her own superiority wouldn’t be a question or a concern, but Romulus was a sentient creature with thoughts, feelings, and a free will, far from ordinary for her to be assuming herself to be his better. Nonetheless the unanticipated act of conciliation had an instant effect in disarming her previous reluctance to extend an initial modicum of trust.
Ruby huffed out a sigh as she felt her muscles relax. Focusing her energy inward, she gathered the ancient magic that powered her ability to shift. Once returned to a human form, she took a moment to get her bearings while maintaining a semi-defensive stance. As vulnerable as she had been while the wolf, she was even more so while a woman. Strong as she was with arms and legs, she was no match for the obvious strength of the beast before her. It was a great risk to expose herself in such a way, which Romulus had obviously recognized as he remained in a submissive posture.

“Great One,” he again greeted.

“Hello,” she replied, ignoring the deferential honorific. “My name is Ruby Mills, and I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Romulus.” At times like this, Ruby was thankful for a decade of being in a relationship with Regina. Some of the former Queen's sense of decorum had managed to rub off on her over the years, rounding out her more boorish mannerisms. “I have to admit, you have me at a loss. I've been around a lot of wolves in the Enchanted Forest and none could talk.”

Romulus nodded sadly. “Once it was not so, but several factors such as a growing mistrust of magic and the miscreant behavior rampant among your kind drove us into hiding. Our numbers had long ago dwindled to the point of mere sustenance rather than prosperity, so we had no choice but to retreat within our protected ancestral sanctuaries such as this, one of three that still exist in this world. Here we have dwelt for centuries in relative obscurity.”

Ducking her head, Ruby had the grace to blush on behalf of her kind. She knew exactly what Romulus was referring to because her own mother had been such a hedonistic werewolf, and the alpha of entire pack of them at that. Ruby was still ashamed to think about the way her mother and her followers had behaved, as if all rules governing civilized behavior no longer applied to them. It was, to her, a disgusting way to live. Granny had raised her to be better than that, which made Ruby question (though she never asked out of respect for the woman who sacrificed everything for her) whether Anita's liberal view of werewolf behavior was responsible for the irreconcilable rift between Granny and her only child.

That didn't mean Ruby was ungrateful for being taught how to control the wolf, though. She was very thankful to her mother for that. Besides giving birth to her, control was the only gift Anita ever gave her worth cherishing. Still, she'd rejected outright all the other nonsense Anita and her pack had espoused. They wanted to live like animals when they were, in reality, people first. It was sad that they had so easily cast aside their humanity to shirk all responsibility, and if what Romulus had said was true, it sounded like Anita's pack was not the first to have such radical views.

“I'm sorry for whatever those other werewolves did,” she said, eyes apologetic. “Not all of us are so...feral.”
The bright amber color of Romulus' eyes softened, his canid features expressing an evident gratitude for Ruby's unprompted apology on behalf of her race. “I am aware of that, Great One. And I thank you for your apology. But while the behavior of lycanthropes was abysmal, they were not alone in the blame for our plight. In fact, humanity in general is mostly culpable for our decline. As people who wielded magic increasingly served their own selfish interests, humans began to lose their belief that it could be utilized with benevolence. They reacted accordingly as humans are wont to do, with fear and hatred.

“Many other creatures of our sort were persecuted wholesale in the decades that followed. It was not just the Dires who became endangered by the frenzy sweeping over the land, but Unicorns, Centaurs, Cyclops, Gryphons, Dryads, Selkies, and others as well. Many species were driven to extinction. Thankfully, we were protected by our blessed sanctuaries and even by various monarchs who were privy to the old ways, such as Queen Regina.”

Though the list of creatures that apparently existed was amazing and worth investing time into researching at a later date, Ruby was more interested in what dealings the Dires had with Regina.

“You knew Queen Regina?” she asked, feeling him out.

“I did.”

Ruby bit her lip tentatively. “Out of curiosity: what's your opinion of her?

Romulus grinned knowingly. “There is no need for subterfuge. I am aware why you ask.”

Ruby arched her brows with surprise. “You are?”

“Yes,” he said, still grinning. “You ask because it is of direct concern to you. The Queen is your mate.”

Ruby stepped back, stunned. “H-how do you know that?”

If it were possible for a wolf to shrug, that is what Romulus did by slightly rolling his powerful shoulders. It was strange body language to witness on an animal, even a magical one like Romulus, but that was what it was just the same. Ruby thought that this entire situation just kept getting, as Alice would say, curiouser and curiouser.
“I can smell her on you,” was Romulus' simple reply, which elicited a faint blush from Ruby.

It was hard for her to imagine how that was possible, though. She’d not touched Regina in days and had trekked around the Enchanted Forest, sweating buckets. All scents but her own should have been suppressed by now. Hell, she’d even bathed in the Crystal Lake just one day previous. Regina’s scent should have long since dissipated. Even with her heightened senses, Ruby could not smell her wife on her person anymore, although she longed to desperately.

“You smell her on me?” she prompted, hoping to draw out an explanation. She was genuinely curious.

“Yes,” Romulus nodded sharply. “It is not so much her actual odor as it her magic. When the Queen came to us to broker her agreement, I made careful note of her distinctive magic. It has always been my assertion that such a powerful individual as the Queen should always be remembered in every way possible: by sight, sound, and smell. Thus, I recognized the scent of her magic instantly upon your approach, for it is inside you and all around you, as if a part of your very essence.” Pausing, he fixed Ruby with a thoughtful gaze, almost wondrous in nature if not also terribly intrigued. “The bond you formed with Queen Regina must be incredibly strong, for I have never encountered such an incidence in which the essences of two people became so entangled, even within True Love pairs.”

Ruby ducked her head as her blush spread down her neck and into her chest. Whenever she thought about the intense, almost intrinsically essential connection she and Regina had built, it made her feel so warm, so whole, and so effervescently happy that she was almost consumed by the sensations. And although it was kind of embarrassing to have such a reaction in public, it happened to her often enough that she should be used to it by now. But, she supposed, there was no getting used to feeling that strongly about someone. The depth of her love for Regina was a source of perpetual awe.

“We are very close, yes,” she said, not quite sure how to elucidate the complex nature of her relationship with her wife. Words were just not adequate to describe a bond that seemingly permeated into the very core essence of her being.

Ruby’s deflection only increased Romulus’ intrigue. His entire demeanor thrummed with interest. “Forgive my curiosity, but do you share True Love?”

Ruby nibbled at her lip as she nodded. “We do.”
Narrowing his eyes, Romulus studied Ruby closely. “I feel as if there is more to it than that. True Love is very rare and the way you smell of the Queen's essence leads me to believe something singularly extraordinary exists between you. I recognize that we have just become acquainted, and while I don't want to press you beyond comfort or propriety, I confess I am completely captivated by this phenomenon. I would genuinely appreciate elaboration if you're amenable.”

“I suppose it wouldn't hurt,” Ruby said after thinking it over, then added with a wave of her hand, “in the interest of building trust between us.”

Romulus smiled his agreement. “Trust is earned most quickly through sharing, a valued tenet of our kind.”

“As it should be,” Ruby commented, and then shoved her hands into her pockets. Rocking onto her heels, she began, “Well, it's a long story, but to make it short, something horrible happened to us a few years ago. I...died and Regina brought me back to life with True Love.” Her brow furrowed deeply. “I still don’t know how. She refuses to tell me how she did it, and I haven’t wanted to make an issue of it just to get to the truth because in the end, it doesn't really mean that much to me. All I know – all I need to know – is that she saved me. Also, around the same time we found that we...”

Ruby trailed off, not quite convinced that she should share such sensitive personal information with a relative stranger. But there was something about Romulus that made her want to trust him. Whether it was his conciliating actions, warm voice, or his kind and thoughtful eyes, she wasn't sure. What she was sure of, however, was that Romulus was not her enemy. She felt it deep down in her bones. And considering that her gut rarely let her down, she decided to take a chance.

After a steadying breath, just blurted it out. “We got each other pregnant. With True Love. At the same time.”

Romulus stood stock still, dumbfounded, his eyes wide as saucers. Such a momentous occurrence had never transpired before to his knowledge. While it would be natural for him to doubt this information, he could not fathom any motivation for the Great One to construct so fantastic a lie. Her very posture was screaming at him that her words were sincere. That said, logic made the scenario seem outlandish if not outright impossible.

As Romulus himself was a very old and well-learned magical creature, he was well aware of the exacting nature of magic and of the price that must be paid to wield it. Magic was a harsh and intractable lender, demanding satisfaction regardless of the cost. The greater the act, the higher the price. Creating life was the greatest feat magic could perform, and as such required the greatest sacrifice: the taking of another life in return.
While it was possible for children to be born *out* of True Love (there were many such instances), those *created* by True Love were fated from conception to never see the light of the moon. The price of such immensely powerful magic would claim the mother’s life before their child could even be born. No other life could satisfy the demand for cosmic balance. While that seemed cruel, magic was not an entity capable of compassion or love or pity, but was a force only concerned with maintaining the fragile balance of the universe. Thus it did not care that two lives would be snuffed out in the process. Collateral damage was of no concern to such an impersonal power.

Yet per the Great One, this was ostensibly no longer true. She and her mate had supposedly created life through their True Love and survived to birth their pups into the world. This news, if legitimate, was perhaps the greatest miracle Romulus had heard tale of in centuries. Had he not already recognized Ruby Mills as the Great One spoken of in ages past, he would have known her to be such now.

His heart leapt in his breast as he recalled the words of the prophecy which had just been confirmed. It was coming to pass. The day was at hand. How he wished to be able to read the lost Book of Ambrosious, if only to fill in the gaps left blank in the ancient oral tradition of the Dire Wolves. Within the mysterious pages of the book, a part of the prophecy that was spoken by Diana and unknown to the Dires was recorded. For a reason Romulus was not privy to, neither the book nor the oral tradition wholly recounted the prophecy, rather each contained only part. All he knew was that his ancestors had been instructed by Emrys himself to keep their portion secret, which they had done for nearly a thousand years.

That oral tradition had been preserved through the generations from Alpha to Alpha, beginning with the greatfather Lycaon, the first of the Dires, and finally being entrusted to Romulus. In it, it is explicitly stated that the Great One will have tasted death and that her beloved would be a person of royal blood whose light was entangled with the shadows of darkness. For years, Romulus had wondered what the prophecy meant, but in the face of meeting Ruby, it suddenly made sense. By her own admission, Ruby had tasted death, and her mate, the infamous Evil Queen, had once been a kindhearted woman who loved more fervently than any other but whose light had been swallowed up in darkness through great tragedy.

Of course, there was more to the prophecy than that, but those words awaited a future that was not yet secured. For now, all Romulus was concerned about was guiding the Great One toward her ultimate destiny. To do that, he had to secure her trust, which dictated his actions of submission.

He had not made such a gesture out of fear, though he knew that she could have overcome him easily enough had she perceived him as a threat. Her power was as undeniable as her imposing size. It wafted from her pores in waves that pummeled his senses. Ruby Mills was, he thought, the greatest of her kind he had ever encountered. As the longest lived of his race, he had met many werewolves of great strength and renown, yet all paled in comparison to the statuesque glory of the Great One.
As she had approached him for the first time, her sheer stature had made Romulus want to roll over on his back to show her his belly. No other wolf had ever caused such a beta response in him. As the Prime Alpha, Romulus humbled himself for no one, certainly not for a werewolf. Yet once glance at Ruby's wolf had his tail itching to be tucked between his legs. Romulus was certain that he could never prevail against such a creature in battle, though part of him wanted very much to witness her prowess in combat. It would be marvelous indeed to be granted the privilege of observing the Great One tear through a legion of her enemies, ripping them apart in a glorious dance of death.

Such wishes were trivial, however, when his primary directive was to secure a better life for his kind. Only the Great One could realize that long unfulfilled dream. If it was necessary to do battle to see that day come, he was more than willing to fight beside so awesome a creature as Ruby Mills. It would be an honor. For now though, his job was clear.

“Forgive me,” he eventually stated, recovering from his shocked stupor. “I was merely stunned. You must understand how incredibly impossible what you just stated is.”

“Well, I know,” Ruby said, wearing a crooked grin. “We were told several times. The price of magic and all that jazz. As I said, it was terrible what happened. Technically both of us died, but thankfully we live in a world where technology can sometimes bring people back from death, which it did for Regina. As for how I'm alive, I have no idea. I'm just grateful I am and that our girls are healthy and happy.”

“I imagine so,” Romulus agreed, having a hard time comprehending how relieved she must have felt after enduring what she had implied to be horrific events. Coming out for the better on the other end of the tunnel was a rare blessing. Life was not often so kind after being cruel. “In any case, you have satisfied my curiosity for now. I thank you for your indulgence.”

Ruby inclined her head with a wide, toothy grin that reached all the way up to her eyes. Their jade depths shimmered in the prevailing sunlight. “You're welcome.”

Unable to keep from staring, Romulus was struck in that moment by the beauty of the woman before him, now on full display. For a human, Ruby was as handsome as any Romulus had ever beheld, which went a long way toward explaining her parallel magnificence while in her fur. It was her innate kindness and willingness to trust, though, which shined most brightly, and it was so intense that it drowned out her superficial comeliness.

This was a woman who had been through untold hardships in her life yet did not allow them to break her, a woman whose heart was tried and true, full of love and hope, despite the pain and suffering she had endured. In the few minutes Romulus had spent in Ruby's presence, he could already tell she was the kind of person who passed her hopefulness and kindness on to others, encouraging them to rise above their own circumstances as she had – the kind of person who inspired loyalty without
having to ask, which was evident by the golden-crowned companion who had crossed over into the world alongside her.

Yes, he had been aware of their arrival. The night before the Great One arrived, the moon had stirred him in a way it hadn't in many years, indicating something momentous was afoot. He barely slept at all, energized and alert for most of the night. As dawn arrived, he had felt the tug of the portal calling to him and went to investigate. Instantly recognizing Ruby as someone special, he had watched over her and her companion from an undetectable distance, following their progress as they journeyed.

It was only when they approached the Dark Palace that he abandoned his reconnoitering. Belmordan was someone to neither be trifled with nor trusted. Still, tracking Ruby and her friend had allowed him to observe the selfless devotion the flaxen-haired woman held for Ruby, an early affirmation of his belief that she was the one his people had been waiting on for so long.

Turning back toward the gates in the near distance, he indicated with a quick motion of his head. “Would you like to enter our sanctuary and greet your distant kin?”

Ruby looked hesitant at the invitation. “Are you sure? I don't want to intrude.”

“I am most certain,” Romulus said. “You are more than welcome among us, Great One.”

Sighing, Ruby shook her head as if slightly exasperated. “I wish you'd stop calling me that.”

“What would you prefer then?” Romulus asked, his head cocked to the side.

“Ruby is fine. And yes, I would like to visit with your pack. That's what I came here for actually.”

“Very well, Ruby. Please, follow me.” And with that Romulus began forward toward the familiar confines of his ancestral home.

“Wait!” she called out, preventing him from moving more than ten yards. Romulus quirked a questioning brow at her, prompting her to continue. “Can I ask a silly question?”

“You may,” he said, more than willing to indulge her.
“Do all of your kind talk? I mean, with words?” Ruby rolled her eyes at her own stupidity. “Told you, silly question. I'm sorry.”

“Do not apologize,” Romulus said firmly. “You're not the first to ask such a question. And to answer, yes we do speak. With words.” At the last part, he grinned teasingly.

Ruby chuckled at his attempt at humor. “Well, that's neat I suppose. A little weird but neat. Anyway, lead the way.”

His grin fading, Romulus nodded, and then started a steady lope toward the gates. Ruby followed along in his wake. And as they crossed through the threshold and passed into the Sanctuary, Romulus felt a surge of energy course through him. His blood began to sing and his bones to vibrate with elation. Destiny, he knew, was upon them, and he could hardly wait to watch it unfold.

Chapter End Notes

In the world of BBC's Merlin, there are talking Dragons. Since I included that world in this, I figured, why not talking wolves? :)
Chapter Summary

During her visit with the Dire Wolves, Ruby learns more about their origins and her own, particularly regarding her connection to the mysterious sorcerer, Belmordan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After entering through the sanctuary gates some seconds later, Ruby took a moment to look around. As the valley passed on beyond the walls, it opened up to reveal a sprawling meadow surrounded by an even more enormous forest, whose tree line was shaped as if to form a crescent. Surely a purposeful design, she figured, as forests did not grow naturally in such a symmetrical way.

Here and there caves dotted the sides of the mountain that rimmed in the valley, giving it an almost civilized feel though in a very primitive way. It was, she though, the perfect place for a large congregation of wolves to make their homes. Appropriately sized caverns made excellent wolf dens, and these appeared to be up to par for the Dires prodigious size. Also of note, the valley was enclosed by crafted walls and protected with potent magic, and there was plenty of field and forest to run through and hunt in. She almost envied the Dires for their good fortune in inhabiting such a gorgeously suited location, though her envy was dampened by remembrance of the their plight. Those living within this lupine paradise might very well be the last. A sobering thought.

Continuing to follow Romulus, Ruby was lead through the meadow to the east where, somewhere near the center of the range and against the mountainside, an especially humongous cave was nestled into the rock. Its mouth was decorated with carved stone forming a grand archway, and next to the mouth of the cave rested a marble pedestal upon which an opalescent globe rested. The strange looking stone shimmered in the sunlight, casting an almost rainbow like reflection across the mouth of the cave. Faintly, Ruby could hear it humming, creating a tickling sensation in the back of her mind. She was suddenly stricken by a nearly uncontrollable urge to touch it, but out of a desire to refrain from offending her host she mustered her sizable will to restrain herself. Years of practice had taught her how to curb her baser impulses, which was good as aside from being polite to her hosts there was no way of telling the stones actual significance. There was a faint feeling in the pit of her stomach it was something best left alone.

As Romulus lead her closer to the cave, Ruby's eyes were drawn to the archway. Upon its stones were carved intricate reliefs that depicted various events, each in exquisite detail. One such relief showed a pack of wolves hunting a stag that looked to be the size of a rhinoceros whose antlers were wider than the wolves hunting it. Yet another relief near the base of the cavern depicted a full moon shining down over a howling wolf, majestically posed upon a stone outcropping. But the largest and most detailed of the reliefs was situated at the center of the arch. It depicted a beautiful woman in a flowing chiton, her legs mostly bared and wearing sandals whose straps climbed nearly up to her
knees. Wild curls tumbled down her shoulder in waves, and in her hand was a bow strung and poised for use. At the woman's side, a giant wolf was striding forward as if about to strike at its prey. Ruby recognized the scene as a hunt, though she was unsure if the figured depicted had any broader significance.

Peering the relief closely, she intently studied the features of the woman. She was a striking figure with a sharp angular face characterized by a high forehead, full lips, and perfectly symmetrical brows. The image resonated rather strangely with Ruby, as if she were looking at an uncanny representation of her mother, and the longer she stared the more she was unnerved. There was a prickle in the back of her mind that she should have recognized this person, which was made no sense as she’d never seen the woman before in her life.

“Ah! My favorite,” Romulus spoke up from beside her, his glowing amber eyes focused upon the relief. Eerie feeling cast aside, she watched him closely as he relayed more information. “That is Diana, Queen of the Moon, our great benefactor. At her side is my greatfather Lycaon, the first Dire Wolf and her most trusted and faithful companion. Together, they hunted and battled, never straying far from one another until the day Diana left this world to return to her home in the heavens.”

Turning to Romulus, Ruby's brows scrunched up. “Diana was not from this world?”

“She was not – is not,” he confirmed. “Diana truly hails from Olympus, though none know the true location of that world or how to reach it. Far away though she may be, we venerate her for her gift to us and for her eternal friendship. We believe she watches over us still and that one day, she will return to walk among us.”

At this, he turned to look up at Ruby, his gaze penetrating her as if down to her very soul. She could not contain the full-bodied shiver it produced.

“In any case, we are not here to speak of our ancient history,” Romulus continued, having noticed how uncomfortable Ruby was under his gaze. He turned his attention back to the cavern and let out of long, beckoning howl. Ruby stiffened at the call, her posture turning defensive as if preparing for a fight. “Fear not,” he said in reassuring tones, “I am merely calling my kin forth. I wish for you to meet them.”

Ruby relaxed slightly, having decided to trust her new acquaintance. Just the same, she kept her limbs loose, ready to spring into action should the need be as she observed a line of wolves trickle toward them from all over the valley. Some had come from the forests but most lazily emerged from their dens within the caves that littered the mountainsides on both sides of the valley. Among the wolves were individuals of various colors and sizes, some gray, some tan, some white, some black, and some of blended coats. All, however, were adults of impressive height and width, which although not as large as Romulus or herself, would dwarf any normal wolf.
It took several minutes for all the animals to answer the call of their alpha but eventually all heeded and came to stand in front of Ruby and Romulus in a tight semi-circle. Most sat on their haunches, shoulders straight and waiting patiently as their eyes drank in the curious human amongst their sacred grounds. Some, however, stood on all fours, their eyes narrowed and teeth bared. There was one notable individual among this number. Sporting a deep gray fur accented by lines which passed next to his ears and then down his mane, the male wolf growled with unveiled suspicion at Ruby.

“Calm yourself, beta,” Romulus said, his voice stern. He stood to all fours when the addressed wolf initially refused to comply. His body language screamed dominance, and for the first time Ruby got a glimpse at how very intimidating Romulus could be if he wanted. “Do not make me repeat my command.”

The threatening nature of his last words finally broke through the beta's resistance. The wolf's ears flattened repentantly as his head hung low. He sat down upon his haunches, thoroughly chastised. “Forgive me, alpha.” His voice was not so deep as Romulus', but was more gravelly and rough. *Much like his nature*, Ruby thought.

“All is well, beta,” Romulus replied. He inclined his head to meet Ruby’s eyes. He gave her a wolfish smile. “Great One, this is Julius, my beta. He is a prickly but loyal lieutenant.”

Ruby gave the wolf a tentative smile of her own, not wanting to risk alarming him again. “Hello, Julius.”

Julius’ eyes had widened as Romulus spoke to him, and as she studied him for his reaction, she noted that he seemed almost awestruck the longer he stared at her.

“Great One?” he spoke with reverence, almost as if a prayerful whisper.

“Indeed,” Romulus said, a pleased smile crossing his mouth. He turned Ruby once more, this time pointedly directing the attention of all upon her. She felt the eyes of a hundred of more wolves boring into her, and had to bolster her resolve to keep from withering under the unsettling weight of their sudden expectation. “Just as foretold and at long last,” Romulus continued, “the Great One is among us. Her name is Ruby Mills and she has come from a world far, far away from here.” He looked out over the crowd of wolves, now positively bustling with conversation amongst themselves at his bold proclamation.

“Settle down now,” Romulus spoke again as the din grew nearly deafening. “While Ruby *is* the
Great One we have long awaited, we must remember that she is also a person who grew up not
knowing of her heritage. She is not yet ready to assume the mantle that has been thrust upon her, nor
should that be expected of her. She deserves our respect and our patience during this difficult time of
adjustment. Remember, we are here to guide and protect her. If we should fail in this, all will be
lost."

Romulus' eyes grew intense as he spoke and Ruby found herself caught up in his alpha energy. She
could see how easy it would be for such a charismatic and powerful individual to inspire such
devoted loyalty. That he was so readily pressing his people to lower their expectations of her at the
cost of increasing the expectations upon themselves did much to alleviate her rapidly growing
concern. She still didn't like the way she was being looked at, though, as if she were some kind of
messiah sent down from the heavens to rescue the beleaguered population of wolves.

Being so regarded gave Ruby new insight into Emma's experience. More than once, Emma had
confided in her how maddening it was to be constantly held up to an impossible standard. Most of
the time, the people of Storybrooke expected the Savior to instantly fix whatever problems they had
and to miraculously mend relationships that had been broken for far longer than she had been alive.

“I swear I feel like they think I’m Jesus Himself,” she once told Ruby after she’d saved the day yet
again when called upon with worshipful pleading. “I keep waiting for them to ask me to turn water
into wine, to walk on water, or to raise the dead or something. Maybe I ought to die and then come
back to life again three days later to complete the association. Hell, if I get to ascend to heaven after
that for a long break from dealing with incessant troubles, it’d be worth it.”

The complaint was hyperbole, of course, but it got the point across with pinpoint precision. Bible
stories were included in the knowledge supplied to her by the Dark Curse, and Ruby remembered
reading them and thinking how unreasonable people were to foist their problems and expectations
upon a humble carpenter’s son whose only desire was to help his beleaguered, downtrodden
countrymen. She could see how Emma might sympathize with the heavy burden Jesus bore. It was
equally absurd to think that one sassy, sarcastic blonde with an impressive rap sheet of insecurities
could fix everything wrong in Storybrooke, but that was Emma's life since the moment she arrived in
town.

As Emma’s friend, Ruby had always thought it unfair that so much was thrust upon her without
caring how she felt about baring so impossible a load. That was why after the Curse broke, Ruby
made sure to treat Emma like any other person she cared about. She did not want to add to the
already nearly suffocating expectations. Incidentally, that wound up being the reason Emma sought
Ruby out again after she was freed of the Dark One curse. One would think a Savior could get a
break after having endured such a harrowing ordeal, but not so in Storybrooke. Just days after being
released from the dagger’s hold, people were clamoring for the Savior again. Unable to deal, Emma
had fled into the woods to get away from the insanity, knowing that she would find Ruby there at the
little cabin she’d built a stone’s throw from Storybrooke’s only inland body of water. That was the
beginning of their current friendship.
After seeing some of the crap Emma had to put up with back home, Ruby was completely opposed to being tossed into the Savior-boat. She was happy to help Emma whenever and wherever she could, but she did not want to belong to that particularly exclusive club. All Ruby wanted was to be a good wife and mother, a good friend, and a good deputy sheriff. Being a Savior was not her style. That title implied solitude and wolves were not suited to such isolation. Emma's fight to belong to a family and to carve one out for herself in the midst of Savioring had been a long and painful process Ruby had no interest in imitating. With two young daughters to raise, she didn't have the time or patience to undergo such a process.

So to say she was relieved that Romulus was deflecting attention away from her was an understatement. Still, she could tell that even he had expectations of her. He just kept them better hidden than the rest of his kin. It seemed everyone wanted a piece of her these days. Since arriving in the Enchanted Forest, she'd endured more covetous stares than she had since prancing about town in clothes containing only slightly more fabric in them than a common handkerchief. Only now the stares weren't fueled by lust, but by a sense of entitled possession, as if she no longer belonged to herself but to whatever destiny she'd been assigned without consultation. Belmordan’s gaze had been unashamed in this belief. Ruby just prayed her initial assessment of Romulus’ character didn’t turn out to be so horribly naïve as it had with the sorcerer from whom she was supposedly descended.

“Already we see events starting to unfold,” Romulus continued with his speech, drawing Ruby's attention back to him. “The fel beasts roam the land openly, brought here by their dark master. His conquest of the Nine Realms is almost complete. Few remain free and should they fall, his power will be absolute. Only with our aid can this be stopped. As such, I ask that you extend your courtesy and kindness to the Great One, for she needs our support if she is to prevail in the critical hours ahead. Treat her as you would one of our own. Make her feel at home. Do not add to the cumbersome weight she already bears; it is enough already. Do this and you will please Diana, and you will also please me.”

The speech seemed to have the desired effect. Almost like air escaping an untied balloon, the aura of excitement faded and was replaced by a humble understanding. The eyes that were once looking on Ruby as a Savior were now more muted, though despite their efforts there was still hope in their eyes that they could not hide. That, Ruby supposed she could not begrudge them. After what Romulus had told her of the Dire Wolves’ situation, they needed some good news, needed some hope upon which to hang their futures. She was happy to provide that so long as it didn't involve her becoming some mythical or prophesied deliverer. Moses or David, she was not.

“Would you care to introduce yourself, Great One?”

Romulus’ question startled Ruby out of her own head. She turned to find him looking up at her with gentle encouragement. Not wanting to be rude, she nodded. After clearing her throat, she looked out over the semi-sizable crowd of wolves. There were at least seventy-five fully grown adult wolves
present, less than it had felt like at first blush, but far more than she had ever seen in once place. Even during days on the run with Snow nearly forty years ago, she’d not encountered such numbers.

The time frames involved made her much older than her actual thirty-nine years, though in truth, most days she still felt twenty-four.

“Hello,” she eventually managed to croak, frame tensed from a nagging anxiety due to the pressure of so many staring at her in hushed anticipation. Her cursed memories carried a deep loathing of public speaking that she had retained. She’d made a fool of herself in high school. How she passed that class, she isn’t quite certain, though she suspects it has something to do with the way the instructor used to stare at her modest tits and her spectacular – just not as spectacular as Regina’s – ass. “My name's Ruby,” she went on after a slight pause to gather her fortitude. “I really dunno about all this Great One stuff, honestly.” Chuckling nervously, she bit her lip. “I think I'm just a normal person for the most part.”

“Hardly,” Romulus supplied from behind her. He nudged her leg with his nose. “Show them.”

“What?” With some confusion, she stared down at him.

“Show them,” Romulus repeated, his tone along with his eyes heavy with insinuation. Ruby understood then what he wanted her to do.

“Oh. Okay,” she said obligingly, then stepped away a pace. With little effort, she summoned her inherent magic and transformed into the wolf. It took her aback a bit how effortless it had been for her to shift considering it was still daylight. *Must be the magic in the valley,* she thought.

Once she was on four legs, Ruby heard the entire crowd of wolves gasp in concert. Their earlier excitement increased tenfold. She could hear them more clearly now, could make out some of their whispers through the din of elation, such as “it's true!” , “she *is* the Great One”, and “by Diana, she's enormous!”

“As you can see, she is who I have said,” Romulus spoke up once more to address the astonished murmuring, fervent whispering, and outright gawking. “I echo my earlier urging. Be respectful.” Again, the hubbub died back down to a gentle simmering. “Now, please disperse. Tonight, we will dine under the light of the moon in honor of our esteemed guest.”

With that, the crowd began to dissolve, the wolves at once obeying the command of their alpha.
Only the beta and three others remained. One was a large male with a square muzzle and brown fur. The other was a female, also impressive in size, with rich cream colored fur and bright olive eyes. Ruby sat at attention upon her haunches as they gathered around her. She remained still as a statue as they inspected her with near reverence.

None seemed bold enough to approach her directly, choosing instead to hover at a respectable distance to sniff at her and study her closely. Even Julius seemed hesitant to be close to her. After having made such a spectacle, he seemed almost apologetic. This went on for almost a minute. Seemingly satisfied, the three wolves then joined Romulus, but made sure to sit behind him out of deference to their alpha.

Romulus then stood to all fours and began pacing in front of the other wolves. “Ruby,” he said to her, his voice laced with pride, “these are the most trusted members of my pack. They have been with me since we were pups. You know Julius.” He stopped to point his muzzle toward the gray wolf, who ducked his head submissively.

“Great One,” said Julius. “I apologize for my earlier impudence. Please forgive me.”

Realizing she could not speak, Ruby shifted back into her human form. “It's alright, there's nothing to forgive,” she said soothingly. “You were just protecting your pack. You should be proud of that.”

The words lifted Julius' countenance. He stood up a little straighter and his eyes lost their tentative fear. Ruby smiled at him, a gesture which he gratefully returned in the lupine manner of the Dires.

“Next we have Marcus,” Romulus continued, indicating toward the other large male. “He is our lore keeper as well as my oldest friend.”

Marcus dipped his head respectfully. “Greetings, Great One,” was his rather formal salutation. Lifting his head, a pair of sage eyes bore into Ruby. “It is my great pleasure to make your acquaintance. Should you have any questions about our kind or our history, I am at your disposal.”

“Thank you,” Ruby said, enduring yet another honorific without protest. She wanted badly to correct the behavior, but the wolves were so sincere that she couldn’t bring herself to object. Instead, she smiled at Marcus much as she had Julius. “The pleasure is mine, though, Marcus. And I might just take you up on that offer. Obviously I don’t know much about Dire Wolves, but there’s also a lot I don’t know about my own kind as well. And I get the sneaking suspicion you’re someone who can help with that.”
“Indeed,” Marcus grinned, proud to be of use to someone of such mythic status. “It would be my honor to discuss the history of our peoples with you should time prove favorable.”

Ruby nodded gratefully. “I look forward to it.”

“And next I would like to introduce Octavia,” Romulus said, coming next to stand beside the gorgeous female with remarkably bright eyes. There was a hint of unusual pride on his face that bespoke a deeper connection between the two, which had Ruby suspecting what he was about to tell her before the words even left his mouth that confirmed her assumption. “She is my mate.”

“Octavia.” Ruby breathed out the name as she took in the sight of Romulus' mate. Added to the fact that Octavia truly was an impressive specimen, Ruby felt an instant kinship with her that was hard to describe. “A beautiful name for a beautiful wolf.”

If wolves could blush, that is precisely what Octavia would have done. Dipping her head respectfully as the others had done, she showed her submission, not only out of ingrained deference but out of an immediate kinship she felt with the woman before her. This Ruby, she could tell, was special far beyond her designation by an ancient prophecy.

“I thank you for your kindness, Great One,” she replied, her voice as modulated as possible. She was afraid of wearing her nerves on open display so as to project confidence. Trustworthy as Ruby ostensibly was, she was still a werewolf who would value strength in her pack.

When Romulus had come to Octavia the day before telling her of the Great One's arrival, Octavia had doubted whether or not he was just projecting his own wishful desires onto the woman he had watched over from the time of her birth until the terrible Dark Curse swept all of Misthaven away to another world. She very much doubted that, though. After a thousand years of guarding the prophecy, the Great One had become somewhat of a fable among the Dires, particularly with the more liberal, realistic minded Dires. But Romulus was not among that faction. He, like Octavia, was a true believer, though in a practical way.

That practical side of Octavia had initially doubted her mate's judgment, but the part of her that loved Romulus and had been devoted to him for more than three centuries stood firmly in its unwavering belief. Of all the wolves Octavia had ever known, none were as wise and discerning as he. And while he was prone to dreaming and hoping, he could also deal in reality, walking in both worlds with an effortless aplomb. His flexibility was what made him such a great alpha.
Octavia believed in Romulus with all of her heart, but even so the realist in her – the practical wolf that had prided herself on keeping a level head – refused to stay quiet. She’d seen how devastated her mate was when the girl with the crimson cloak he placed so much hope in was torn away from this world, seemingly dashing his dreams of her realizing the mantle of Great One he had thought her to be born into. For a year afterward, he had carried out his duties within the sanctuary a diminished wolf whose eyes no longer sparkled with imagination in the moonlight. Octavia was loathe to ever see Romulus that way ever again, and thus her hesitance to accept his assertions that the girl he’d once so unerringly believed in had returned, greater than ever before. A portent, he’d insisted, of things to come.

But when she actually beheld the Great One with her own eyes, those doubts that plagued her vanished. Octavia had never seen so magnificent a specimen of either wolf or human kind, which in and of itself was convincing enough. But the power the werewolf radiated was so dynamic and forceful as to drown out even the energizing beams of light from a full blood moon, which only served to reinforce confirmation that this Ruby Mills was indeed the Great One. Never before had she been so similarly awestruck and frightened, and with good reason. No doubt Ruby could destroy many of her kin with ease before sheer numbers finally overwhelmed her.

“It's not kindness if it's just stating fact,” Ruby responded to Octavia's demure reply.

“Well said,” Romulus agreed wholeheartedly from beside Octavia.

The cheeky tone of his retort shocked Octavia out of her temporary stupor. She glanced at the Great One for any sign of affront only to find the woman beaming an almost conspiratorial grin down at Romulus. Octavia was a bit taken aback at the woman’s informality. She had always imagined the Great One would be an austere individual of immense power and stature whose bearing would reflect that. Ruby appeared to be a kind and genial person, though, not at all what Octavia had pictured from the innumerable legends she’d read and heard over the years concerning the prophesied figure. As unexpected as it was, she had to admit the woman's inviting personality was quite refreshing.

Romulus then spoke, cutting off any chance of further conversation for the moment, “Now that introductions have been made, shall I show you around our humble home?”

Nodding enthusiastically, Ruby looked around the valley with undisguised wonder. “I would love to!”

Octavia grinned. The Great One was in for a treat. The Selenian Valley was one of the few remaining sanctuaries untouched by the hands of greedy men, a pristine preservation of days long by when gods and mystical creatures long since forgotten walked the earth. It had always been home to Octavia, but even three hundred years within its confines had not curtailed her appreciation of
Diana’s final gift to her kind.

And as Octavia loped along beside her pack just behind Romulus and Ruby, she savored the awesome gravity of the moment. She had a feeling events were going unfold quickly from here on out.

She was right.

The next several hours went by in a blur for Ruby. First Romulus took her on an abbreviated tour of the valley. It was a beautiful place where life was brimming in every nook and cranny, within every stream and tree, and seemed to inhabit the very air she breathed. Animals of all kinds populated the forest, which surprised Ruby considering how secluded the valley was. She’d expected little fauna beyond what wolves naturally hunted, and though there were such staples like deer, elk, and rabbits, there were also other types of animals that typically would not be found in wolf territory. One such creature was a strange breed of cat that seemed like a cross between a cougar and a tiger which occupied the areas between the river carving a winding path through the center of the forest and the mountain slope forming the western boundary of the sanctuary. It was a fearsome looking creature that made her hackles rise when she spotted one observing them as Romulus showed her around the fringes of the forest.

As for the forest itself, the trees that comprised it were as diverse as the lifeforms that made their living underneath the canopy of leaves overhead which blocked out all light in certain places. The environment was one perfectly suited for a wolf to run free in, even more so than the dense forests back home in Storybrooke which seemed mundane in comparison to this lush lupine paradise. Ruby kind of envied the Dires for their fortune in making such an amazing place their abode.

After touring the forest, Romulus lead Ruby back to the den he shared with his mate. The sun was just beginning to settle low on the horizon when they arrived. There they were joined by the trio of wolves she had been introduced to belonging to Romulus’ pack, Octavia foremost among them. Rather than join her and Romulus on the latter portion of their excursion, these wolves had opted to return to their business with an understanding to meet back at Romulus' den at sunset.

Ruby spent the next hour conversing with the leadership of the Dire Wolves that occupied the valley. At Romulus' encouraging prompting, she indulged herself in asking questions of them, learning much she hadn't known of the history of Dire Wolves. They even managed to fill in some gaps in the history of werewolves that Granny had left woefully vacant.

According to Dire Wolf legend, Marcus had elaborated, there was once a wizard of great power who
shared an affinity with wolf kind, particularly the magic breed of wolves that would one day become the Dire Wolves. So close was he to his animal friends that he could speak to them and they to him. One winter day, he met a young woman of otherworldly beauty hunting the great stag that lived in the forests and meadows near his home. At her side was an enormous wolf with fur the color of midnight. She invited the wizard on her hunt and they became fast friends. Her name was Artemis.

Over the long months of winter, the wizard and Artemis shared many such hunts and other exciting adventures. As time went by they became closer and closer, and as such things tend to go, they eventually fell in love. For a time were happy hunting together with their companion wolves and living in a cabin the wizard had built in the forest he called home. However, both were keeping secrets.

Artemis' secret was that she was not of this world. She had traveled from somewhere far away, a world of blue oceans clear as crystal and a myriad of plentifully populated islands. A world where people had built great structures such as temples of marble with enormous pillars and statues of gold so large their legs spanned the breadth of an ocean inlet. But what's more, she was powerful, though somehow her power was linked to that of the moon, ebbing and flowing with passage of night and day. Still, though weaker during the reign of the sun, Artemis was stronger than anyone the wizard had ever met, and indeed more so than he had ever dreamed of being.

The wizard's secret was, of course, his heritage, the inherent access to magic and the ability to speak to wolf kind that defined his life for as long as he could remember. But rather than drive a wedge between them, the revelation of these secrets only served to strengthen their bond, drawing them closer together than ever before. When Artemis' learned of her beloved's gift, she offered a boon he could not refuse. Combining the wizard's power with the innate magic of the wolves he shared a kinship with, Artemis transformed both wizard and wolf into something greater. The wizard became the first werewolf and his companions became the Dire Wolves, a race of intelligent creatures capable of speech and small, instinctive acts of magic.

Eventually Artemis returned to Olympus for a season, but upon her return she was alone and in mourning. Her wolf had died rescuing her sister and her father refused to reanimate him out of respect for his noble spirit which had passed on to the eternal dens of his ancestors. Artemis, filled with rage she could not contain, swore revenge, for her wolf companion was more than just an animal but a kindred spirit with whom she had traveled the worlds for untold millennia. Thus began a crusade that lead to her capture and to her lover rising in her absence to be known as the Lord of Death.

“Belmordan,” Ruby stated to no one in particular. Her mind was humming. Belmordan had given little detail beyond his assertions to be the first werewolf. She had to wonder if the legend was wholly accurate and if so, how it might help her to further understand the mysterious sorcerer.

“This is the story of Belmordan, yes,” Romulus nodded grimly, taking over the conversation from
Marcus. “Though he did not always go by that name.”

“I met him yesterday with my friends,” Ruby informed him. “He swore his intentions were not malicious, but we all got the feeling that he wanted something from me.”

Looking around at the other three wolves in the den, Romulus saw equally troubled expression on their faces. All were aware of the danger posed by Belmordan. He turned back to Ruby.

“You were wise not to trust him,” he said, the other wolves nodding along in agreement. “He seeks to free Artemis from her prison.”

Ruby cocked her head ever-so-slightly sideways as she was apt to when confused. “Her prison?”

“One of the reasons Artemis was imprisoned was because of her relationship with Belmordan,” Octavia spoke up, finishing the tale Romulus had begun. “Her father had always disapproved of their union and of their capricious use of magic. He was King of the realm from which Artemis hailed, you see, and wielded power and wisdom beyond all who inhabit the eternal realm of Olympus. He recognized Belmordan's unquenchable thirst for power and that his grieving daughter was more than an accomplice to his ambitions but his equal partner. After the death of her companion wolf, they made plans to conquer other realms. The King could not allow that, so he sent his other daughter, Artemis' twin sister, to stop them.”

Romulus stood to all fours from where he had been sitting, padding his way to the front of the cave where the impressive reliefs were carved in the face of the rock. The party followed him, Ruby included, though she lagged a bit behind. Once she was outside, Romulus pointed his nose up at the depiction of Diana and Lycaon.

“Behold,” he said, “the sister of Artemis, Diana, our beloved matron. To defeat her sister and Belmordan along with their wolfen allies, Diana forged her own bond with Dires who did not ascribe to Belmordan and Artemis' philosophy of conquest. Lycaon became their alpha. With the aid of a great King of the North and the legendary sorcerer, Emrys, Diana overcame her sister and, in cooperation with Emrys, was able to ferry Artemis beyond Belmordan's reach. As he fled, he swore vengeance upon his enemies should it take a thousand years.”

Romulus turned his gaze upon Ruby, heavy and grim. “It is for this reason Belmordan seeks you. You are all that remains of the bloodline he and Artemis began, and because you alone have been given the favor of Diana, none can free Artemis save you. He was kind to you in an effort to present a truth that favors him. He wants you to help him of your own free will. But make no mistake, if you should continue to refuse, he will compel your assistance.”
“First of all,” Ruby frowned slightly, not liking the reference to what Belmordan himself had heavily implied but she had not comprehended at the time, “what do you mean I'm all that remains of the bloodline Belmordan and Artemis began?” In her mind, she could hear Belmordan once more as he informed her with great relish that he was her progenitor. At the time, she thought that he was only referring to himself in those terms because of the whole werewolf thing, but the way Romulus was talking it went much deeper than that.

Romulus sighed. “When Diana defeated Belmordan and Artemis, she was unable to imprison her sister right away. Artemis was with child, you see, and it was only after the child's birth that Diana could seal Artemis away for all eternity. Diana entrusted the newborn babe to Emrys, who raised her as his own. You, Ruby Mills, are the last remaining direct descendant of that child.”

Stepping back as if struck, Ruby gasped in utter astonishment. It couldn't be true, could it? How could it be? If Belmordan was telling the truth, nearly a thousand years had passed since these events. Surely there had been some error along the way. Yet even as she thought this, something in her gut indicated it was true, that this blood relation was why her wolf had so instinctively been willing to accept Belmordan. Without even knowing it, she had recognized her ancient sire.

Feeling sick all of the sudden, Ruby clutched at her stomach.

“I know it is difficult to accept, but it is the truth,” Romulus gently insisted. “I can state this with firm assurance only because it has been the task of my line since my grandsire Lycaon to watch over yours. For nearly a thousand years we have kept this charge dutifully. We have been there to observe every birth and to mourn every death of those who preceded you. And just as Lycaon was there to witness Eleni enter the world, I was there for many others, such as your mother and yourself. It was my song that welcomed your mother into the world, just as I did for you, and it was my song that lamented your mother upon her passage beyond this mortal coil to that which waits beyond. I hope to never sing that song for you, though if called upon, I will.”

“Oh, my God,” Ruby lamented, realizing just how validated Romulus' assertions were. She was also startled by dimly recognizing the name he’d mentioned. She’d heard it before, though she wasn’t sure where.

Eleni. It was a beautiful name that seemed as if it would roll off the tongue and it seemed so familiar that for a moment she searched through her memories for a connection. But when none immediately surfaced, she discarded the familiarity as inconsequential.

Turning back to the topic at hand, she elaborated on her expression of dismay. “Granny always said the first thing she heard after my mother's first cries was the howling of a wolf, and I remember
hearing the same thing minutes after she died.”

“Yes,” Romulus reiterated, “I was there, called by something that cannot be explained or defined, a link, an irresistible connection between our bloodlines. It was what beckoned me to you once you returned to this world, and what lead you to me as well, though you likely would not have even known it.”

“I came here for help, not because of some cosmic link,” Ruby protested weakly, still off-kilter from what she’d learned. “The wolves at home are dying. I thought I might be able to transplant a pack from the Enchanted Forest to help them recover.”

His eyes shining, Romulus smiled. “That is why you came to this world, yes,” he said with patience, “but that is not why you are here with us right now in this valley that your ancestors once trod.”

Her face showing her pained distress, Ruby wiped away a tear from her cheek she only just realized had fallen. “Why am I here then, huh? Besides having my entire life turned upside down? ’Cause apparently I'm some legendary person foretold by prophecy to do something or other. No pressure. Oh, and by the way, I'm descended from a monster, which explains a lot, you know, with the whole terrorizing my village and eating the boy I loved.” Giving a harsh laugh, she pushed a hand through her hair and began to pace. “I mean, could there possibly be anything else you want to drop on me? No, don't answer that. I don't want to know. I just want to go home!”

Her pacing ended, Ruby started to swirl around to face Romulus, but her attention was grabbed by the large marble pedestal next to the mouth of the cave. As if descending into a trance, all sound faded, her attention solely focused on the stone as she approached it. Almost like magic, night fell as she moved, though she wasn’t sure if this transition was universal or merely from her own perspective. Once situated before the stone, the moon rose above the horizon as if it were being pulled up into the inky night sky by an invisible rope. Huge and full, it cast blinding rays of reflected light down upon the mouth of the cave.

As the moonlight washed over Ruby and then onto the stone, it began to glimmer and hum, radiating an energy that called out to her mind.

“A single touch is all that is required,” it said, sounding so much like her mother that tears fell in torrents from Ruby’s eyes. “Do not fear. This is your destiny. Accept it. Embrace it. Become who you were always meant to be!”

Spurred on by pure instinct and the comforting warmth that accompanied that voice, she reached toward the stone without a second thought.
“No!” Romulus voice cut through the silence, but it was too late.

Ruby's hand contacted the smooth surface of the stone and the instant it did, a jolt of electricity shot through her body, constricting her muscles until she was seized into a statuesque state. Pain unlike any she had ever experienced flooded her senses, drowning her in agony which she could not even begin to process. Drawing into herself under the power of the stone like the collapsing petals of a dying flower, she let out an inhuman scream.

As she felt herself surrender to the debilitating, all-consuming anguish, the edges of her vision began to cloud. And then, just as she was about to pass out, the pain fled from her, and her body slumped boneless and weightless, yet she did not fall. Totally overwhelmed by whatever was happening and unable to act consciously, she felt herself leave the ground, her limbs lifeless and draping downward as she was lifted from the earth by some mystical force that superseded the laws of physics. Her eyes transfixed on the scene above her, she absently took in the starlit sky and the heavy moon, hanging almost ominously above. Through the ever-increasing humming that emanated from the stone, she could hear nothing save the pounding of her own heart. Suddenly, quite without realizing it, she began to hum both audibly and physically right along with the lilting melody pouring out from somewhere within the murky depths the stone like the peaceful waves of the ocean. It was a surreal experience that she would not remember when it was over.

In that moment, she felt as if she were going to float all the way up into the atmosphere, beyond the grasp of the earth into the waiting arms of the mother moon. Light began to surround her, softly at first and growing with intensity at an alarming rate. Closing her eyes, Ruby could almost see it, an immense pool of power that dwelt inertly within her very essence. She imagined herself walking toward the pool, immersing her bare toes first before wading in. The water was shockingly cold, so she pulled her toes back out with a gasp. But then the surface of the water began to stir, lapping up against her bare feet and she found herself unable to move. Up and up it climbed, rising ever higher until it was at her waist. She screamed for help, pleaded for Regina to save her, but her cries went unanswered, and on the water came, to her chest, then her neck, and then finally swallowing her whole.

Once below the surface, she found that she could still breathe though she remained paralyzed due to the crushing pressure of the energy that surrounded her. For several seconds, she struggled against it, but with every twitch and jerk, she felt her strength being sapped until at last she was utterly spent lacking the strength to even form soundless words upon her lips. Succumbing to the pulsating surge of energy all around her, she felt the dam of her resistance break. Unbridled power rampaged through her being, and with the echoing background noise of Romulus, Octavia, Julius, and Marcus screaming and howling, Ruby drifted away into the dark vastness of the sea.

Chapter End Notes
One more chapter left in the Enchanted Forest before we're back in Storybrooke for good, and it's a doozy. It's hard to tell from the muted response, but hopefully everyone reading is enjoying the journey.
Chapter Summary

Ruby and her new pack run for their lives from hellbeasts intent on stopping their return to Storybrooke.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Ruby awoke at last, it was to an annoying jostling of her side. With heroic effort, she cracked her eyes open to find Romulus frantically nudging at her with his nose. Behind him, she could vaguely make out the darkening sky through the bleariness, no longer bathed in sunlight though the horizon was awash with the gentle hues of sunset. How long had she been out?

All of the sudden, she caught sight of a flickering orange out the corner of her eye. A fire was raging through the forests of the sanctuary, and as she stared dumbly the smell of smoke began to choke her. Coughing against the smoke clogging up her lungs and through, Ruby blinked her stinging eyes as they began to water.

“What the hell is going on?” she groaned, her head pounding.

“You must arise,” Romulus replied, his tone harsh with urgency. “They have found us. The sanctuary has been compromised. We must evacuate while we still can.”

“What? Who found us?” she queried, her brain still trying to catch up to what was going on. “I don’t understand what's happening.”

“The Fallen have penetrated the barrier,” he explained quickly, glancing over his shoulder every couple of seconds. “They are the twisted beasts you encountered earlier, creations of Belmordan, the Dark Sorcerer who is seeking to enslave the Nine Realms. He sent them here to destroy us and take you by force. I believe he anticipated your touching the Sacred Moonstone. I do not know how he did so, but we do not have time to converse about such things. We must go. Now!”

Realizing she had no time to argue, Ruby struggled to her feet, wobbling unsteadily once she was finally vertical. It took her a moment to get her bearings.
“Transform if you are able,” Romulus instructed once she was somewhat grounded. “We must be hasty in our flight. The Fallen will no doubt attempt to stop us, as I assume Belmordan seeks to prevent you from leaving this world. I hope for the sake of our survival that your companions are ready to depart upon our arrival.”

Nodding, Ruby closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind. She found it frustratingly difficult due to the throbbing pain and the cacophony of noise all around her. The licking and cracking of flames was issuing from the forest as well as the sounds of barking and growling punctuated by heartwrenching whines from injured and dying Dire Wolves.

Guilt welled up in her breast. She was responsible for this. Centuries of peaceful existence was at an end because of her senseless quest and her naive trust of Belmordan. How many of these kind creatures had lost their lives already? How many were soon to perish? The body count on her conscience was already unbearably high, both from her time as the wolf and from Joshua's insane slaughter back in Storybrooke. The weight of it all was nearly too much to bear already without adding more innocent souls onto the pile.

Gasping, Ruby lurched forward as her emotions tumbled out of control. Her stomach churned and her head began to pound even more fiercely. Leaning forward, a jolt of unbridled electricity arced through her body, causing her to collapse to her knees as a hoarse scream tore free from her lips. It felt as if her brain was going to explode out of her head. In instinctive reflex, she clasped her temples in what was to her was a necessary attempt to hold her fragmenting skull together.

For untold minutes, Ruby was paralyzed by the agonizing lances of fire passing through her gray matter. Through the fog of pain, she could hear Romulus yelling at her, urging her to move as he struggled to fighting off several attackers. But Ruby was too disconnected from reality to respond. Everything sounded as if it were miles away. Her vision blurred until she could make out nothing but vague shapes and swirling colors, as if the world had been transformed into one of the de Kooning paintings Regina had raved about when they visited the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Sweat poured in fat rivulets down her face and neck. Panting, she fell forward, hands extending out to stop her from slamming her face into the ground. Her arms trembled under the unrelenting assault, barely able to hold her up with how violently they were trembling.

But then as quickly as it hit her, the pain passed and the haze lifted. Her vision sharpened, more clear than ever before. She could hear the sounds of her own heart thudding against her rib cage in addition to every creature near her. Looking up to the sky, she caught sight of the pale moon hanging just over the horizon, just barely visible through the fading light of the evening sunset. She could feel it beckoning to her, tugging at her heart, singing to her bones. Her eyes began to glow a brilliant gold she felt her wolf surge to the foreground of her mind, demanding that she surrender to the call of the moon.

Grinning widely, she obliged. Bounding forward, she shifted into her wolf form in one smooth
movement before her foot even once touched the ground. Running at full tilt, Ruby tore into the hellhounds that were attacking Romulus. A blood haze descended over her as she attacked with raw jubilation. Gore splattered all over her as she ripped the hideous creatures limb from limb or tore their throats out, both woman and wolf reveling in the wanton destruction of at least a dozen enemies. Once all of the nearby hellhounds were dispatched, she grimly surveyed the carnage. Savage satisfaction washed over her at the grotesque destruction she had wrought.

“We must leave!” Romulus shouted, grabbing Ruby's attention away from the grizzly scene she had left of the unfortunate beasts who dared attack her kin. “Quickly!”

Nodding, she launched herself forward toward freedom. Romulus fell in behind her, and as they ran, several surviving members of the pack joined them – foremost among them Julius, Marcus, and Octavia. Together they made a line for the closed gates. As her paws beat a staccato rhythm into the earth, Ruby wondered in the back of her mind at how the hellbeasts had even got into the Sanctuary. The gates were closed and protected by powerful magic she wasn’t sure Rumplestiltskin at the height of his Dark One strength could take down. Perhaps Belmordan had transported them in or there was some undiscovered passageway they had utilized to penetrate the valley's defenses. The latter seemed unlikely as the Dires were sure to know every last inch of their ancestral home, which left only the former, and that gave Ruby little comfort. If the dark sorcerer could so easily penetrate the Sanctuary’s wards with his magic, what hope did they have of protecting themselves should he ever force his way into Storybrooke?

As they neared the gates at last, Ruby's attention was drawn back to her objective, namely getting the hell out of there. She watched Romulus approach, interested in seeing how a wolf opened such an enormous gate. He reached forward to press his nose against a symbol on the door, but before contact was made a sound from behind grabbed her attention away. Her ears picked up the thunder of numerous pursuers rapidly approaching. She glanced back to see a full pack of hellhounds trailing them, the leader of which was the enormous black beast she had faced the day before, the one with calculating eyes betraying a level of intelligence rivaling that of the Dires.

Only fifty yards away now, they would be within striking distance in seconds. Ruby growled, tensing in preparation to attack. But before she could launch herself at the invaders, the harsh sound of metal separating rang in her ears. Romulus had opened the doors. She swung back around just as the Dire alpha yelled, “Move! Now!”

Obeying without comment, she turned and bolted out the opened gates into the clearing beyond. As she sprinted toward the woods from which she had emerged some hours before, she course corrected so that she was headed in the precise direction of the clearing she had left Emma and Esperanza in. Once oriented, she turned her head back gave the wolves a look and a bark that she hoped translated into, “Follow me!”

Bearing down, she propelled herself forward with extra momentum, hitting a speed that pushed the
limits of safety when running through a wooded area with plenty of unforgiving objects to smash into should her paws loose purchase of the earth even briefly. Her sensitive ears could keep track of the progress of the Dire Wolves that were following her, and to their credit, they were able to keep pace with the punishing pace she set. Running at breakneck speed, they were able to put a bit of distance between themselves and the hellbeasts, who were evidently slower because of their greater density.

Settling into the steady run, Ruby allowed instinct to take over. Several times as she maneuvered through the thick forest, she bumped into trees and burst through bushes. The scratching and clawing of thorns dug into her flesh, but she ignored the pain in her haste. After about what seemed like an eternity of hard running due to the stress of the situation, she at last began to detect the familiar smells of her friends. She could also make out the smell of burning wood and cooking flesh, rabbit, she decided, which indicated Emma and Esperanza had complied with her commands and remained in the clearing rather than having wandered off to locate her. She gave out a couple of excited yips to prepare the Dires for their imminent arrival.

Seeming to understand, Romulus yelled out, “We smell them also! Press on!” Ruby did so.

As they got closer and closer to the clearing, she began to make out voices. “I'm worried too,” Emma said, and Ruby could hear her friend's anxiety and anger. Without time to warn them, she burst through the underbrush at the fringes of the clearing and instantly shifted back to two legs.

“Get ready to use the bean, Emma!” she shouted, skidding to a halt a dozen paces away from her startled friends. “Hurry! We have incoming!”

At that moment, the Dires came crashing through behind her, doubly startling Emma and Esperanza. To their credit, both women recovered quickly, jumped to their feet, and drew their weapons. As Emma slid her new sword from its sheath, the reflection of flames began to flicker off of the blade, making it seem as if it were burning. Ruby could feel the magic which imbued the weapon, faint as it was, come to life at the touch of its new mistress.

“Don't worry, they're with me,” Ruby added when she saw her friends warily eyeing the Dire Wolves flanking her. “Just get the bean, and pronto!”

Recognizing the stress in her friends voice, Emma sprang over to her pack and began rummaging through it until she located their one-way ticket home. She didn't really have time to worry about the gigantic wolves that were hovering protectively at Ruby's side, or how different Ruby seemed – as if she were more than she had been before she left – when she could hear the approach of angry footfalls just beyond the threshold of the clearing and shallow within the forest beyond. The proximity of the enemy also meant she didn't have time to properly chastise Ruby for the method she’d employed to get away, leaving her friends behind to be sick with worry over her wellbeing.
Ruby had been gone for over twelve hours, the last four of which Emma spent alternating between pacing, cursing, and pleading with whatever god or gods were listening for her best friend to return.

Setting those things aside for now, Emma opened the pouch Regina had deposited the bean in and retrieved it into her hand. She pinched it between her index finger and thumb, then extended out her arm. Before dropping it, she glanced at Ruby. “Ready?”

Ruby gave a terse nod, not angry so much as in an increasingly panicked hurry. “Do it.”

Not needing to be told twice, Emma allowed thoughts of Storybrooke to fill her mind. She pictured her parents walking with Neal in the park, his growing form trailing awkwardly beside them. Next she imagined Henry when he was younger, the wonder and awe in his eyes as he woke up to realize his mother really was the Savior and had broken the curse by giving him True Love’s Kiss. She also pictured her son at Ruby and Regina’s wedding, standing proudly at his other mother’s side while serving as her best man. He’d looked so tall and handsome in his tuxedo as both he and his mother beamed at the vision that was Ruby walking down the aisle toward them in her fittingly red wedding gown. And last but not least, Emma thought of Killian, her True Love, her own personal savior. She would never forget how she felt when he took the blow that should rightly have been hers after she had briefly lost herself to the darkness of the dagger. Realizing someone loved her enough to die for her out of pure choice, pure devotion, opened her heart again, wrenching it with finality away from the whispering evil that had possessed her. And the kiss that broke the curse of the Dark One at long last, well, she certainly would never forget that.

All of these things had happened in Storybrooke. The memories were Emma’s anchor to home, a road map to guide the magic of the portal where she wanted it to go. Once she was ready, she tossed the bean into the center of the clearing. The second it touched the ground, a swirling vortex of green energy formed which sucked the earth beneath and around it downward.

“Take Esperanza and get through now!” Ruby ordered, her voice cutting through the whirling and whooshing of the portal. Emma began to protest, but Ruby cut her off. Something inside her, a protective instinct over her family, was screaming that at her to get Emma safely through that portal since she could not follow right away. Were they all to cross through, the portal would remain open until its magic expired, affording the hellbeasts access to Storybrooke as well. Someone would have to stay behind to defend the area until the last possible moment. That someone was going to be her. “Don’t argue!” she shouted when Emma didn’t budge. “There’s no time for you to be stubborn! Go now, Emma!”

Grunting her displeasure, Emma nodded. She knew better than to question Ruby at such a critical juncture. Once she collected her pack, she snatched Esperanza’s hand and unceremoniously pulled the raven-haired beauty to the portal. Without bothering to explain herself, she gestured toward it with her right hand. “After you.”
“Alright, but you better be right behind me.” Esperanza replied, hair whipping from the blustering wind the vortex created. Her face was strangely calm considering the hectic nature of the moment and the thoughtless way Emma had handled her. Emma had to admit that she admired the woman for her cool under pressure. It seemed that was just the kind of person Esperanza was, unflappable and dependable.

“I will be,” Emma promised, wishing she meant it. She hated lying but no other alternative presented itself at the spur of the moment which would convince Esperanza to follow her directions.

In response, Esperanza's eyes narrowed, perceiving the false answer. She made no response, however, having understood Emma's actions and deception for what they were. From what she had learned of the woman in the past few days, Emma was both stubborn and loyal to a fault. There was no way she was going to leave Ruby behind having come so far already. All Esperanza could do was accommodate the desires of both Emma and Ruby, two amazing women that she had the utmost respect for.

Praying to anything or anyone willing to listen for the safety of her new friends, Esperanza looked at them one last time, giving both women a meaningful look originated from their shared adventure over the past two days. “I'll see you on the other side!” And then she jumped through the glowing green portal and disappeared into the ether.

Emma kept close watch on Esperanza until she was successfully through the portal, but the moment Esperanza was safe, she swirled around on Ruby, positively steaming at the audacity of the woman to ask her to sit out the pending fight. “I have half a mind to throttle you right now!” she said with a harsh glare.

Sighing, Ruby approached the angry Savior, the Dires following closely behind her. “We don't have time to hash things out right now, Emma,” she said. “Those hellbeasts we encountered earlier are trailing us. They'll be here any second.”

“Good thing I'm here then,” Emma said. Removing her pack, she tossed it through the portal then renewed her grip upon the sword she’d recovered from the bowels of the Dark Palace. It's magic vibrated through the grip into her arm where it settled into her heart, a passive song of battle she knew would spring into a full on symphony once blood began to spill.

Ruby's breath caught at the action and the determination with which Emma stood her ground. “What are you doing?” she asked, wide-eyed and afraid.
“I'm gonna stay here and fight,” Emma said, daring Ruby to argue with hard green eyes. “I'm not going to leave you behind. I let Esperanza go because this is not her fight, but it is ours. We can't let anyone besides us through that portal because if those things were to get loose in town, there's no telling how many people they would kill. I’m the Savior. It’s my job to protect Storybrooke. So I’m staying. Deal with it.”

Ruby cursed, recognizing the validity of Emma’s argument. She was in such a rush, she hadn't been thinking of how Emma might see it as her responsibility to guard the portal leading to the town and people she’d been born to serve. This altered her plans significantly.

Turning to the Dires, she faced Romulus. “Alright, you guys need to get through the portal,” she instructed. “Emma and I will take care of these things.”

“We cannot,” Romulus replied as if that should be obvious.

The fact that Romulus spoken at all shocked Emma to such a degree that she audibly gasped. Talking wolves? Her mind instantly recalled the conversation with Belmordan. Could it be that these were the creatures he was referring to in his little story? Emma wanted to question the large and impressive looking creature but she held her peace out of expedience. This was no time for twenty questions. Things were about to get ugly.

“Our entire existence is predicated upon protecting you, Great One,” Romulus continued to explain his refusal. “We will stand with you and the Savior.”

“That's not how this works,” Ruby said, aggravated at how just about everyone was refusing her directions. Her ears had picked up the approach of the hellbeasts, a fact she knew Romulus and his pack were also aware of. The anticipation of bloodshed made her even more edgy. “I am the prime alpha here, not you. We don't have time to argue about this. Now, as your alpha, I am ordering you to lead your pack through that portal.”

“Respectfully, I refuse,” answered Romulus stubbornly. “You are my alpha, that is true, but I have a sacred duty that transcends your command. I made an oath when I inherited my father’s post. I will not abandon you. However,” he added as Ruby started to retort, “I will send the rest of the pack through as you have requested.” Turning to the others, he fixed his attention on Julius. “Beta, as the Great One has instructed, lead the pack through the portal and wait for us on the other side.”

Ruby could tell all of the other wolves were as unhappy about that command as Romulus had been. Unlike him, however, they were not willing to disobey their alpha. Silently, nine Dire Wolves including Marcus followed Julius through the portal. Octavia, however, remained, appearing
Ruby could sympathize. If Regina had given her such an order, she would not have been able to follow it. To be asked to abandon your mate, even at their instruction, was too much for either a wolf or a werewolf to endure. Separation knowing what might be happening to a mate with no way to reach them was a recipe for madness. For a split second, it looked like Octavia was about to refuse outright, but Romulus preempted her with a sharp look that made the hair on her neck prickle. Ducking her head, Octavia nodded mournfully and shortly thereafter disappeared through the portal.

Hearing the sounds of twigs snapping and maddened growling, Ruby's attention was wrenched back to the forest. She realized that there were only seconds to spare now. The hellbeasts would soon be upon them.

“Emma, please...” Allowing distress to color her words and expression, Ruby decided to attempt one last plea for her best friend to see reason. Worry for Emma was threatening to choke her. “Please go home. I couldn’t take it if something happened to you.”

“Forget it, babe. I’m here come hell or high water,” was the obstinate reply. Twirling her sword, Emma then maneuvered into a combat stance, her torso angled toward the forest with her legs slightly spread apart and bent at the knee. She gripped her sword in both hands, firmly yet loosely enough to wield it with agility. Taking a deep breath, she prepared herself for the upcoming battle.

Growling in frustration at Emma's refusal to relent, Ruby focusing all of her attention on the treeline in the near distance. It took only moments for the hellbeasts to appear. With a unison howl, the ghastly animals surged out of the forest, not slowing down a bit as they charged forward with reckless abandon. There had to be at least fifty of them, nearly all of which were foaming at the mouth as if berserk, jabbering and barking wildly as they advanced. Only the leader appeared to have his wits about him. Ruby focused her attention on him.

“I got the leader,” she said to Romulus, squaring her shoulders. She spared a glance to the person who had come to mean more to her than any save her immediate family. “Take care of yourself, Em.”

“Always,” was Emma's succinct but heartfelt reply.

Knowing the time was at hand to purge all other thoughts, Ruby summoned her energy to transform into the wolf. She felt her reason give way to the bloodlust once more, and as her heart began pumping and the adrenaline flooded her system, she shot forward toward the oncoming hellbeasts. Snarling and growling as she ran, her vision tinged crimson and the anticipation of the kill glinted in
her eyes. Behind her, Romulus and Emma charged alongside her, the former with a howl and the latter with a cry of exultation. Ruby's teeth bared in a malicious grin. Emma the Savior was no more. The woman who was now charging to battle with her was Emma the warrior. This day there would be much blood shed.

With a mighty roar, Ruby launched herself into the huge pack of hellbeasts, biting and tearing at limbs at necks. She ripped apart five of the twisted animals within a minute as she fought her way toward the back of their lines where their leader was pacing in anticipation. It was obvious he wanted a rematch and Ruby was itching to give him one.

After slaughtering her way through another dozen unorganized beasts, she paused a moment to take stock of the battlefield. Off to her left, Romulus was fending off a group of three attackers, dodging and weaving through them like the experienced wolf he was. The hellbeasts, though thoroughly rabid, were no match for his skillful precision. He cut down the attackers with ease then moved on to another set who were trying to flank the portal and sneak through.

In the opposite direction Emma was twirling and slashing with practiced grace, utilizing both her magic and her newly acquired sword to tear through a line of hellbeasts ten deep. One after another after another fell to the Savior’s prowess with the blade. Ruby was impressed. Emma's had vastly improved from the last time they saw such combat. Clearly practicing more seriously on a regular basis with Regina, Killian, and David was paying off. More than ever it was obvious that Emma had risen to become a woman worthy of her various titles.

While Ruby was distracted watching Emma’s impressive sword dance, she hadn't noticed another group of hellbeasts closing in on her. There were six of them this time, all large with semi-intelligent eyes rather than the lifeless mania she had seen in all the others. All at once, these new assailants slammed into her, landing several blows to her sides and legs. After recovering from the initial shock of their assault, Ruby shook them off and lurched forward to ram the largest of them away with the crown of her head. It flopped over onto its back with a thud, and she utilized the opening to rush in and finish the job. She tore his throat out in a single bite and got showered with arterial spray for her trouble. Snarling muzzle dripping with blood, she turned on the other five hellbeasts and gave a baleful growl that rattled her ribs. Back in the Enchanted Forest, grown men well-experienced in combat fled at the sight of her gore matted fur, crimson stained teeth, and burning yellow eyes, but the hellbeasts did not flinch nor did they appear even marginally frightened by her fury even though she was at least twice their size and had already slain more than twice their number with relative ease. Growling their own spiteful reply, they renewed their assault with escalated vigor.

As the majority swarmed to her sides, biting and scratching at her legs and ribs, one of the more industrious ones leapt to her back. Using its talon like claws, it latched on and held tight. Ignoring the pain of her skin being shredded, Ruby whipped her entire body around to clear the mob of bodies pressing in on her and to try and dislodge the beast atop her back. The move worked to some degree, affording her a bit of breathing room, but the tenacious creature on her back clamped down even tighter and then bit into her shoulder. A strong jaw sank sharp teeth deep enough into her flesh to encounter bone. Ruby yelped at the fiery agony of skin and muscle being punctured and then
shredded.

For a moment she wavered, coming close to loosing her footing, but then her furious resolve to protect her home and to survive at all costs kicked in, and she steeled herself against the screaming of her shoulder. Blocking out the pain, she launched herself toward the hellbeast in front of her, pouncing before it could even react. Just as she plunged her teeth into its neck, the creature on her back bit down again, this time on the back of her own neck. Howling with pain, one of her legs gave way and she fell forward. Head throbbing, blood streamed down her neck and jaw, dripping onto the ground as her vision blurred. She could hear the calls the few remaining hellbeasts, delightedly yipping and barking with unrestrained glee. They believed her to be defeated.

The thought enraged Ruby. In a frenzy, she summoned every ounce of energy and rose once more to all fours. Now upright, her vision already tinged red gave way to crimson fury that unleashed a growl so loud and ferocious that it that shook the ground all around her. With one mighty roll of her shoulders, the hellbeast clinging to her back was dislodged. It went flying several feet away before landing in a heap less than a yard in front of its leader where it laid whining pathetically.

Freed of that annoyance, Ruby focused on her other attackers. One by one she slew each of them, the last of which she very nearly ripped the head clean off as she bit through its thickly corded neck. After dispatching those enemies, she tunneled in on their leader and began to approach at a deliberate pace. Since she could hear Emma and Romulus still fighting in the periphery, she was not worried about their safety. Before reaching the lead beast, Ruby stopped at the broken body of the creature that had leapt on her back. She pressed it to the ground with one paw, applying merciless pressure until she felt its ribs cave inward, crushing its heart in the process.

The din of battle died down around her as her attention narrowed down solely to her target. Everything else going on within the clearing faded away; it was down to her and the lead hellbeast now. Pinning her ears back, her chest began to rumble with a deep and menacing growl. The leader returned a matching one of his own. For a long space, they stood staring at one another with equal acrimony, both tensed for attack as they studied their opponent. A flinch from the leader's muscles signaled the attack, and simultaneously, both she and the lead beast lunged at one another, colliding in what comparatively reduced their earlier confrontation to only a faint echo. Ruby recovered swiftly enough to get her bearings and then spring at the black monster before it was prepared. She bit at its neck, intending to end the contest with one blow, but it was deftly avoided and then riposted by vicious snap at her head. Dodging to the side, Ruby heard the whoosh of air and the clamping of teeth right beside her left ear. It was a narrow miss.

Wasting no time, the beast attacked again, but this time Ruby neatly sidestepped the maneuver, swinging herself around as the creature passed by. With all of her might, she propelled herself forward at the defenseless hellbeast that now had its back to her. She landed atop it, her heft knocking it to the ground. Not allowing it a second to regroup, she pressed the devilish animal to the ground with her forelegs as it thrashed to and fro in a vain attempt to escape her superior size and strength. Victory was hers! She bared her teeth and prepared to deliver the death blow.
But the moment her head descended toward her victim’s neck, something slammed into her side. Her mind barely had time to process what had happened before she was sent careening at terrific speed away from her quarry and toward the forest line. With a sickening thud, the right side of her body collided against a particularly unforgiving trunk. Ruby slid down to the ground, stunned and disoriented.

Several times she tried to heft herself back up only to collapse back down each time with a feeble whimper. Her entire body felt as if it had been broken by the impact. Despite the aid of the full moon of her native shores, she was unable to sustain her transformation any longer. She had to shift back lest she lose consciousness.

Never had Ruby attempted to transform while being so injured. Normally the process was accompanied by tolerable pain, but this time a white-hot flame scorched through her body as she turned from wolf into woman. Her ribs in particular felt as if in full conflagration. Once back in her human frame, she let out a prolonged groan. No longer awash with adrenaline and protected by the wolf’s superior resistance to pain, everything hurt. She could barely move anything without causing her vision to swim. Her neck was numb at the back from being bit, though she could feel blood seeping down her back from the wound, and her nose and mouth were bloodied as well. The taste of tangy copper suffused her already overloaded senses.

Heaving herself with great effort, she pushed through the unbearable pain assaulting her in unrelenting waves. Somehow she managed to maneuver herself against the tree without passing out, and once she was leaning against it she allowed her head to loll back. It thudded hard against the bark, though she barely noticed in her weakened, disoriented state.

“I warned you that you would regret your decision,” a voice called out, cutting through the fog of Ruby’s concussed brain.

_Belmordan._ Ruby shuddered, her injuries exacerbating the onset of primal fear at his sudden arrival. Frantically and worriedly, she cast her gaze about, searching frantically for Emma and Romulus. To her horror, both were suspended in midair, fighting against invisible bonds of magic that restrained them. Behind them, the portal still swirled with life, green arcs of electricity shooting out of it intermittently. She was surprised it was still opened, and while she was partly glad of it, she mostly wished it had closed if only to ensure the safety of their families. Belmordan could _not_ be allowed to reach Storybrooke, no matter what. If that meant her dying here in this world, and Emma along with her, so be it.

“Let...my friends...go,” she said, choking and gasping for air. It felt like every single rib was broken, which made it nearly impossible to breathe or speak without blinding pain.
“I intend to do just that,” was Belmordan's reply, “after I have dealt with you.”

Moaning in agony, Ruby pushed herself up a little higher against the tree. “Are you...going to kill me...now?”

“No. I have plans for you and they require your survival,” he said with dark eyes. The ominous way he addressed her made it seem almost preferable if he had said yes. “I had hoped you would aide me willingly but I see now that is impossible. I must break you and mold you.” Taking a few steps closer, Belmordan now hovered over Ruby. His face was implacable and menacing in a way that made her blood run cold. “It pains me to bring you harm but you have left me little choice, girl.”

“I'm...n-not...a girl,” Ruby said, summoning what remained of her strength to sound defiant. “All...woman...here.”

As if amused by her attempt at levity, a ghastly grin crossed Belmordan's face. “Your bravado is impressive. Duly noted. However, despite your womanly beauty, I care little for the shell you occupy. My interest lies elsewhere. You are merely the key I must wield to reach what I truly desire.”

Lifting his hand, Belmordan showed Ruby his hand, his eyes narrowing into slits as he focused intently. Almost instantaneously, an inky black disk of magic began to form on his palm. The way it swirled and pulsed, it almost reminded her of those black holes they sometimes talked about on the science programs Henry so loved to watch.

Once the magic he summoned began to grow, Belmordan returned his attention to Ruby. His irises were so dark now they were nearly as black as the magic he was wielding. “To accomplish that,” he continued, “I must...reforge you.” Extending his hand out, Belmordan's face then twisted into a diabolical sneer.

Her death seemingly imminent, Ruby flashed back to that day in Joshua's basement. Her memory was so strangely clear that she could see him standing in front of her, his eyes blazing with madness as he prepared to strike her with that awful silver scythe. Ruby remembered her thoughts before the blade entered her chest, how she hoped Regina would forgive her for dying because she'd been afraid her death would set Regina off again and she'd hated herself for being the potential cause. And now once again Ruby had put herself into a situation where she was literally staring death in the face left fearing what Regina would do if she didn't come back home. Would Regina be able to go on for the girls' sake, pushing through her pain to be the best mother she could be? Ruby believed that she would, that things were different now for Regina than they had been that day so long ago. Would she grieve? Sure. Ruby was enough of a realist to know that her death might still destroy Regina in any number of ways, but she was still certain that her wife could set aside her grief for Sophie and Amie.
That said, if Emma came back through that portal alone, it was unlikely that Regina would ever forgive her, even though Emma was not to blame. After all the Savior and Evil Queen had been through together to build a solid friendship, Ruby didn't want to be the one to destroy it. But that's just what would happen if she did not return to Storybrooke. If she died in the Enchanted Forest and Emma made it back alive, Regina would hold that against Emma for the rest of her life. Things in Storybrooke would slowly but surely devolve until the relationships between their respective families broke down, returning them to a time before the Curse was broken and they'd all learned how to be happy again. For that reason alone, Ruby deeply and desperately desired to avoid her imminent demise.

But there were so many other reasons she wanted to live, foremost among them her wife and children. It was for them she had clung to life so viciously in Joshua's basement, and that was before she’d known they were both pregnant. Now she had so much more to live for. She wanted to be there for every triumph and failure as Ami and Sophie grew up; she wanted to be there for every birthday party, grade card, dentist appointment, and graduation. The thought missing all of that was excruciating. But as bad as that was, it was somehow worse that she would miss out on growing old with Regina. That was something she’d always dreamed of. Being old and gray sitting on the front porch with her wife, nagging each other and complaining about all the young whippersnappers making a mess of the neighborhood. She wanted that so badly that she ached for it. But what was she to do? In her current predicament, critically injured with no wolf to rely on and her backup neutralized, she felt utterly helpless. All she could do now was await the inevitable, a grim yet realistic outlook that went against her every instinct. And yet that was what she'd been reduced to, which was perhaps the worst feeling of all.

“No!” a cry came from behind Belmordan, wrenching his attention away from Ruby. It was Emma, now struggling even more savagely against her bonds. Ruby gasped in terror even though she paid for it when her ribs reminded her of their current state of disrepair.

“You cannot stop this, Savior,” Belmordan called out, taunting the Savior. For Ruby, though, it was a fortunate mistake.

Now incensed, Emma screamed with effort as she bent all of her considerable power on lifting her sword arm. To Belmordan's shock and Ruby's immense joy, it began to slowly rise, first an inch, then another and another, until at last it broke free. As Emma's arm arced upward, her sword sheered away the magic that held her captive. Groaning like they had been made of metal, the magic bonds tore, sparking as the gleaming blade cut through them as though they were warm butter. Once her arm reached her waist, the magic wholly gave way. It burst apart with a terrific blast, the force of which knocked Belmordan to his knees.

The second Emma's feet touched the ground, she was on the move. Ruby could do nothing but watch as her best friend bellowed a great battle yell and then surged forward like the warrior princess she was. Clenched tightly in both hands, her sword shimmered with golden flames that licked up the
blade only to reflect burning circles in her eyes. With her face twisted fiercely, eyes gleaming, blonde hair blowing in the wind, and sword billowed in flame as she charged, Emma appeared less like the friend Ruby loved more than life and more like a vengeful Valkyrie from the pages of some Norse epic. In that moment, Emma became almost more than human, a supernatural force of justice and retribution that could not be stopped by any force known to man. This, Ruby thought, was the Savior in all her unleashed might, and it was glorious.

Almost as if she were propelled by some invisible force, Emma crossed the distance to Belmordan in a blink. With swiftly deft movements and a mighty roar, she rose her sword into the air and sliced it downward. It struck Belmordan's wrist – the one belonging to the hand he was gathering his magic in – and severed it cleanly. Screaming in agony, the dark sorcerer dropped his elbows, clenching at the stump upon which his hand was once attached.

Behind them, a great noise echoed through the forest, the same that rang out when Emma's bonds burst asunder. Romulus had been freed by Emma's strike, and like the Savior, he wasted no time in charging Belmordan as the wounded man wallowed in pain. Seeing that his life was in jeopardy, he straightened up and raised his good hand into the air, summoning an orb of magic that surrounded him just as Romulus reached his position. The massive Dire Wolf alpha collided with the shield, bouncing off to the side and skidding several feet on his side. He rolled back over immediately, uninjured and growling with more animosity than Ruby had imagined the noble wolf capable of.

Raising her sword again, Emma brought it down on the barrier protecting Belmordan. The magical orb arced and buzzed as it resisted the onslaught from her magical sword and her pure Savior magic. And although it held strong for the moment, the blade was sinking inexorably down into it. Ruby knew that Belmordan recognized the inevitability of his shield failing just as surely as she had. The sword that had broken through his magical restraints with such ease could not be countered, even by his most potent defensive spells, particularly when he was wounded as he was.

“This isn't over,” Belmordan barked at Emma and then Ruby, his face a mixture of a misery and rage. “You may have won this fight, but rest assured, I will return. You can run away to another world but I will find you. You can run away to another world but I will find you!”

Still gripping his forearm, Belmordan began uttering an indecipherable phrase, quietly at first, then rising up into a frenzied chant. For the third time that evening, Ruby felt the earth tremble. In response to what was happening, both Emma and Romulus backed away from Belmordan's shield with widened and wary eyes. The chanting continued. Ruby could feel the swelling of magic as Belmordan channeled his power within the protective bubble of the orb.

All of the sudden and with one huge burst of energy and in a flash of bright light and midnight smoke, Belmordan was teleported away. The critically injured alpha hellbeast who was laying motionless where Ruby left him was also caught up in the spell, disappearing along with its master. When the fog cleared, no trace remained of them. Only the grotesque bodies of the slain beasts were
left behind. It was over. Somehow, they had survived the onslaught.

Relief washed over Ruby as a thick beads of sweat rolled down her temple and then tumbled down her face. After wiping them away with her forearm, she pulled her arm back to find her sleeve drenched in blood. It hadn't been sweat after all. Looking at the bloody sleeve as if not understanding what was happening, Ruby heard Emma call her name. The Savior sounded distressed. Ruby hoped she was okay. Emma had certainly seemed okay when she was kicking Belmordan's ass. Never had Ruby been more proud of her friend.

Her head lolling again as if her neck was suddenly rubberized, she fought against the sudden pull of sleep. The present seemed to fade away with the onset of delirium due to blood loss. Beyond being very tired, Ruby felt so very confused. Her grip on reality was beginning to slip away. What had happened to cause her to feel this way? And where was she again?

Swooning, Ruby's eyes rolled back into her head and much like a tattered rag doll would, she slid sideways from the trunk of the tree. The instant her head connected with the ground, everything around her went black.

Chapter End Notes

Oops! Poor Ruby! Hope she's okay! ;)


In a flash of dusky light and tremulous ebony clouds, Belmordan emerged from the transportation spell into his chambers. Within the comfortable, shadowy confines of the Dark Palace, he could lick his wounds and recover from his embarrassing failure.

Fury pulsed through his veins atop the pain from his severed appendage. The loss was a temporary inconvenience that could be corrected magically, and as he set about fixing his hand, he ruminated upon the larger problem. His failure to secure Ruby presented a setback that would cost precious, unrecoverable time during which Artemis would be left to languish trapped within a fate worse than death.

He flexed his newly reattached hand into a fist and then drove it into the nearest wall. The satisfying crunch of stone and masonry resounded through the room. Shards of pain lanced through his hand, and he reveled in the sensation. The physical discomfort matched his stormy mood. Thoughts of Artemis’ imprisonment invariably sent him into a spiral of either dark desolation or chaotic wrath.

Coming by information on the holding cell constructed by Merlin and Diana had not been easy. His insufferably moralistic cousin and the Olympian goddess who had betrayed her own twin sister had done well to scatter knowledge of the processes they used to the four corners of the nine planet system they all inhabited. His vast network of operatives were cunning as they were resourceful, though, and had pieced together enough intelligence for him to deduce it was nothing short of a living coffin. Prisoners held within the magically infused chamber designed to keep them in perpetual stasis were not even provided the mercy of being stripped of their awareness. It was, in his mind, a truly cruel torture. The idea of Artemis being forever trapped in such a place was unfathomable, especially since she, being Olympian, would experience torment not even he would inflict upon his most hated enemies.

As an Olympian, Artemis possessed an inherent link to the spirit plane that connects all living things and every celestial body together throughout the cosmos. Olympian bodies were not merely flesh and blood and bone but equally comprised of spirit matter, which rendered them not only immortal but also powerful beyond comprehension to mere mortals such as he once was. It was why they could project their astral forms to other worlds, which in turn explained why they were worshiped as gods when in fact they were beings created by nature just as were ordinary men.
Fortune had rained down effusively upon Planet Olympus, arranging it at the very heart of the Yggdrasil System of which eight other planets were a part. Olympus was a majestic world of crystalline azure seas dotted with only one large continent and innumerable islands of vastly different shapes, sizes, and ecosystems. Mount Olympus, from whence the first Olympians originated from their Titanic parents, was erected upon the central leyline of the planet that ran beneath the southern shoreline of its only continent, an enormous landmass that dwarfed any other within the Nine Realms.

The Titans were the first sentient beings to spring from those inexhaustible wells of primordial magic but they were fickle creatures, savage and destructive at one moment and peacefully harmonious the next. When aroused to passion their wars left scars upon the face of the planet that are still there to the present day. So volatile and dangerous were they that their own children, which in time became known as the Pantheon of Olympus, rebelled against and overthrew them. Many of the Titans were destroyed in a great and terrible battle that left a thousand miles of the planet uninhabitable for a hundred generations. Those that survived Zeus locked away in Tartarus never again to see the light of the sun. His shame over his parents was so great that he forbid any save those alive during the war to possess knowledge that they yet survived. To the Olympians born thereafter, the Titans were relegated to the pages of history books, an object lesson on the danger of abusing power.

Artemis herself had not known her grandparents were alive until she had lived more generations than the most complete mortal histories can reckon. The betrayal she felt at learning what her father had done was one of the many reasons she turned her back upon him and his oppressive traditions. Belmordan had been with her the day Kronus’ prison finally weakened enough for him to announce himself to his descendant. He had sensed her discontent, her anger, and offered her an opportunity to set things right. And since freeing the Titans from Tartarus was the final step of that plan, Belmordan did not believe his Olympian lover would appreciate the irony of sharing her grandfather’s fate.

During their dialogue, Kronus had revealed to Artemis that his prison was living damnation, that Zeus had neglected to fully sever his intrinsic ties to the world and to the spirit realm from which they derived their strength. This heinous arrangement left Kronus able to see and feel events unfolding without the agency to partake in them. Thus he could observe the births of his grandchildren without being afforded the privilege of ever holding them, watched them grow and flourish to become beings of such pride and power that countless worlds bent the knee to their mere spiritual projections, and was then forced to bear witness to deaths he was not permitted to grieve. It was a sadistic twist of fate that Artemis also was condemned to such a fate within the prison her own sister had built. And that Belmordan’s own cousin, the immortal sorcerer Merlin, had helped in the construction was an irritant to an already festering wound that sometimes crippled him with such excessive rage that he often frightened himself.

Coming so close to obtaining the key to unlocking Artemis’ prison only to have it slip from his grasp at the last second had that crazed animus building within his mind, and it exerted such pressure on his head that he could hardly see straight. Unable to hold it all in, he shouted as he lashed out at anything he could see. In his fit of temporary mania, he tossed indiscriminate bursts of magic at vases, paintings, and pieces of furniture, heedless of their aesthetic or monetary value. He watched them break and crumble with grim satisfaction. Venting, he had learned, was the only way to keep from
losing his tenuous grip on sanity.

“Master,” a deeply resonant rumble sounded from behind him, grabbing his attention. Belmordan whirled to find his alpha laying helpless upon his side, blood leaking from his jowls onto the stone floor. In his bleak ruminations, he’d forgotten about Remus.

Sneering, the sorcerer raised his hand and began to issue his power toward his fallen minion. “I ought to let you lay there and suffer,” he said, seething with displeasure. “You had one mission and one mission only – to kill the others and leave the girl to me! Your pack succeed admirably in sacking that accursed sanctuary, but somehow you, my most trusted ally, managed to completely bungle your assignment.”

Drawing a harsh breath, Belmordan curtailed his magic, having healed the enormous wolf to the point of satisfaction. He did not mend all of Remus’ wounds, choosing instead to leave some untreated as a reminder to his chief lieutenant that failure came at a price.

“Were it not for the fact that you are my oldest friend,” he then said, “I would destroy you.”

Glowing red eyes turned up to him, mustering up as much a plea as pride would allow. The harrowing expression took Belmordan back to a time in which had not yet met Artemis, a time when immortality had not yet been bestowed upon him. It was a time when life was much more simple, when he and his wolf bond-brother passed the nights adventuring under the serene light of the moon with only each other as companions. Those memories of midnight hunts with Remus lingered through all attempts to purge himself of such useless sentimentality, as if stubbornly imprinted upon his very soul.

It made sense in a way. Remus had been with him from the beginning, having come at a time he was most needed. After the death of his father, Belmordan had inherited his ancestral gift and became a Wolflord, but being young and mired in sorrow, the gift had seemed a millstone hung about his neck and a constant reminder that his father was dead and that he was alone in the world. The grief was only made worse by the fact he’d received word of his father’s untimely passing via letter.

When his mother died some years before, his father had moved to a land far to the north, estranging himself from his family. Not long after that the Great Purge began, instituted by a grief-maddened Uther Pendragon. What few familial relations remaining to Belmordan were swept up in the bloodbath and mass exodus that ensued. There was no one left to whom he could turn.

Nearly a year passed in solitude until one night he was sitting on the husk of a fallen oak tree, staring up mournfully at the moon as memories of his father sucked him further toward the abyss of
depression. It was at his lowest and most vulnerable moment that Remus arrived. By chance he’d glimpsed at the low-set horizon, and when he did, he noticed the giant wolf seated tall upon his haunches, his majestic form illuminated in by the waxing moon hanging low and rotund in the background.

After a moment of staring in fear at the creature, Belmordan reached out with his nascent powers only to find a conscious mind on the other end of the connection. The buzzing presence that filtered into his mind startled him. All the other wolves he had commanded in the months that followed his ascension possessed simple minds that obeyed without question. Their desires were never difficult to interpret: I want to eat; I want to hunt; I want to run; I want to mate. But the creature he would come to know as the Dire Wolf elder, Remus, had a mind as complex as his own.

“Hello, young Gryffyn,” the greeting came, a strange tingling sensation accompanying the richly grand tone. Gryffyn had been Belmordan’s name in an age long past, one he had long since abandoned. “I am Remus, your guardian. I have been waiting for you to summon me since the day you were born. I am here to answer your call.”

“Why now?” Belmordan had asked aloud even though Remus was yet far away. “Why didn’t you come when I needed you, when my father died and I was all alone?”

“You were never alone young Gryffyn,” said Remus, having somehow heard from a distance. “I was there, unannounced, to watch over you until you were ready to receive me. Your mind has been chaotic until now and your heart full of bitterness. Tonight, however, you have peace for the first time since your father passed. Is this not true?”

It had been true and he told Remus that. Sitting there in the moonlight had made him feel close to his father again, as if the man himself were present, his giant frame and chiseled features soft with patience and acceptance. From the moment his father died, Belmordan had felt like kindling a flame that would burn the entire world to ashes. But that night, he was content to merely be, to soak in the cool night air and revel in the sensation of being alive.

“You are yet coming into your powers. With time, you will feel closer to your father than when he was alive through the bond we share,” said Remus, and as he loped ever closer, growing larger as he neared.

Belmordan’s breath left him at the awe-inspiring size and wild beauty of the wolf who would quickly assume the role of his best friend and constant companion. They spoke until nearly morning, and then slept side-by-side out under the stars. After that, nothing could separate them. And that Remus’ promise of a renewed closeness with his deceased father proved true only deepened the unspeakably profound connection that formed the instant their minds touched. Remus was the only being upon whom Belmordan could unequivocally depend and trust. Over the centuries, he had proven himself
over and over again, and had never failed in a task set assigned to him before that day. Remus was as 
close to his heart as any, even Artemis, and there was little the wolf could do to sever that bond.

Belmordan sighed, his anger draining out of him. Remus’ failure was unpalatable, but in a way he 
understood it. Even he hadn’t predicted the girl would be so strong, nor had he anticipated the Savior 
being able to sunder his magic. That she did so with remarkably little effort posed a conundrum and a 
potential source of danger to his well-being. It was obvious to him that the sword Emma Swan 
carried was no ordinary blade, and it needled at Belmordan that he could not place the familiar 
design. Putting the blonde down would be a priority upon their next encounter, but he would have to 
be more careful to avoid a confrontation with the sharp end of her mystical sword.

And then there was Romulus, the accursed mutt. As much as Belmordan despised the old dog, it 
appeared he had some fight left in him, which was impressive considering he, unlike his twin 
brother, had been without a bond-mate for all his life. Dires without bond-mates were subject to the 
ravages of time just the same as any ordinary wolf, so it was a mystery why Romulus remained 
youthful. Perhaps it was the Selenian Valley that kept him young, Belmordan surmised. No matter. 
Whatever power maintaining Romulus’ vigor, the wolf had acquitted himself well, just as had the girl 
and the Savior.

None of that changed the fact that the trio had been outnumbered handily, and should have been 
easily overpowered.

“You failed me, Remus,” he then said to his supine companion, voice still stern although somewhat 
softened by abiding affection. “But as it so happens, I need you still, if only to counter the threat your 
brother poses to my plans.”

“My brother,” Remus replied around a pain-filled groan, “is weak. His pack is...weaker still. Few 
remain...that did not make it...through...the portal.”

Belmordan nodded thoughtfully. “A sliver of good news, though it does little to amend for your 
blunder.”

“Forgive me, Master,” the great black wolf whined, his ears pinning back in submission. With great 
effort, he managed to lift his head. “I will not...fail you...again.”

Kneeling at the injured creature’s side, Belmordan laid a gentle hand the fur of his mane, threading 
his fingers through the matted hairs. “See that you don't, old friend, for we can’t afford it. Our margin 
for error has decreased significantly. We will not get another chance like the one that was just 
squandered.”
Part of the blame rested on his own shoulders, Belmordan thought, which was why his anger was rapidly depleting. The key to Artemis' freedom had literally delivered herself right into his hands and he let her go because he assumed his ability to track her via the undetectable potion he’d slipped into her meal would make her easy to apprehend. All he had to do was wait for the telltale surge of magical drain upon the connected leylines running beneath the surface of this realm to indicate a portal opening, then he would transport himself to her location, sweep up whatever resistance remained from Remus and his pack’s attack, and then bind his distant offspring much in the same way he’d done Romulus and the Savior. What seemed a solid plan turned out to be a colossal error. He should never have allowed the girl or her companions to leave the castle, never tried to sway her with pretty words and hopeful promises. He should have known better than to resort to the sorts of tactics Merlin preferred which lent themselves only to failure, just as with Arthur. In his experience, force was the only reasonable means with which to procure obedience. It had not failed him yet. He’d been a fool to show kindness simply because she was his distant offspring.

Now with his quarry a world away having taken a portal back to her world with a magic bean, he was reduced to grasping at straws. A magic bean. That had been a genuinely surprising development as he’d thought the beans eradicated from existence. There was no denying that the setback was enormous but if he could locate a bean quickly, and surely at least one was left in this world, he could use it to send himself and half his army into the world Queen Regina had cursed all of Misthaven into. The book detailing how to expand the size and scope of active spells which he had secured from what was once Xavier’s realm guaranteed this.

With a huff, Remus laid his head back down, his lids fluttering to a half-closed position while Belmordan continued to stroke his fur. “What...will you...do...then?” the great wolf asked, blowing a puff of air from his nostrils at the last word.

Belmordan gave his faithful companion a dark smile. “They used a magic bean to power their portal,” he said, explaining his inner thought process. “They were only grown in this world and I heard tale that the supply was forever exhausted. But now we know that may not be true. There may yet be a bean left in this world, and if there is, I'll tear every kingdom apart until I find it.”

“What can I do to help you...Master?” Remus asked, his voice fading as he began to slip into a healing sleep.

“Once you've recovered, summon your pack,” Belmordan replied, standing once more and crossing the room to look out the grand window at the landscape below. The warped, shimmering nature of the area which was a side-effect of his magically powered portal to this land made the view seem almost out of some fantastical painting rather than reality. A bean would not have such an effect.

The varied efforts of humanity at transcending space and time via magic or other means were
frowned upon by the universe because they were a perversion of the natural order. The human mind was violently alien to Yggdrasil, who did not appreciate her limbs and branches being traveled down by forces which were foreign to her. The attempts of sorcerers and scientists over the nine realms to subvert her rules of cosmic travel resulted in many terrible disasters that had rendered vast portions of some planets uninhabitable. Yet, being a cosmic sprout of a somewhat kindred life form, magic beans were a form of life she would recognize as providing an acceptable method of travel along her pathways.

A magic bean. How quaint. How simple. How ingenious. He should have thought of it long ago.

“Scour the realm for a bean,” Belmordan then instructed, still peering out the window. “If none are found, extend your search to the neighboring kingdoms. Enlist the dragons and send the gargoyles as well. Locate a bean for me, Remus, and all will be forgiven.”

“Yes, master,” Remus responded, his reply barely audible, but Belmordan heard every word. “I will do...as...you...ask.” And with that, the bestial wolf stilled, his breathing evening out.

Smoothing a hand over his companion's coat once more, Belmordan began to hum a low, rumbling melody from his youth, one his father had often sang in his youth as they huddled around the campfire with his mother and his father's great snow-coated wolf, Lumus. Why his father hadn’t communed with the Dires was a secret Belmordan had to wait two whole years to find out. Though the answer hadn’t made sense back then, it does now.

Romulus and Remus were born to serve the two greatest werewolves to ever live. But whereas Remus had found his a thousand years before, the girl Romulus was meant for was just now discovering the extent of her true heritage. Were Ruby to be given time to develop the bond with Romulus and to explore her powers with the guidance of her witch of a mate, she would no doubt pose a legitimate threat to Belmordan that could not afford to be ignored. But the girl was still ignorant of her potential, and not only because she was simply uninformed but because she also didn’t want to see the truth.

Ruby had been scared when he first told her she possessed more power than she was aware of, and he knew that fear hearkened back to how she’d found out she was a werewolf in the first place. Killing her lover in such a traumatizing way had set her back years in her progress and set up an obstacle to growth that only recently was fully removed. How that happened, Belmordan was not completely certain, but he was certain that for a long time she’d harbored deep anxieties, both subconscious and conscious, about her wolf form. Because fear was the primary impediment to the development of magicians and werewolves alike, Ruby’s apprehension was a hindrance that was only amplified by her potential to become the preeminent female exemplar of both.

A decade could pass, then, without danger arising of her growing powerful enough to face him.
Even a century of dedicated study would not suffice to equal his unparalleled proficiency in the arts of shapeshifting and the casting of dangerously complex spells. As disparate in power levels as they were, that she’d escaped at all was because he underestimated her companions – a mistake he would not make a second time. No, the next time he would leave nothing to chance. While he dealt with the girl, the hordes of men enslaved to his will would crush the Savior and the Evil Queen and all their heroic but ultimately insignificant friends. Artemis would be freed at last, and with her aid the Titans could be released. And then the conquest of Olympus could begin.

As he sang Remus a song of healing and recovery, the smile never left Belmordan’s face.
At Belle's unanticipated news of the portal opening, Regina was so possessed by the urge to get to the Wishing Well that she didn't even bother disguising her use of magic while in public. She was not unaware of the continued suspicion where magic was concerned, her dark brand in particular, and normally would have foregone such displays considering the increasing crowd both inside the diner and out about town on an unseasonably comfortable afternoon. But with Ruby back home, she had neither the time nor the inclination to entertain a need for subtlety. Let the people think what they must.

The second she stepped out of the diner, she snapped her fingers, calling upon her magic to teleport herself away. As familiar purple smoke engulfed her, she made a mental note to return for her vehicle. Her love for the elegant and expensive Mercedes did not trump her pressing desire to be reunited with her wife.

Arriving a few paces from the Wishing Well itself, Regina turned toward the ancient tree that served as a sprawling, deciduous sentinel over the area. About ten feet away she spotted the open portal still swirling a sickly green. She made her way over to within a stones throw of it, not wanting to get too close lest the two-way vortex suck her in. Frame tense, she watched the glowing green disc closely for any signs of activity from the other side.

When nothing happened for an unusual stretch, Regina began to grow nervous. Biting at her lip and kneading her hands together, she began pacing to stave off anxiety – an uncomfortable activity in the best conditions while wearing four inch heels. Ignoring the discomfort the uneven ground around the well caused to her feet, she stared at the portal with pleading intensity, trying to will something – anything – to happen. She wished with as much fervor as she could muster for Ruby to come bounding through with Emma in tow, a smile of success on both of their faces as they returned in triumphed. Even them tumbling through disheveled and exhausted would have been welcome as desperate as she was to see Ruby again. Still nothing happened.
But just when her hope began to waver, the portal at last began to arc with activity. Regina gasped, ready to spring into action should either Ruby or Emma need assistance. To her astonishment, when someone did come through a moment later, it was not her wife or her son’s other mother, but a young, Hispanic woman in her late 20’s. After tumbling to the ground roughly, the woman raised up to her knees and then peered around in open wonder. It was obvious to Regina that it was the woman’s first trip through a trans-dimensional portal from the way she had landed so ungracefully and her face then lit up upon realizing where she was as if she had experience the greatest miracle to ever occur. Simpleton.

Glaring at the stranger as if she were the one responsible for keeping Ruby away from home, Regina sneered, “Who the hell are you?”

“Oh!” The woman whirled around to face Regina, and her dark eyes widened at having finally noticed she wasn't alone. “I...oh,” she stammered. “I, um...”

Regina scoffed derisively. “Oh for heaven's sake, spit it out already.” When the interloper continued to fumble for a response, Regina began tapping her foot impatiently. A sable brow arched in expectation. “Well? I haven't got all day.”

Nearly trembling, the young woman stood and began wringing her hands in front of her. Her face had grown a touch pale in between acknowledging Regina’s presence and being chastised for her nervous fumbling. It was evident she was frightened now, which suited Regina just fine when it was supposed to be Ruby coming through that portal instead of a stranger she didn’t know from Eve. The unpleasant development had soured Regina's mood, and the newcomer was the unfortunate soul who got to reap the harvest of her displeasure.

“M-My name is Esperanza...your Majesty,” was the girl's disjointed reply. Now that she had spoken more than single syllable utterances, her exotic accent shone through, reminding Regina of her father's native land.

Regina bit back a smile, abnormally pleased at both being referred to by her late honorific and that she could still intimidate with the best of them.

“Well, Esperanza,” she said, pointing toward the portal, “I am here because someone very important to me was supposed to be returning through that very portal right there after being missing for over three weeks. So, imagine my disappointment when you came through instead.” Crossing her arms, Regina's eyes narrowed dangerously. Her magic danced at her fingertips, tickling the skin and aching for the opportunity to be unleashed. “Now, for your sake I won't jump to conclusions just yet, but your explanation for this disturbing development needs to be satisfactory. Or else.”
Gulping audibly, the woman nodded her head. Her eyes were still reminiscent of a frightened doe caught inescapably between a car’s unforgiving bumper and it’s own paralyzing shock. “You're waiting for Ruby, yes? And Emma?”

The unsubtle name dropping certainly arrested Regina's attention. She strode forward until she was in Esperanza's personal space, her nose nearly touching the other woman's. So close, she could finally appreciate how beautiful the woman was. This Esperanza had all the hallmarks of someone hailing from the kingdom of Regina's paternal grandfather, Xavier. Her raven hair was long and wavy about her shoulders, and her olive complexion – a shade darker than Regina’s – shone bronze under the unobstructed sun. There was no denying how enviably symmetrical her face was, characterized by a cleft chin, full lips, almond shaped eyes, high cheek bones, and a strong jawline that resembled people from the southern regions of the realm from which Regina’s own mother supposedly originated. Being so close to Esperanza afforded Regina proximity to another link to the land of her ancestors, and she had to admit her curiosity was piqued. As interested as she was in coaxing out Esperanza’s story, though, she had far more pressing concerns at present.

Tone demanding and eyes sharply narrowed, she asked, “How do you know Ruby and Emma?”

Clued in now to being under suspicion, Esperanza straightened into a much more confident posture as she huffed out her disapproval at what she clearly interpreted as a rude reception. Regina dismissed the girl’s offense as inconsequential, but was glad to at least see she had a backbone.

“I met them when they were journeying to the Dark Palace,” was Esperanza’s terse reply. “I have been with them on their quest three days now, helping them where I could. We journeyed many long miles together; we even fought side by side. I believe they came to trust me, and they certainly earned my trust. I will never forget their kindness to me in offering to bring me back to their home with them so that I could fulfill a quest of my own.”

Regina was confused by Ruby and Emma having extended such an invitation. “Why would they do such a thing? Ruby's task in the Enchanted Forest was a simple one. They would have had no need for the help of a stranger.”

“As your spouse came to find out, things are not so simple in Misthaven anymore. The lands surrounding the Dark Palace have greatly changed in the years since you last departed. I was their guide, but even had I not been, they would have helped me on my quest. Your beloved esposa understood my reasons.”

“That's an awfully bold declaration.” Regina paused to shift her weight from one leg to the other. “And how, exactly, do you know of my relation to Ruby?”
Esperanza nipped at her lip, eyes turning hopeful that her answer would warm Regina up. “She told me about you and showed me images of your family on her strange device.”

Regina quirked an eyebrow at Ruby having ferreted her cell phone into her pack knowing very well it would be useless for any practical purposes. She must have taken it for the pictures and videos, to be able to watch them during down time on the journey and feel a little closer to home. The sentimentality behind that one little detail did more to soften Regina than any earnest declarations from Esperanza ever could.

The beginnings of a smile turned up the corners of her lips. “She did, did she?”

“Si,” Esperanza nodded, smiling brightly. “As I said, she came to trust me and I her. Enough for her to share her happiness with me and for me to share my motivations with her. She also understood my desire to see my quest completed, which is why she invited me into their company.”

“I see,” Regina said, brows furrowing thoughtfully.

Ruby having felt comfortable enough with this woman discuss their family said something that Regina could not easily dismiss. Ruby was one of the most instinctual judges of character Regina knew. If she had so entrusted Esperanza with such delicate information, the woman couldn't be all bad. That said, Regina was not Ruby. While her wife was more open with her heart and her trust, Regina was not. She needed more information.

“If I may echo your boldness,” she then asked, “might I inquire as to what those motivations were?”

The inquiry prompted a strange response from Esperanza, whose eyes brimmed with an affection that had Regina fighting back the urge to reel away. Normally upon meeting her for the first time, people either gazed at her with lust over her beauty, neutrality over her unfamiliarity, or dread over her reputation. No one she had just met had ever looked at her that way before, and it was frankly disconcerting.

“To meet a long-lost member my family,” was Esperanza's vague answer, though she clarified it by with a loaded gaze that had the former Queen flummoxed.

It was clear to Regina what was being implied. But even though she thought the notion absurd that she could be related to this woman, as she searched Esperanza's face, the pieces of the puzzle, as it were, began to fall into place. The resemblance to her mother was subtle, but at the same time
“No...” Regina breathed out, stunned. The specter of her mother hung hauntingly over her shoulder, growing prominently large as she became more and more convinced that Esperanza was not simply some random stranger Ruby and Emma ran into on their trip. Disbelief fueled by logic warred in her head with the signals of acceptance coming from her heart. “I...It's just not possible.”

Esperanza gave her a patiently gentle smile. “But it is.”

Brushing her hand over her forehead, Regina struggled to make sense of the woman before her being an actual, living blood relative. But how? Regina knew of her father's family history only what he had told her, which was precious little seeing as how it so pained him to speak of the parents, brothers, nieces, and nephews he’d had to leave behind when his father banished Cora from the realm never to return on pain of death. As was obvious, she knew even less of her mother's.

All of her life, Cora had kept her origins purposefully mysterious due to loathing of her underprivileged background. The woman who would one day become the Queen of Hearts had been painfully strict concerning inquiries relating to her past, particularly where it concerned her own parents. What few scraps of information Regina managed to gather merely indicated that Cora was born somewhere in the south of in Xavier's kingdom. Regina had no clue as to the name of the village from whence her mother hailed, and she didn’t even know the names of her maternal grandparents. All she knew was told by her mother was that she had grown up a poor daughter of a miller, and to Cora, that was too much already.

Being a naturally curious person who valued her roots, it bothered Regina that she didn't know where she came from on her mother's side. But she had long since learned to live with her ignorance at the painful end of a thick, quebracho ruler.

Just as Regina opened her mouth to press Esperanza for more details, she was interrupted by another spat of activity from the portal. Turning expectantly, her hopes rose just to be dashed yet again when Ruby failed to emerge from the swirling vortex for a second time. Emma also failed to appear, which had Regina increasingly frightened.

Her temporary fright was curtailed quickly by the pack of unnaturally huge wolves that dashed out of the portal. At their head was an enormous creature with deep gray fur. Regina assumed he was the alpha as all the other wolves looked to him for instruction. Once all the wolves were through the portal (there were nine altogether), the alpha fixed them with a stern glare that had them moving into a tight formation, poised and ready for anything. They did not appear hostile but they were certainly wary of their new surroundings. Regina held her breath, not wanting to show any reaction at all in fear of setting them off.
After the wolves assembled in line, the alpha started to approach, coming to within a foot of her before it stopped to sit down upon its haunches. It then lowered its head once before meeting her eyes.

“Greetings, your Majesty,” it said as if it knew her personally, “my name is Julius. We are here at the behest of our Prime Alpha and the Great One, who we understand to be your mate.”

Regina gawked like a teenager, stunned by the astonishing turn of events. It had been surprising enough see the wolves come through the portal in the first place, but to hear a wolf speaking to her as if a human being had rendered her mute. But then her memory sparked, and she recalled a memory lost in the shuffle of a life misspent in the pursuit of revenge. This was not the first time she had encountered such a creature. The Dire Wolves! How could she have forgotten?

“Where is Romulus?” she inquired, wondering where the Prime Alpha was. More than that, she wondered about Ruby, as the lead Dire had obviously met her, thus the presence of his pack in Storybrooke. Regina was also confused as to why Julius had referred to Ruby as ‘the Great One.’ “And where is my wife?”

“The Prime Alpha remained behind, as did the Great One and the Savior,” Julius explained, succinct and steady in his tone. Whereas Esperanza had been afraid of Regina, this creature maintained an unflappable veneer. His fearlessness would have been admirable had not he not just told her Ruby was not back home already because she chose to stay behind. Why, though? Something had to be wrong. Regina's throat constricted as panic set in. “Fear not,” Julius then spoke, having picked up on Regina's anxiety. “They should follow us through soon. There was an unexpected complication to contend with.”

“What kind of a complication?” Regina asked, worrying her lip as she began to pace again.

“Nothing that is not easily handled.” Julius’ lips spread into a wolfish grin that faded as quickly as it came on, only to be replaced by untold sorrow. “The Fallen Ones overtook our Sanctuary, though we know not how or why. With the Valley's defenses breached, we were forced to flee. A chosen few were selected to accompany the Prime Alpha on his sacred mission to protect the Great One. These are those you see before you now. However, a few packs of the Fallen chased us back to the portal.” The wolves behind him began to chatter in agreement.

Regina's pacing stopped abruptly. “What are these Fallen Ones? I don't recall ever learning of such creatures before.”
Julius nodded. “You wouldn’t have, your Majesty. They are a twisted mutation of our race who serve the Dark Sorcerer. They departed our world along with their master countless moons ago, though recently returned to wreak havoc upon all who oppose his demands of submission. Fierce and nearly indestructible to mortal weapons, many villages have fallen prey to their bloodthirst. Fear not, however, as they are no match to the Great One, and even less so when combined with the might our Prime Alpha and the Savior. A legion of those beasts could not overcome such strength.”

Though the reassurance somewhat relieved Regina, she remained on edge. Normal wolves were a formidable foe when working together in packs, not to mention wolves that were mutated and empowered by some villainous sorcerer she’d never even heard of.

“This Dark Sorcerer,” she asked, wondering if Julius knew more of the person's identity. “Who is he and why were his servants after you?”

“The Dark Sorcerer is a man of immense power,” Julius answered, his eyes grave, “the most powerful of all magicians to live save one. He has conquered many worlds. Ours was only the latest to fall prey to his machinations. Why he was specifically targeting our kind is up to speculation, and I have my theories though I dare not speak them. It is not my place. The Prime Alpha will be better able to elaborate to your satisfaction when he arrives.”

Sighing, Regina clenched her eyes shut and pinched her nose. It was just so painfully typical for her to be in need of answers with no one competent enough or with the proper authority to give them. Frustrated and worried beyond measure, she began to pace once more, her mind swirling with all that was happening, from Esperanza being related to her to Ruby and Emma’s delay to deal with supernatural wolves bent on their destruction. Couldn't things just work out simply and easily for once? Ruby was only supposed to have traveled to the Enchanted Forest to find a pack she could bring back home, not start a conflict with the latest in an exhaustively long line of villainous magicians bent on world domination. How the hell did this keep happening to them? Where they cursed or did fate simply hate them?

“I have seen Ruby and Emma in action, your Majesty,” Esperanza then said, full of confidence, interrupting Regina's internal lamentations. “We fought a small contingent of these creatures near the Dark Palace. As Julius well said, they posed no real threat to Ruby. She destroyed three of them in seconds with little effort. Even their leader could not harm her. She will return. I have faith.”

“Well, I pray you're right,” Regina said, wanting to believe against her own doubts born out of experience, but not quite able to. She’d been burned too many times in the past to risk that naive form of Snow-esque optimism Esperanza seemed to be channeling.

Needing some space, Regina turned from the many sets of eyes all observing her closely and walked away from her audience toward the large maple dominating the area surrounding the well. Sliding
down its bark, she lifted her knees up to her chest, not caring much that she had probably ruined her expensive slacks in the process when all she could think about was what was happening on the other side of that portal. Were Ruby and Emma fighting at that very moment, struggling to stay alive against a relentless wave of attackers? Were either of them wounded? Or worse, bleeding out upon foreign soil, never to see their families again?

Regina's eyes slid closed at the wretched thought. She couldn't give purchase to such morbidity, not when she knew for a fact that Ruby was still alive. She could afford such certainty because her heart was still beating – well, the half of it which resided in her own chest. Because she had given half of her heart to Ruby, if Ruby were to die, Regina would die with her. That was the price of such magic. It was also the reason Regina had chosen not to tell Ruby what she had done.

Regina knew her wife well enough so that she could comfortably predict Ruby's reaction to learning about their sharing of one heart. If Ruby were to ever discover the truth, or even worse, learn of the consequences of that choice, it would change her way of life forever. That reckless, wild, and free part of Ruby that Regina loved so much would disappear, smothered under a sense of responsibility and a self-sacrificial nature that drove Ruby to put others before herself. Laden with the knowledge her life was literally worth two, she would be unable to do her job properly for fear of taking risks that might endanger her life. After all, it was no longer merely Ruby's life on the line, but Regina's as well. Consciousness of the half of Regina's heart beating inside her chest would color her every decision from there on out, and like a beautiful flower deprived forever of the sun, Ruby would slowly wilt until all that was left was a shell of the woman Regina loved.

Regina refused to allow that to happen, so she chose instead to give Ruby an extremely watered down interpretation of events. To preserve her version of what went down in Joshua Woods' basement, she had sworn Snow, David, and Emma to absolute secrecy – seeing as they were the only witnesses other than herself and Joshua, and that monster wasn't likely to talk any time soon. Of course, being the Charmings they had initially protested the ‘creative truth’ Ruby would be fed, but eventually Emma came around to Regina's view of things and proceeded to convince her parents to tow the line. Snow had been especially unhappy on the basis of their old friendship, but Emma persisted, insisting as both Ruby's best friend and co-worker and as a sorceress herself, she was better position to grasp the ramifications of Ruby being made aware of her ‘heart condition’ than any save Regina.

There were still times when everyone in the know felt the weight of that decision, especially Emma since she and Ruby occasionally got into close calls at work from time to time. Sometimes when those kinds of things happened, Emma would show up at Regina's office, shaky, laden with guilt, and on the verge of tears. It wasn't difficult for Regina to sympathize with Emma's situation; she knew she had put the woman between a rock and a hard place. But what choice did she have? Ruby could never know that the heart she'd been born with was destroyed and what was currently beating in her chest was a gift from Regina to seal her eternal devotion. That Emma understood the reasoning did not preclude her from struggling with harboring such an enormous secret from her best friend.

“I come here,” the Savior once said during one of her infrequent visits, “because sometimes I just
Regina still believed that. Ruby was free to live her life as she saw fit and that was all that mattered. The guilt of deception was a fair price to pay to preserve Ruby’s freedom of choice, to shield her from self-imposed obligation to safeguard the exceedingly precious organ beating inside her chest. And besides, it had come to be a source of comfort to her that Ruby was literally carrying around half of her heart wherever she went. The song Ruby wrote for her and performed often to thunderous applause at The Rabbit Hole had literally come true, for it made Regina feel like they were always together, even when hundreds or thousands or even millions or billions of miles separated them – such as was the case right now.

As comforting as it was that her being meant Ruby was also, Regina knew that could change in the blink of an eye. Life was, after all, so easily snuffed out. Watching Daniel’s heart be reduced to dust that slipped carelessly from her mother’s fingers had been her hard education on the matter of human fragility. She went on to reinforce that awareness by actively participating in the slaughter of countless innocents and personally ordering the deaths of even more. Experience had taught her that someone could be here one second and gone the next, leaving their loved ones bereft and confused and lost. And although her familiarity with the abrupt nature of death began with Daniel, the infinitely precious nature of life was never more devastatingly clear to her than the night she’d found Ruby dead in Joshua Wood’s basement.

The reality that Ruby could be taken away from her at any moment had fundamentally changed Regina, had forever altered her view on how best to conduct her life with regards to her loved ones. That night one of Snow’s more prevalent moral sermons finally registered – that it was more important to appreciate a person while they were alive than to do so through revenge after they were gone. It was a lesson she afterward put into practice by making a point to tell Ruby, “I love you,” every single day, to touch and hold Ruby whenever the opportunity presented itself, and to never miss a chance to outwardly express the inward truth that Ruby and her children were the most important things to her in all the world. And even though it was sometimes difficult, she tried her damnest to never go to bed with anger or hurt feelings between them. So while that day had objectively been the worst of Regina’s life, it was also one of the best, and not only because of what she gained in finding out she and Ruby were going to be parents. It had taught her to never take what they had together for granted.

Still, while that situation had worked out in the end, Regina was cognizant of her track record. Destiny had proven to be her enemy far too many times for her to rest all of her heart on faith, hope, and love. Though more convinced than ever of the power of those three intangible forces, she was still a realist at her core. As both a mayor and a woman prone to cynicism, Regina dealt in cold, hard facts. Facts were reliable; they were always there; they never left you or failed you. She supposed that was why she loved numbers so much. There was no faith in numbers, just intractable, immutable rationality.
But even as a realist Regina could appreciate the encouragements Esperanza and Julius were offering. Ruby truly was a force to be reckoned with in her wolf form. The wolf had grown so large in the past five years that even Regina would have cowered in fear to find herself on the wrong end of those piercing amber eyes, vice-like jaws, and razor-sharp teeth which appeared, as the fairy tale so aptly told, all the better to eat one with.

Wavering between her two opinions, hope on one hand and apprehension in the other, Regina rested her forehead on her the tops of her knees and retreated into her memories to ground herself. She didn't know much time passed as she luxuriated in the many priceless moments that highlighted her life with Ruby, such as how radiantly beautiful Ruby had been on their wedding day, or how she glowed with ethereal joy after giving birth to Amelia in spite of being exhausted and sweaty. A dozen such moments came to her remembrance and she savored each one, immersing herself in the sights, sounds, and smells that came along with each recollection.

Becoming so lost in her thoughts, Regina was unaware of the passage of time until she was being startled to her feet by a loud rumbling issuing forth from the portal. Horror stole her breath. It was about to close!

In desperation, she cried out with anguish and rushed toward the rapidly shrinking disk. But when all hope seemed lost, it yawned one last time, and just before it slammed closed, three figures emerged in turn. The first was a huge Dire Wolf with jet black fur, whom Regina instantly recognized to be Romulus, the Prime Alpha of the Dire Wolves. Once he was through, there was a slight pause and the portal gave out a prolonged groan. Her heart in her throat, Regina watched Emma Swan emerge next, her face strained and betraying fear as she carried an alarmingly limp Ruby through with her. After stepping all the way through the portal, Emma collapsed to the ground in exhaustion, first landing on her knees and then shifting back on her rear to sit, still cradling Ruby protectively in her arms.

Another strangled cry tore free from Regina’s throat as she scrambled over to Emma and flopped down roughly onto her knees. She could feel the material of her designer slacks tear at violence of the impact, but disregarded what would ordinarily be a cause for anger. Brushing her hands over Ruby's matted hair, Regina took stock of her wife from head to toe. Completely still save for the labored rise and fall of her chest, Ruby’s head was resting against Emma's chest while her arms and legs hung limply toward the ground. There was blood smeared all over her face which even now dripped from her nose and mouth and from a large gash above her brow. Every time she breathed, her chest made an awfully wet rasping noise.

“What the hell happened?” Regina demanded, frightened so badly she her hands quaked uncontrollably. She glanced up at Emma to find the Savior gazing down worriedly at Ruby as if searching her face for signs of life. The look exacerbated Regina's own anxiety.
“There was a fight,” Emma explained after turning her eyes up. She was breathing heavily from her exertions. “Bad one. Lots of them. Killed them all but Belmordan showed up. Caught us off guard. I'll tell you...later. Just get us...to the hospital. Please!”

Emma was right, Regina realized. With Ruby in such a state, there was no time to be discussing what had happened. *Act first, talk later,* she told herself. After giving Emma a sharp nod, she stood and faced Romulus and Esperanza, who were standing nearby, concern over Ruby’s state painfully evident.

“We're taking her to the hospital to be treated,” she told them, looking first to the Dire Wolf whom she had previous acquaintance. “Romulus, you and your pack may have the run of the forests here. Make your way to the wolf den to assess things there if you wish. I'm assuming Ruby told you why she sought you out?”

“She did,” Romulus confirmed, his voice as deep and rich as she remembered it. “We shall do just that, your Majesty, though I ask that you grant me a boon and inform me of Ruby's status as soon as possible? I would greatly appreciate that. Even though her welfare is my sacred concern, I have come to care for her very deeply on a personal level, so it pains me to see her wounded in such a way. She is a very special person.”

“Yes, she is,” Regina replied, managing a tight smile although her voice was choked with emotion. “And I would be glad to apprise you of Ruby's condition as soon as I’m able.” After a simple incline of his head to Regina, Romulus gave Ruby one last meaningful gaze before turning to the forest with a commanding bark. His pack followed after him, yipping and barking as they went. “As for you,” Regina turned to Esperanza, “you may accompany us if you so desire. But tell me now if that is your wish. I'll waste no more time.”

Stepping closer to Emma, Esperanza laid her hand on the Savior's shoulder. Emma looked up at her with open affection and gratitude, which only served to confirm the woman's earlier assertions of her trustworthiness. Emma was not a person to surrender her trust easily and was far more discerning in that department than Ruby, whose tender heart often overrode her rational sense.

“I will accompany you,” was Esperanza's succinct reply.

Nodding, Regina placed her hand on Emma's other shoulder and waved her hand, summoning her magic to transport them as she pictured the hospital in her mind. In the blink of an eye, they were inside the lobby being greeted by the gawking stares of a small group of surprised nurses and doctors, which fortuitously included one Victor Whale.
Upon seeing Ruby, his eyes grew large with concern. “What the fu...” the incoming curse tailed off at sight of Esperanza, causing Victor to quickly amend his word choice, “…dge happened?” A sculpted, sable brow rose up at the near flub, causing Victor to turn a peculiar shade of crimson Regina had never seen him wear before. Could Frankenstein be smitten by the new girl? *Interesting.*

“Stuff,” Emma replied tersely, struggling to hold onto Ruby due to her exhaustion. “Just help her!”

“Of course, of course,” Victor said. Turning around, her waved to a nurse and called for a gurney. Two of them responded, quickly collecting one and returning in short order. After lowering it, they instructed Emma to carefully deposit Ruby on the mobile platform, which she did along with their help. Once they had Ruby all strapped in, they raised the gurney and prepared to wheel her away.

Not willing to be separated again after so long apart, Regina instinctively reached for Ruby, only for Victor to step in front of her with a placating smile on his face.

“Don't worry, she'll be okay,” he said, calm and confident in tone. “I got this.”

Though Victor had never been subtle about his opinion of himself or his skills, Regina had learned to appreciate both. He had, after all, saved her life that day so long ago. And the delicate care he gave to Ruby after her admittance later on showed a side of him she didn’t know existed. Apparently Victor Frankenstein did in fact have a warm heart beating underneath that cold, calculating, man-of-science facade. Who would have that? Then again, the same could have been said of her once upon a time…

That said, her trust only went so far. Regina had not forgotten what Victor did to Daniel.

“She better be,” Regina warned him, careful not to sound too threatening in recognition of their longstanding detente.

“You know Ruby,” Victory replied, a crooked grin on his face. “She heals fast. She'll be back to her old self in no time.” And with that, he turned his attention to the nurses on either side of the gurney. “Wheel her on into the ER. I'm right behind you.” They obeyed the doctor without question.

When Victor started to follow the nurses down the hall, Regina grabbed at the sleeve near his elbow, tugging him back around. “Stay with her, please,” she implored, kind of hating how needy she sounded. “Don't leave her for a second until she's stable and I can be by her side.”
Victor laid his hand over Regina’s, patting it affectionately. “I won’t. I'll take care of her. I promise. I care about her, too, you know.”

Tears bit at Regina's eyes that she tried her damnedest to hold back. “I know you do. You've been a good friend. Thank you for that.”

Never in a million years did Regina think she would be thanking Victor Frankenstein, the very same man who had once played a pivotal role in the Rumplestiltskin’s sinister production of the Evil Queen. Come to think of it, she was technically Victor’s second monstrous creation, and yet here she was bestowing gratitude upon someone she’d once held in contempt exceedingly only by that she held for Snow White. What’s worse, she was entrusting him with the life of her True Love. It was almost a cruel throwback to when she so naively sought him out to revive Daniel. She'd got burned back then for her trust and rewarded him with three decades of thankless servitude as Storybrooke’s only resident surgeon.

But if there was one thing Regina knew about Victor, it’s that the man was a consummate survivor who would not repeat his mistakes. That, and he loved Ruby like a sister. For that reason alone, she knew he would give his very best, that that was enough.

Victor gave her a grin. “What can I say? She’s easy to love.”

Regina returned his grin with a more muted smile. “That she is.”

With a respectful tilt of the head, Victor then squared his shoulders, professional demeanor firmly back in place. “Well, then. I'll come get you as soon as you can see her, okay?”

“Alright.”

With that, Victor strode away, purpose behind his steps, and disappeared down the hallway. Left to the maddening monotony of the waiting game, Regina needed something to take her mind off of her wife’s battered body, so she focused in on Emma, who was still sitting in the floor with her arms in her lap as if she was physically unable to lift them. Otherwise healthy, the Savior appeared worryingly devoid of energy.

Clearing her throat purposefully, Regina caught Esperanza's attention and then gestured toward Emma with her chin. “Help me get her up?”
Nodding, Esperanza moved with Regina to stand beside Emma. Bending down together, they lifted Emma up by her arms and guided the uncommonly pliant woman through the lobby into an empty waiting room. What little help Emma could supply came in the form of movements staggered as if she was drunk, which would have been comical had it not been an indicator of acute magical drain. It took quite an effort, but they eventually maneuvered Emma into the waiting room and then deposited her into the nearest chair without anyone getting injured. It was a minor victory, but one Regina was willing to take in the hopes it was only one of many to come.

Once Emma was settled in, Regina sat next to her, angling her body so that her knees were diagonal in the chair. Now facing Emma, she tipped the Savior's chin with her finger. Sluggishly, Emma met her gaze, and Regina took the opportunity to study her eyes so that she could determine whether the stubborn woman was hiding any injuries from her. Emma was notorious about refusing to admit when she needed help, especially when she was physically hurting.

Per Emma's own confession, she'd not had many adults interested enough to fuss over her when she fell or bumped her head or got sick as a child. A few, she had told Regina, had actually scolded her for daring to catch a cold or scrape her knee roughhousing with the other kids in the group home. This meant she had learned to internalize her weakness lest it be something else for which she could be deemed unadoptable, and it also meant she was adept at schooling her facial muscles when practicing deception. Part of Emma's superpower in detecting falsehoods was derived from her intimate familiarity with convincing lies that fooled adults who should have been able to see through them considering her age. It was all very sad, and for obvious reasons Emma preferred not to even think about her past, but that deep-seated inclination of Emma's to conceal her pain served as a reason for Regina's actions.

Much like the Savior, Regina was very adept at detecting untruths. It was just one ability that made her such an effective monarch. Peasants and nobles alike learned very quickly not to approach her with yarns, however clever, meant to procure her favor unjustly. And with so much experience reading Emma under her belt, she had become an old hat at it. Those green eyes could hide many things from many people, but not from Regina's discerning gaze.

Seeing nothing to indicate Emma was concealing something, she adopted the direct approach. “Are you hurt?” she asked, still searching Emma's eyes. “And don't lie to me. You know I can tell.”

Emma blinked a few times as the question rattled around in her head. She was still looking a bit hazy to Regina, dazed almost as if she'd been concussed. Whether it was from her ordeal in the Enchanted Forest or being in a hospital again with Ruby, Regina could not tell. She couldn't begrudge Emma for zoning out, though, when she was tempted to do the same herself.

When the inquiry finally registered with Emma a few moments later, she shook her head in the negative. “I'm okay. Just a few scratches.”
Again seeing no dishonesty or deflection, Regina's brows furrowed. “Are you sure? Because you seem like you have no strength left.”

“Yeah,” Emma sighed. “I had to use my magic back there. Like, a lot. Me and the big wolf got caught up in a spell that trapped us so we couldn't move.” Her eyes grew intense as she recalled the events in question. “It was so freaking strong, Regina. Like nothing I've ever experienced. It took everything I had to break it and get to Ruby before he killed her.”

“What?!” Regina barked, not at all happy about learning of Ruby's near death experience in such blunt, offhanded terms.

“Damn, sorry,” Emma said, clearly abashed at her faux pas. “Probably should have segued into that a bit better, huh?”

“Your talent for understatement is prodigious,” Regina huffed, still somewhat indignant. “Explain.”

After Emma did so in detail, Regina sat back heavily into her chair. Her earlier concern was now ratcheted up to exponential levels. This Belmordan fellow was clearly very powerful to have bound Emma and Romulus with such strong bonds. Both were creatures of innate magic, whose binding required an expenditure of power an order of magnitude greater than for normal creatures or people. Magic did not like to be constrained, in whatever form it took, which is what made the Dark One's dagger so potent and dangerous. The malevolent magicks it contained harbored unfathomable animosity toward the confinement of their bladed prison and rebelled against it in every way possible, one of which was to make the wielder as miserable in darkness as they were.

Regina's eyes narrowed as something occurred to her. “The way you speak of this sorcerer, I get the feeling that was not your first encounter with him.”

“You'd be right,” Emma replied, scratching the top of her head as she squinted against the light. The look on her face told Regina that she was about to come down with a raging migraine. If the wait was long, she would soon need to force Emma to eat and drink something soothing to the stomach or vomiting could be expected. “We ran into him at your castle, too.”

Regina could not have expected that. The Dark Palace was not exactly an inviting abode for a traveler from afar. “My castle, you say? Was he occupying it?”
“Yep.”

“Why?”

Emma cocked her head, eyes bleary. That she was not slurring her words was a good sign. “Beats me. He didn’t say and we didn't ask. We just got roped into spending a night there and by the time morning came, all we wanted was to get the hell out of there. He is one creepy-ass dude.”

Regina frowned, ignoring Emma's ineloquent description. “How so?”

“He seemed to have an unhealthy fixation on Ruby,” Esperanza then spoke from the seat next to Emma, who nodded her agreement. Regina glanced at the newcomer who she had honestly forgotten was present. “It may have been since he was a werewolf. In fact, he proclaimed himself to be the first of them and that Ruby was the last of his descendants.”

“That can't be possible,” Regina said. She was no expert on the history of werewolves but knew enough that such an assertion was absurd. The werewolf race had existed for hundreds of years. “He would have to be centuries old.”

“Over a thousand according to him,” was Esperanza's reply. “Emma and I didn't really believe him either, but Ruby's reaction leant the impression she at least gave the idea some measure of credence. We didn't really get to discuss it further but it seemed to me like she was conflicted between revulsion at his attention to her and being drawn to him.”

“Yeah,” Emma affirmed, nodding her head. “She did seem weird around him, almost like her conscious mind wanted to get as far away as she could but her subconscious was resisting that. It might have just been the werewolf thing, though, like Esperanza said.”

“Perhaps,” Regina replied, frowning more deeply. The more she heard, the more uneasy she felt. “Did he say why he was so interested in her?”

“Not much beyond a few weird things. Like, for one, he said she was born to be a Queen,” Emma said, as if the suggestion were as far-fetched as the vacuum of space being hot. However, Regina winced internally. If only Emma knew how very close that was to being true. “Said he wanted to teach her how to be more. I don't think he was perving on her, but I could be wrong.”
“What is ‘perving’?” Esperanza asked in confusion, causing Emma to giggle under her breath childishly.

“It's a slang term meaning an unsavory sexual desire for someone who is not receptive or is ignorant of those affections.” Regina took a professorial tone yet sacrificed her austerity to roll her eyes at Emma's infantilism. Would the woman never grow up?

“Oh,” said Esperanza, gaping for a moment as she processed the meaning. Her face screwed up into a grimace after she came to terms with the colloquialism. “No,” she then stated, “he was not looking at her in such a way. Rather, I think he intended to use her for his own ends. He was just covering that desire up with pretty words. For what, I'm uncertain, though I do believe he thought her to possess some greater power that she was unaware of. I think his desire for her hinged on that power, to be honest.”

Sitting back once more, Regina chewed on the information. She had to admit, this Belmordan fellow was right about more than one thing. For instance, Ruby was not technically a queen, but by birthright she would be upon Spencer's death. But also, and more importantly, he seemed aware that Ruby possessed far more power than she was aware of.

This was not news to Regina, who could feel that latent power just beneath the surface in Ruby whenever she shifted. It hadn't always been that way, but ever since the 'incident' with Joshua Woods, Ruby's shifts were accompanied by increasingly large surges of magic. The first time Regina felt it, it was so stimulating that she was nearly brought to her knees in ecstasy, and the effect was only becoming increasingly intense with the passage of time. Now when Ruby shifted, the fabric of reality seemed to warp for a split second, caved in by the enormous gravity of the power she exerted upon the space around her lithe form.

While the impressive displays both intrigued and worried Regina more than she would ever admit, but never enough to investigate beyond a few clandestine searches for information amidst her old tomes held beneath the family mausoleum. Now that she had such great cause for concern, though, she wished she had done more, if only to have a more clear idea of what Belmordan was after.

“Wait a second,” Emma spoke up, startling Regina out of her own head. Her eyes were narrowed accusingly at Regina. “You know something, don't you? He's not just some lunatic, is he? Something is different about Ruby.”

Nodding, Regina bit her lip. It was best to just tell Emma because she was going to find out anyway, and besides, Emma was the only person Regina trusted outside of herself to look after Ruby. While not at versed in magical theory as Regina was herself, Emma was incredibly powerful and had vastly improved her control and manipulation of said power since those early days of stunted and accidental displays. If something were to go haywire with whatever innate magic was growing inside Ruby,
Regina was going to need Emma’s help to contain her.

Still, it made her uncomfortable that Esperanza was present, but Emma did not seem to mind at all.

“Yes,” she replied, eyeing the exotic looking woman somewhat warily before turning her attentions back to Emma, “but I’m unsure what that is exactly. Her shifting changed after...well, you know.” At that Emma averted her gaze, eyes laced with pain at the memory and a measure of guilt at having prompted Regina to mention it. “But I didn't think it anything to worry about, just like with how her wolf started to grow. If I'd known...”

“I know, I know,” Emma breathed, obviously realizing she had pushed Regina in a way she hadn't intended. “I'm sorry I brought it up. I guess I'm just at my wits end with the trip and Ruby getting hurt.”

Emma had told Regina that she didn't like thinking about that day, that she couldn’t imagine what it felt like to remember her True Love strung up like a piece of meat, beaten to a bloody pulp, and clinically dead. It did seem to bother her, though, that Regina hadn't trusted her enough to talk about this.

Sighing, Regina patted Emma's hand. “It's alright. We're all a little stressed out right now, but in the interest of changing subjects so we can calm down a bit, may I ask if anything at all went per plan on your trip?”

“Well, one thing did,” Emma replied, sporting a wry grin and looking more like herself than at any time since returning through the portal. “We made it back alive in one piece. Home at last at least.”

Regina heaved a dramatic sigh. It was going to be a long wait.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know if there are any screw ups grammatically or otherwise. I'll be honest, the story seems underwhelming in terms of reception, so I sort of mailed the editing in.
Chapter Summary

Regina and Ruby get a brief reprieve from the madness of their lives.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 25 - The Calm Before The Storm

An inferno licking up the right side of her torso wrenched Ruby from the greedy grip of unconsciousness. A scream clawed it's way through her chest, though groggy as she was it came out more of a pathetic whimper reminiscent of a kicked puppy. Some Big Bad Wolf you are, she thought, in a daze of agony cruising atop a yucky feeling of stickiness that proceeds sleeping in for way too long.

An image popped into her mind then, of gleaming eyes fixed malevolently upon her, provoking an irrational compulsion to launch upright to brace for an attack that would never come. A spike of adrenaline accompanying that panic supplied enough energy to struggle against the various wires attached to her hands and chest. Heart racing, she pried her eyes open only to find that her surroundings were too hazy to make out any detail beyond stark whiteness. She clenched them shut again as fear and confusion trampled through her muddled gray matter. Was she still in the Enchanted Forest? If so, where was Emma? Was she even still alive or had Belmordan killed her and she was just emerging from some metaphysical transition into a purgatory where nothing at all made sense save for the pain wickedly lashing at her side. That she understood perfectly. Physical pain was her old friend.

"Lay still, sweetheart. You're safe now," a husky feminine voice said with some anxiety from Ruby's left. The gentle reassurance did little to assuage Ruby's half-delirious thrashing and moaning. "Stop fighting, Ruby. You'll hurt yourself."

A warm hand then pressed to Ruby's forehead and began to soothe away the sweat-dampened hair that was matted upon it. The touch was so soft and so intimately familiar that she immediately relaxed. As if mystical in nature, the tender contact was instilling her with a serenity that assuaged her frantic nerves. She went still as she rested back against the bed. Her ribs were still aflame, though, and she trembled from the agony as she bit down on her lip so hard that she tasted blood.

"Shh, hold on, my darling," the voice cooed.

Though the anxiousness Ruby heard only seconds before was gone, it had been replaced by a deep hurt that pricked at Ruby's conscience. Somehow she was able to instinctually understand that she was the cause of it, and she didn't appreciate how it made her feel one bit. She was supposed to make that voice sound happier, not more muted with sadness than it was some of the time, which was already too often for Ruby's liking.

Immediately thereafter Ruby heard the click of a button. Sweet relief flooded her system within seconds, drowning out the vague guilt building. She dimly realized she'd been given a dose of morphine, a boon with more than one implication. Thank God for modern medicine, she thought as
painless euphoria set in. And that I'm finally back home.

Now able to tolerate awareness, she chanced cracking her eyes open again. Blinking against the bright, unforgiving fluorescent lighting, her vision began to clear. As she had suspected, she was in the hospital back in Storybrooke. An unfortunately familiar setting.

"Hey, you."

At the greeting, Ruby rolled her stiff neck to the left and smiled at the sight of her wife. Regina was hovering as close to the bed as possible while still gently stroking Ruby's forehead. Weak as the smile was, it unmistakably originated within the depths of her heart. Just seeing Regina's beautiful face made Ruby feel a thousand times better.

"Hi, baby," she said with a sluggish drawl. She winced at the soreness of her throat, which felt more like sandpaper than moist, fleshy tissue.

Regina was unsurprisingly prepared for the occasion, and hastily retrieved a cup of ice chips from the tray table at the foot of the bed. After plucking a piece out with her fingers, she lifted it to Ruby's lips.

"Suck on it slowly."

Ruby nodded gingerly as she opened her mouth to accept the offering. She bit back a dirty joke, not quite feeling up to her cheeky self. That, and she didn't think Regina would appreciate the poor attempt at levity after she'd gone and scared her half to death. In all likelihood, Ruby was about to get a dressing down for the ages, which she was most certainly not looking forward to even if she'd earned it and then some.

The ice melting in her mouth relieved the scratchiness, so she accepted another three chips without argument. Once she was able to talk more freely, though, she broached the topic that was sure to lead to her chastisement. In her estimation, having been through a similar scenario once before, it was best to rip the band-aid off lest Regina stew too long on her having been injured. That, and she suddenly remembered a halo of blonde hair hovering over her just before she passed out and was beset by an irrepressible urge to inquire as to how her best friend fared.

"Emma?" she asked worriedly. Last she saw, Emma was unhurt, but the display of magical prowess she'd put on to break free of Belmordan's bonds and rescue Ruby had to have sapped her strength.

"At home resting," Regina said soothingly. "She's perfectly fine, although she nearly did herself in getting you home. She quite literally carried you through the portal and then refused to leave your side until you were stable. I swear, the woman has lost all innate sense of self-preservation since embracing her destiny. I sent her home after she was allowed to see you once you were in a room. Hook told me this morning she slept for nearly twenty-four hours once she got there."

Ruby winced at the confirmation of what she'd already suspected. Not only had Emma saved her life, but she'd also lugged her sorry, unconscious ass back home having just dangerously expended her magical energy. Ruby knew how risky that was for a sorceress like Emma, whose magic was intrinsic to her essential being. Regina had complained to Ruby before about the Savior's penchant for reckless abuse of her powers, and that should Emma push herself too far, a garden variety of ghastly consequences might await her including but not limited to: chronic physical exhaustion, seizures, debilitating migraines, prolonged loss of consciousness, or even death. Apparently the severity of the associated malady was directly correlated to how near they came to totally emptying their reserves. That Emma slept for an entire day was evidence of how alarmingly close she'd been to the worst possible outcome.
Compounding guilt gnawed irritatingly at Ruby's stomach. Not only had she come far too close to losing her own life, but she'd nearly cost Emma hers as well, not only by dragging her best friend to another world on a quest she had no stake in, but also by being too weak to defeat Belmordan on her own. It had been Ruby's responsibility to clean up the mess she'd made, but Emma stepped in without any regard whatsoever for her own well being – ever and always the Savior willing to sacrifice herself for those she loved. As Regina so aptly surmised, Emma really had seemed to abandon her instinct for self-preservation in the pursuit of living up to her prestigious calling, and her recklessness only became more audacious when loved ones were in danger.

Feeling small and ashamed and humbly repentant, Ruby flitted uncertain eyes up to her wife, who was gazing back with none of the expected aggravation. "I'm sorry for that. I wish I'd been strong enough to protect her. As usual, I failed."

Regina's expression indicated how strongly she disagreed. "Nonsense. Emma doesn't blame you. Why do you insist on bearing responsibility for things out of your control?"

"It's not just that," Ruby said, "it's everything else, too." She squeezed her eyes shut as her chest tightened into a painfully tight knot. All the times she'd lamented her selfishness between Esperanza's humble cabin and the final fateful counter with Belmordan played through her mind, and she fisted her hands feebly into the sheets as the beeping of the heart monitor began to speed up in the background. The ramping electronic pulsation provided an ambient pace to her vaulting anxiety. "I shouldn't ever have left you and the kids just because I couldn't handle some animals dying. But I did. I walked away from my family to go on a stupid quest that nearly made you a widow, all because I'm pathetic and stupid and needy. There has to be something wrong with me. Right? I mean, I keep on making these gigantic mistakes that leave me a broken, bloody mess you keep having to put back together. It's not fair to you, or the kids, or Emma, or anyone else, and I just...I just hate it! I hate myself. You'd be so much better off if Joshua had just finished the job."

Ruby felt Regina's movement at her side before two hands firmly grasped her face. "Hey! I don't ever want to hear you say that again. Not ever!" Ruby whimpered at the harshly barked command laced with palpable pain. That her words had hurt Regina made her hate herself even more, and she withered inward, shoulders drawing into her chest as self-loathing enslaved her rationality.

When will it finally happen, I wonder? The insidious voice inside her brain that said that often made appearances when Ruby was having a moment of weakness. Such as right now. She'd noticed it mostly came around when she'd done something to upset Regina, like the time around the anniversary of her being tortured to death that she'd not slept for more than half an hour over a span of six days due to acute nightmares.

They'd been eating lunch at the diner that day because both had needed a break from stressful office environments. Ruby had escaped from a clown fiesta back at the station. A gaggle of newly arrived munchkins from Oz had picked a fight with Storybrooke's resident drunkard dwarfs over disparaging comments about their height, resulting in both groups being arrested. Ruby hauled one group away in her cruiser as Emma dealt with the other using magic. On the way to the car, Ruby had been kicked in the shins so much they were mottled purple and black for two days after, and during the ride the dwarfs yapped so much her pulsing migraine loosed the reigns on the wolf. When she'd had enough, she actually bared her fangs at them in the mirror as her eyes flashed gold. That shut them up right quick. Or it did until they got back to the station where Leroy – the vertically challenged bastard – immediately picked up where he'd left off with the munchkins Emma was processing, leading to another epic row. Even after both were isolated in cells, the verbal assaults continued unabated. The cacophony of their screeching and screaming was maddening, especially since Ruby hadn't slept a wink the night before.
Meanwhile as they ate, Regina was relating some story about being fed up with one of the council members roadblocking a proposal that Ruby doesn’t really remember anything about because she’d been drifting off with a half-eaten fry smooshed between her fingers.

“Oh, for God's sake, Ruby," Regina had said with an exasperated sigh upon noticing Ruby's head slumping toward her plate and the smattering of ketchup that was waiting to plaster her face. Ruby shot alert, blinking rapidly to clear the sudden bout of drowsiness, only to find Regina staring her down with unconcealed disapproval. It was, incidentally, the exact same expression her wife often wore when the kids were tap dancing all over her last nerve. "I wish you’d stop being so stubborn and just take the damn pills tonight so you can get some sleep. I’m sick of seeing you like this."

Ruby had a standing appointment with Archie since the whole Joshua incident which she still maintained. At the time, about four years out, she’d been going through a bit of an emotional relapse featuring self-induced insomnia for fear of sleeping. Every time she nodded off for more than twenty minutes, she was right back in that godforsaken basement being electrocuted or stabbed or whipped all over again. So to fend that off, she opted to guzzle unhealthy amounts of coffee and soda to keep herself awake. When that failed, she resorted to putting herself through a punishing workout in the little gym Regina had installed for them in the basement when it became obvious going to an actual gym wasn’t in the cards with two babies to care for who required near constant attention. But even her best efforts to stimulate her brain through lung-searing, muscle-burning exercise stopped being effective after a few days.

Regina, of course, was not silent during all of this. She’d pretty much rode Ruby's ass until Ruby caved to the constant, well-intentioned needling to talk to Archie about what was going on. He'd squeezed her in for an appointment that same day – the day before her public fight with Regina – and had been understandably disconcerted when she reluctantly confessed to having not slept much more than five hours over the course of six days. To rectify the problem with the nightmares, he gave her a prescription for a potent sleep aid designed for the worst insomniacs. Ruby, being her typical mulish self, refused to take them that first night. Of course, she had another nightmare; and of course, she didn’t take the pills so she could go back to sleep again because she was far too irrational at that point to do something so healthy and sensible.

Irritable, exhausted, and within a hair’s breadth of a breakdown, Regina’s comment in the diner was a poke that had the wolf baring her teeth for the second time that day.

"Is that so?" Ruby had said, tossing her mangled fry down. Her volume rose with each syllable as did the angry flush of her cheeks, and her notice of how increasingly uncomfortable Regina got at the attention she was drawing only spurred her on. "Well, let me tell you something. I’m sick of you constantly nagging at me! And I wish that you would stop being a totally controlling, judgmental bitch for just one day!"

She'd nearly shouted the last bit, red-faced with a fury beyond her comprehension just as much as it was out of her control. To her horror, Regina reeled back as if slapped, then went dead still. Her rapidly paling visage turned cold as ice as the lunch crowd all gawked shamelessly at them. Most of the attention was directed at Regina, to be honest. Which is why Ruby realized in mute dismay that Regina was making associations to how people had once looked at her, and that she’d felt as if all eyes were on her rather than on Ruby who had been doing the shouting because they assumed she was to blame for the blowup. Wounded more deeply than Ruby was prepared to realize, Regina had retreated into her old standby persona, the unfeeling woman immune to having her feelings stomped upon by those closest to her because she never let anyone close enough to actually hurt her.

"If you really feel that way, I won’t offend you with my presence anymore," Regina had said, tone
devoid of emotion, which sent Ruby's heart plummeting straight into her boots. And then she wiped her mouth with all the grace and dignity of royalty, slid out of the booth, left payment for her portion of the meal on the table, and then strode out of the diner without so much as another glance in Ruby's direction.

When the bell over the door jingled in protest at Regina's thunderous exit, Ruby sat dumbly, wide-eyed and in disbelief over what had just happened. Some minutes passed as she played things out in her head over and over, and when it finally sank in how horribly wrong she'd been, how abysmally she'd just treated the most important person in her universe, she broke down in tears. Right there in rush hour traffic at the diner, she sobbed her heart out, uncaring about how people stared piteously in her direction when she'd possibly torpedoed her marriage.

Eventually Granny none-too-gently manhandled her out of the booth and then hauled her from the diner by the scruff of her neck. Once Ruby was stuffed into her Camaro a little too roughly to be accidental, Granny proceeded to drive towards Mifflin Street instead of back to the station where Ruby had asked to be taken.

"Nuh uh," Granny had said as Ruby sat hunched over in the passenger seat protesting being treated like a child. "I don't wanna hear any lip from you right now. You've said quite enough already, I think. So shut your trap and listen to an old woman who's been where you are right now." Ruby did just that, heeding the warning in her grandmother's sharp blue eyes with a fearful nod. "Good girl. Here's what's gonna happen. I'm gonna take you home where you can decide how you're gonna apologize to Regina. And don't half-ass it, either. If you do, I'll find out, and believe you me, you'll be wishing for the days I made you go out and pick the switch I striped your legs with. Whatever it takes to make things right, you'll do it. Apologize profusely. Do the damn laundry every single night. Hell, if you have to grovel on your hands and knees in the middle of Town Square, do that, and damn your pride. That woman has been through enough with you for you to say stupid shit like that to her, and in public no less! She deserves better from you, girl. Hell, I raised you to be better."

The blunt assessment was just what the doctor order to cut through Ruby's self-pity. She choked back another sob as for the second time it hit her just how badly she'd hurt Regina.

"I mixed up really bad, Gran," she said around the thick lump of guilt in her throat. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't tell me that," Granny said. But then she reached over to pat Ruby's hand and offered her an encouraging smile. "Tell her, and just like that. Mean it. Prove it. She'll forgive you because she understands what you're going through. And she loves you. More than I ever thought she was capable of. If she didn't, she wouldn't put up with your crap. That's for damn sure."

Ruby couldn't argue with that logic, and in the end, she took Granny's advice. Completely abdicating her pride, she apologized to her wife on bended knee, cooked her dinner for a week, bought her that new clutch she'd been eyeing to match the little amber colored cocktail dress that made her olive skin particularly dazzling, and then went the extra distance by making extravagant baths each night using those expensive oils Regina loved along with a smattering of rose petals and then dutifully ensured her wife's wine glass stayed full as she lazily read the latest book that had caught her fancy. Ruby even went so far as to have flowers delivered to Regina's office every single day for a month, each day a different arrangement with a different meaning to symbolize her regret, her abiding love, and her promise to do better. And most importantly, Ruby started taking the damn pills so she could sleep again. Which she did. Which significantly improved her mood and helped restore her to the right frame of mind to mend the threatening tear in the fabric of her marriage.

Regina milked the attention for all it was worth, but Ruby didn't mind one bit. Not when she'd earned the penance. Granny was right. Regina deserved better from her, both then and now.
When is she finally going to wise up? the voice went on, accompanying the bitter shame of that memory. When will she realize she's better off with someone who deserves her? Ruby whimpered again at the melancholy chord that struck. Once again, she'd been the cause of Regina's pain.

"Look at me, Ruby." This time, Regina's voice was pleading, the edge gone. Ruby peeled her eyes open to find Regina gazing at her with so much love that her eyes welled up with tears. She reached up to grasp at her wife's arm, quivering with fear and wracked with irrational guilt. "You have to stop this right now," Regina then said, wiping at Ruby's tears with her thumb. "Stop blaming yourself. Stop blaming yourself. I'm not angry at you. And I'm not going to leave you. Ever. I love you more than my own life. And no matter what you may think in these low moments, I don't deserve better than you. I deserve you. Want to know why?" When Ruby nodded weakly, Regina ducked in lower to nuzzle their noses, then rested her forehead against Ruby's. Eyes locked, hearts thumping so loud Ruby could hear them both. "Because you make me happy. So, so happy. And you've been doing it for more than a decade now. Three weeks without you and another adventure at Storybrooke General is not going to change that."

A relieved sob tore through Ruby then, and she pulled Regina into a series of careful kisses. Between them, she whispered, "Thank you. Thank you so much! I love you!"

"And I love you, too," Regina said when they parted. And as she released Ruby to fetch a chair which she then pulled up parallel to the bedside, her smile was brighter than the piercing lights of the hospital room. "Now, then," she said once seated, hand right back in Ruby's. "I don't want you to think you're totally off the hook. At the moment, I just want you to focus on resting so you get better. You're healing faster than a normal person would, but you've still a long way to go. There will be time later for you to do penance over scaring the living hell out of me."

"Yeah. Rest sounds good," Ruby said, blushing at mention of the precise word she'd used to describe how she'd made up for her blunder to Regina years before. "Penance."

Penance was a sacramental rite performed for the sake of a deity to gain absolution for past transgressions. Well, from Ruby's perspective, she was a degenerate sinner and Regina was her stern yet merciful goddess. Which made the noun choice especially apropos. Her wife really did know her so well.

Unaware of Ruby's train of thought, Regina reclined against the backrest of her chair, crossed her legs, and then raised Ruby's hand up to her lips to place a kiss upon her knuckles before holding the hand against her chest. "I'm sure it does," she said. "That Belmordan fellow did quite a number on you."

The name sent a shiver of dread through Ruby. "You know about him?"

Regina hummed her acknowledgement. "Emma gave me the Cliff's Notes version waiting for you to get out of surgery. As did the young woman who tagged along back to Storybrooke with you two." 

Esperanza! Ruby thought with some mild panic. How could she have forgotten Esperanza? "You've met Esperanza?" Regina nodded. "Did she tell you who she is?"

Regina smiled gently. "She did. She came to visit you yesterday after getting settled in at the B&B room I arranged for her. We had a nice chat about our tangled family tree while we sat with you."

Ruby gasped at hearing at least a day had passed since she returned. It hadn't really registered when Regina told her Emma convalesced for over twenty-four hours. "Yesterday? How long have I been out?"

"Three days in a medically induced coma."
Ruby groaned, rubbing at her forehead with the back of her hand. "God. That long?"

As if remembering something unpalatable, Regina's face twisted into a grimace. "You were a mess, Ruby. Victor practically had to reassemble the right side of your rib cage it was so mangled. He told me it was like solving the world's most confusing jigsaw puzzle. It took him seven hours to fuse all of the bones back together. If not for you being a werewolf able to heal from virtually any non-silver inflicted wound, you would have died, or at least never healed right. As it is, he had to forego the normal post-op drug regimen to keep you sedated because you were in so much pain that it wasn't working. Loathe as I was to sign off, I agreed with Victor's assessment that putting you into a coma was the only practical option to keep you from undoing all of his hard work in a fit of agony."

That took the wind right out of Ruby's sails. Suddenly loosing so much time seemed a fair trade off for, you know...having a functional rib cage. "Oh. Well, I guess I understand. It's just...hard to wrap my head around missing more days when I've already missed so much already. Do the girls know I'm home?"

"I told them the day you arrived," Regina said, expression strangely reluctant. "But I've not let them visit you yet."

Ruby frowned deeply. Despite having no legitimate reason to, she felt deprived of access to her children. "Why not?"

Regina shifted uncomfortably. "I didn't want them to see you like that. You looked awful, Ruby. You're just now looking like yourself again."

"I've looked awful before."

"Yes, before they were born. And then I had help magically repairing the damage done to you. This time, no one was available for that sort of intensive endeavor. Emma is exhausted, Zelena has Frankie, I'm with the girls when I'm not here, and Rumple? Well, I was desperate last time because what happened to you was...I just couldn't live with leaving you that way. As bad as you looked after surgery this time, Emma insisted that expending too much energy healing you would be a mistake. I believe she's afraid the man you just escaped will come after you in the near future."

"She's right," Ruby said, voice turning scratchy all over again. She swallowed thickly, wincing a bit at the roughness of her throat and the turn of direction in their conversation. "He will. He won't stop for anything, either."

"Emma filled me in earlier, but I want to hear it from you now. Why this unnatural fixation on you?" Regina asked as she fetched Ruby another ice chip.

Ruby answered as she worked the cool object around her mouth. "According to him, he was the first werewolf. And I'm his last direct descendant."

Regina gazed at her carefully. "And you believe him?"

Ruby nodded. "I know it sounds crazy, but I do. At first I didn't, but the wolf seemed to immediately sense his connection to me, which convinced me pretty quickly."

"There's no chance she could be mistaken?"

"Have you ever known her to be?"

Regina sat back with a sigh. "No, I can't say I have. So, did he say anything else? Give you any other indication as to why he came after you so violently at the portal?"
Ruby would have shrugged had she not been scared of inciting her ribs to ignite again. She'd just now gotten them to stop incessantly burning. "I declined his offer to join him in some insane plan of conquest. I was gonna have to let him use me to free his mate from prison, and for some strange reason I just knew I couldn't do that. That she couldn't ever be let out."

"Who?"

"Artemis."

"The Greek goddess?"

"Mnhmm. She's the one who made Belmordan a werewolf. She's also purportedly my ancestress."

"My God," Regina said, somewhere between awestruck and disturbed. "Could the family tree get any more insane? Who else is waiting to jump out of the woodwork? Maybe I'll find out some day I'm related to Morgan Le Fey."

Ruby chuckled gingerly, a dark tint to her humor. "You never know. I mean, I still don't know who my father is. Imagine if he's some psychopath who terrorized children and kicked puppies for fun? Villainy seems to run in the family from what I can tell. Belmordan and Artemis. My mother."

When she mentioned her not knowing who her father was, the color drained out of Regina's face, which had Ruby wanting to press as to why. But something told her that was a topic best addressed at a later date when she more healthy and Regina was in a better headspace. It seemed at the moment like a potential minefield waiting to blow up in their faces, so she let it go aside from filing the information away for a later date.

After licking her lips and clearing her throat, some of the color came back to Regina's cheeks. "Sweetheart," she said with a warning carefulness that made Ruby's decision seem wise, "no matter who your father is, no matter who your great-great-great-to-infinity grandfather and grandmother are, it makes no difference. You are a good person." Ruby huffed her disagreement. "You are, Ruby. Ask anyone in town if you don't believe me."

Not normally one known for being saccharine, Ruby thought Regina sure had a way of showing herself to capable of heart-melting sweetness. Gazing lovingly at her amazing spouse, Ruby said, "All I need is for you to."

Regina gave her hand a squeeze as her expression softened. "You have that without question, darling. I love you unconditionally, which means I will always support you and I will always be on your side."

Ruby nibbled on her lip pensively before whispering, "Promise?"

"With all my heart." Regina placed another kiss upon Ruby's knuckles, this one more reverent than the last, before resting her chin upon their joined hands. "Now, why don't you try to get some more rest. I'll go fetch Victor to check up on you in a minute. And who knows? If you do well, maybe we can get you out of here in a few days."

Ruby grumbled in annoyance. "Tomorrow will work for me." Tired already of being abed, she could hardly imagine managing a few days cooped up in this offensively sanitized room with its awful smells and constant noise and untimely flow of visitors. If she was going to be in world's worth of pain for a while, she'd much prefer to endure it at home surrounded by the three precious people that made her life worth living no matter the circumstances.

Unsurprisingly, though, Regina voiced her doubts as to that timeline for Ruby's discharge. Ruby,
again being her stubborn self, set about to prove her wife wrong. Which she did. She was biting back
tears due to the pain, but she left the hospital on her own two legs only twenty-three hours later when
Victor pronounced her ribs healed enough for her to walk around. And while Regina wasn't too
happy with her decision to check herself out against medical advisement, all Ruby cared about was
getting home to her girls. She'd been far too long without them.

"MAMA!"

Two screaming children came thundering down the curved staircase into the foyer within moments
of Regina placing the keys in the door. She barely had time to help Ruby shuffle over the threshold
before their daughters were assaulting their recently absent mother.

"Careful," she said as the girls wrapped themselves around Ruby, one on each side with their arms
thrown round her waist squeezing for all they were worth. Concern for Ruby's injured ribs was
paramount in her mind, but she couldn't bring herself to tear the children away when Ruby was
beaming down at them, hands in their hair, tears of joy streaming down her face, and her eyes
sparkling with more lively energy than at any time since she'd woken from her medically induced
coma.

Regina felt her own tears pricking at her eyes at the sight. Still, as wonderful as their reunion was,
she had to prioritize Ruby's health over hugs, however heartfelt and wonderful they were. After
giving the embrace a bit more time, she squatted down on her haunches and pried the girls away.

"Come now," she said as they protested being separated from their mother. "Let Mama go." Though
glowering petulantly, the girls obeyed, as they always did for her. They had wisely learned long ago
that she was not to be tested when she issued a command. Ruby was the pushover parent who let
them get away with things she shouldn't, which got her in trouble a good deal, too.

That damnable pout forming, Ruby turned it on Regina as if wielding a lethal weapon. "Regina, it's
okay. They're fine."

She flashed her wife with a stern gaze as she stood back up. "Don't even start with me, Ruby." Ruby
ducked her head, suitably admonished. Regina then redirected her attention to the children, who
were pepperering her with whiny complaints. "Listen, there will be plenty of time for hugs when
Mama is all healed," she said. Both girls quirked their heads to the side in the canine way they
inherited from Ruby.

"But why? I wanna hug her now!" Sophia's lament had Regina smothering a grin.

"Because she was injured very badly," she said in her best motherly tone. "It might hurt her if you
hug her wrong. You don't want to hurt Mama, do you?"

Both girls heaved out a crestfallen, "No..."

"Well, then, you have to be careful not to jostle her ribs for a while."

Amelia perked up at the seriously stated instruction. "Oh! You don't have to worry about that,
Mommy. Me and Sophie can't do that yet."

"Can't do what, honey?" Ruby asked, eyes dancing with humor while Regina frowned, apparently
not in on the joke.

"We can't jostle like Uncle David does. He can do it with four tennis balls at the same time!"
Ruby barked out a laugh at the admittedly cute misinterpretation that was followed immediately by a
groan when her ribs protested the action.

Chuckling herself, Regina shook her head at her raven-haired child as she smoothed her hands down
the child's arms. "That's juggle, sweetheart. Jostle means no squeezing, or touching, or bumping into
Mama's ribs."

"Oh." Amelia shrugged as if the distinction meant nothing and then gave her a cheeky grin. "Okay,
Mommy. We'll just hug her legs then!" And without warning both kids sprang forward with squeals
of delight to wrap Ruby's legs up in an even more fervent embrace, all the while Ruby beamed
proudly at both their exuberance for her and their cleverness at skirting the stipulations.

Regina sighed against her own amused smile. Those three being so impossibly misbehaved was
going to make for a long few weeks, but she wouldn't trade their sometimes – okay, oftentimes –
frustrating antics for anything.

Sometimes she marveled at how lax she'd grown since the girls were born. There was a time in her
life she wouldn't have tolerated such disobedience from her children, nor would she have abided her
spouse to blatantly enable the unacceptable behavior. Henry could attest to that as he'd grown up
with that strict, overbearing disciplinarian who more resembled Cora's brand of draconian parenting
on a good day. Regina was still loathe to admit just how much she'd become like her mother.

She supposed she could assign some of the positive change to her own decision to redeem herself.
Initially, she'd done so entirely for the sake of her son, but in time she came to realize that she
actually wanted to be a better person for her own benefit. Destroying Snow and holding on to a
Curse that was never going to last forever had come frightfully close to entombing her perception of
the things that really mattered in life. Henry played a starring role in that reawakening, which is why
she'd gone to such lengths to reform her abrasive attitude and abysmal behavior. There had been a
number of hiccups along the way and she'd very nearly fallen headlong off the wagon a time or two,
but for the most part she has enjoyed varying degrees of success in her effort to transform herself
from an infamous villain into a respected heroine.

But not all of her newfound peace could be explained by that initial impetus to be a better person.
Some of it belonged to Ruby alone. Since that fateful day at Granny's when Ruby braved the
presence of a wounded animal who'd limped in to lick her wounds and had been as close to lashing
out in her grief as she was crumpling beneath it, a subtle shifting began that was still in progress to
the present. Quite without trying, Ruby put Regina back in touch with the girl she'd once been, the
one ready at a moment's notice to abandon all she knew and leave her life of privilege behind for the
love of a poor stable boy.

Perhaps it was Ruby's own parallels with Daniel that had inspired that nearly extinguished ember of
Regina's personality to reignite. There was, after all, no denying how many similarities the two
shared. For one, both were raised by a grandparent having been abandoned by their mothers. There
were two subtle differences in Daniel's case. For one, his father had died in the Seventh Great Ogre
War when he was only a baby still, and secondly he'd been reared by his grandfather rather than his
grandmother as Ruby was. But the principle of their upbringing remained otherwise strikingly lateral
in nature. Their upbringing were clearly defined by the selfless individual who had sacrificed so
much to provide a home, shelter, and an affection for them that went above and beyond the call of
familial duty. For that reason, both had maintained a respectful devotion toward their beloved
grandparent, Daniel until his death and Ruby to the present day.

They also bore physical resemblances that were undeniable. Both were fairly tall for their gender,
certainly enough that Regina had to crane her neck to kiss them. Which was just fine with her if only
because with both Ruby and Daniel, she felt safe enough to give up leverage and be put in a position of vulnerability with her lover. Height aside, they also shared a nearly identical shade of hair, which was the color of rich earth and was so delightful to the touch that she loved to bury her fingers their tresses and luxuriate in the way the silken strands felt against her skin. Additionally, both had light colored eyes, Ruby's green to Daniel's blue, that truly were the windows to their souls through which she could clearly observe a love for her that was so profound as to be frankly impossible for her to fathom. And, of course, both had beautiful smiles that had an ability, reserved to them, to pierce through Regina's tough outer shell straight into her heart where they created a delicious warmth that she would be content to bathe in should it be possible.

And then there was the fact that both were more comfortable surrounded by nature than confined within the four walls of a house, however grand the creature comforts said home offered. From what exposure Regina had to him, Daniel had lived on the saddle. He'd looked so uncomfortable in the scant few times she'd seen him in the house to discuss business with her father that when they grew closer, she always met him at the stables instead of calling him to her, often under the guise of desiring his advice during an impromptu practice dressage session with Rocinante. They'd spent many hours afield, just the two of them and their beloved steeds under the blue skies.

Ruby was not quite so keen on horses as Daniel, but she loved being outside every bit as much. The yard stayed pristine during the warm months, as did the garden, because Ruby was either mowing, trimming hedges, or plucking weeds of an afternoon. This grated at Regina's nerves at times because ordinarily that would have been her job, but she said nothing because she also felt a little bad about how much of a homebody she became when the weather took a turn around October, and often felt Ruby might be suffocating inside all afternoon and evening just so Regina didn't have to brave the harsh New England winters. Ruby seemed to actually enjoy the work, too, and seeing that was the case, Regina would just pitch in rather than chastise Ruby for taking on too much responsibility around the house. Not that she was complaining, per se, about her yard being the envy of Storybrooke. Beyond outdoor 'chores' Ruby could also be found simply meandering the woods for her own pleasure. On nights when Wolf's Time drew near, she would spend at least an hour each night communing with the segment of their environment nearest home that remained unsullied by human progress. Regina accompanied her quite often, especially when Henry was on break from school, and she found it hard to peel her eyes away from how at ease Ruby was amidst the towering pines and oaks that populated Storybrooke's dense forest. The grace with which Ruby navigated that rough terrain often took Regina's breath away, and served as a sobering reminder that her wife was no ordinary woman, but a creature of magic whose connection to nature ran far deeper than even that of even the most rugged outdoors enthusiast.

Being a gregarious person who had a vicious competitive streak, Ruby also participated in a variety of sports. Volleyball was one such activity she enjoyed, and she took every opportunity she could to rope a few of her friends down to the smooth stretch of sandy beach a few miles south of Storybrooke. She also adored soccer because of all the running involved, though she didn't get to play that much because her age group was so obsessed with the main Americana sports: baseball, basketball, and football. As a pseudo-compromise, Ruby started up and then organized an annual softball tournament every year. It took two years for it to really catch on, but the event had become a staple of summer in Storybrooke. In fact, quite a rivalry had developed up between the team fielded by local law enforcement chapters and the Storybrooke General hospital, mainly due to Ruby and Victor's on-the-field jawing. That, and Ruby's insufferable showboating every time she hit a home run.

There were yet more parallels, though, between Daniel and Ruby, such their deep affinity for animals. While drawing from divergent sources, that passion for wildlife drove them both to defend and care for creatures mostly dismissed as inconsequential or considered at best their property for their owners to abuse at their every whim. It Daniel's love of horses that made him such a gifted
groom and so skilled an equestrian. Likewise, it was Ruby's love of wolves that lead her to journey to another world in a desperate bid to save what few of the animals remained in the area.

Perhaps the most obvious link was the relative socioeconomic poverty they were born into, but that was something neither allowed to define them. To do compare them in that way would, Regina felt, be a slight against their characters that she simply couldn't stomach.

That said, Ruby was not Daniel, and had her own strengths that balanced out Regina's in ways Daniel probably never could have. Mainly her ability to comprehend the darkness Regina struggled with. Daniel was the definition of innocence, more so than even Snow White, and could never have sympathized with the urges Regina wrestled with on a daily basis even in her purest state. Ruby understood her on a fundamental level that no one ever had, and not only that, accepted her for who she was rather than who she wanted Regina to be. Free to be herself without oppressive expectations, Regina had flourished as a result of their relationship. The thorny stem of her healthy cynicism and combustible anger kept solemn vigil over the delicate petals of gaiety and kindness which were permitted to blossom under the nourishing sun of Ruby's love.

She was, in effect, as whole as she could possibly be, and that completeness afforded her a tolerance for silliness and obstinance that otherwise could not exist.

"Sorry, sorry!" Zelena sang, wrenching Regina's attention to watch the tall redhead belatedly rushed down the staircase after her responsibilities.

Regina had left her sister in charge of the girls as Zelena had the afternoon off due to being scheduled to work graveyard at the hospital where she doubled, strangely enough, as a nurse and a midwife. It took quite some time for Zelena to earn the townspeople's trust after her brief post-Pan reign of terror, but she'd been successfully plying the trades her own version of the Dark Curse supplied her with long enough that she was hardly ever greeted with the suspicion she'd once garnered from patients. Zelena was rather like Regina in that way, which served as a nice reminder to Regina that she and her sister had more things in common than not.

"They hurried off before I could even turn around," Zelena said once she was mingling with the small crowd in the foyer. "I couldn't leave Frankie alone without ensuring she wasn't about to tear down the Lego palace they spent the morning building. Cheeky little monkey, that one is."

Regina chuckled at the apt description. Francesca was a saucy little thing just like her mum, only her hair was more strawberry blonde than red and her tantrums were far more palatable...and cute. Regina adored her niece nearly as much as she did her own daughters, which is why she allowed them to spend so much time together. That, and she felt it was vital that their relational bond be strengthened as much as possible in their formative years. She didn't want the cousins to be as deprived of family as their mothers were, a sentiment with which Ruby agreed wholeheartedly.

"'Sup Greenie." Ruby greeted Zelena with an audacious grin that was returned in full.

Looking entirely pleased at the sight of Ruby back home where she belonged, Zelena trilled, "Well, hello there my favorite little pup! Caused such a ruckus they kicked you out already, have you?"

Ruby chuckled lightly. "You know me so well."

"Unfortunately so." Zelena giggled when Ruby slapped at her biceps. She then glanced at Regina, who gave her grateful smile, before sinking down to her haunches in front of her nieces. Much like Regina just had with Amelia, she ran her hands down their arms in a soothing gesture meant to encourage compliance. "My lovelies, I know you're both excited Mama's back home, but why don't you go help your cousin clean up for lunch while your Mums and I have a chat, eh?"
As to be expected, both girls protested the suggestion, so Regina did what she does best: play the villain. "Girls. Listen to your Aunt. Go help Frankie wash up for lunch or there will be no apple crisp for dessert."

That did the trick. Both Amelia and Sophia immediately snapped to attention at the mention of apple crisps, and then obeyed without another complaint at the suggestion they might be denied the delectable treat. She watched them scurry away with an indulgent smile. *Just like their mother,* she thought, *always lead about by their stomachs.* Regina had learned a long time ago that the old adage about the quickest route to a man's heart was just as true for Ruby.

"So, in all seriousness..." Zelena said once the girls had cleared the vicinity. Her expression took on a more grave note as she stared critically at Ruby. "You're looking well for a woman whose ribs were turned into pulp. Victor let me have a peek at the X-rays. You're lucky you weren't on two legs when you hit that tree."

Ruby ducked her head to stare at her shuffling feet, intent on avoiding Zelena's unyielding gaze for as long as possible. Regina didn't blame her, as it rather reminded her of their mother. She shivered at the effect as her arms pebbled with goosebumps.

"I know," Ruby said, looking apologetic when she glanced back up. "Your sister already read me the riot act on the way home."

"Good on you, Sis!" Zelena said, turning to offer a high five Regina, who smugly completed the gesture.

Ruby glowered at them both. "The disapproval of one Mills woman is bad enough. But two ganging up on me is just totally unfair! In fact, there ought to be a law against it."

"Is that right?" Zelena said, brow arched severely. "Well, you shouldn't have bloody well nearly got yourself killed, then."

Ruby grumbled out her reply. "It's not like I went out looking for some random madman to terrorize me because he thinks I'm family."

"Just the same, I'd appreciate if you were more careful in the future. I've grown rather fond of you, I'm afraid. And besides, I can't have you gallivanting about getting yourself killed when Regina just got you good and housebroken."

Regina laughed under her breath at how cross Ruby got at the canine comparison, and even more when that expression sharpened into mock betrayal at her own follow up. "Well, said, Sis. I've invested far too much time training her to have it all so imprudently wasted. She even fetches on command now. Don't you, dear?"

Eyes narrowed, Ruby let out an exasperated harrumph. "Wow! A dog joke about Ruby. How original! *Har har.* You are both so hilarious! I should sign the both of you up for comedy night at The Rabbit Hole."

"Now, now, let's not go too far," said Zelena, tittering with amusement. "I'm funny, but I dare say my sense of humor wouldn't be appreciated in such a classy establishment."

"True. Fart jokes don't really fly on the over-five-year-old crowd." Ruby's deadpan delivery was worthy of Regina, which only made it that much more funny.

After a bark of laughter that had her slapping her thighs, Zelena calmed enough to return to the subject at hand with a more serious approach. "Touche! Annoyance at your proclivity for injury
aside, I am glad you're okay. When Regina called me, she was all deathly calm and detached. I thought the worst was happening again cause she'd went into shutdown mode."

"I sort of had by that time," Regina said. "I was dealing with worrying myself sick about Ruby in addition to a Savior who refused to go home and rest even though she could barely hold her head up. Honestly, if it hadn't been for Esperanza, I might have torn my hair out. I swear, Emma is just too much to handle at times that I can't fathom how Hook manages with just one."

"Creative usage, I suppose," said Zelena, and with a lewd glint to her eyes that drew a snort of laughter from Regina and a disgusted sound from Ruby.

"I could have done without that mental imagine. Thanks."

Regina seconded the statement, though she gave her sister a sly wink of approval at the unwholesome jest.

"So," Ruby said after rolling her eyes at them both, "did I hear someone mention lunch? 'Cause I have to admit, I'm absolutely starving."

As if to punctuate the declaration her stomach growled so loudly that Regina thought she probably could have heard it upstairs.

Zelena's eyes bulged at the volume. "Oh, my! It sounds as if your situation is dire indeed. What say we get some grub in this pup's tummy, Sis?"

"I'd say that's an excellent suggestion," Regina said. She reached out to rub Ruby's back. "If we don't, we might get a front row seat to a living enactment of this world's version of her fairy tale."

"Oh, Ruby," Zelena sang merrily, holding her fingers to her lips in mock fear, "what big teeth you have!"

Ruby decided to play along. Her good humor had evidently returned. "All the better to eat you with, my dear!"

Hands at her hips, Regina played at being enraged. "I should hope not, Missy! Else you'll be sleeping on the couch tonight!"

Regina watched Ruby slink over into her personal space through narrowed eyes that rolled before relaxing as her wife slid into her arms.

"Aw, baby," Ruby crooned once nestled in Regina's embrace, their noses brushing for their proximity. She then clinked her unnaturally pearly white teeth together, eyes glinting and crinkled at the sides. "You know you're the only one I want to devour."

"I better be," Regina said, then ducked in for a lingering kiss. When they parted, she glanced over Ruby's shoulder to see her sister with her index finger in her open mouth as if she was gagging herself.

"You two are impossibly disgusting," Zelena said. "I'm going to the kitchen to get started on lunch before my appetite is gone." And with that she turned and left without another word.

Regina watched her go but never relinquished her hold on Ruby. They stayed there in the foyer, lightly swaying in each others arms, drinking in being together at home again until Zelena's shrill call pierced their happy little bubble.

"Are you lot coming or am I going to do this all by my lonesome?"
Regina chuckled as she drew away from Ruby. Stepping up from the foyer onto the main floor, she offered Ruby her hand. "Come on, let's go help or we won't hear the end of it for days."

"Heaven forbid," Ruby said as she clasped their hands together. And then they headed into the kitchen where Zelena was waiting with a corny joke that had them dissolving into peals of laughter that didn't seem to stop the entire time they were preparing their afternoon meal.

After an uneventful lunch mostly free from puerile antics from children and adults alike, Zelena joined Regina and Ruby in the living room to chat while the kids played for a bit longer. An hour or so later, she wrangled her only offspring to head home so she could get ready for a work later in the evening. Frankie adamantly refused to be pulled from an intense session of Pirates and Princesses where she was playing the part of the heroic and virtuous Regina of Misthaven while Amelia and Sophia hammed it up as the theiving rascallions Hook and Smee who were plundering Princess Regina's hapless villagers. Once the game ended, though, Zelena put her foot down, and when Frankie began to object, gave her daughter 'the look.' It was yet another subconscious channeling of Cora that Zelena seemed to be able to summon at will, and one that even worked on her from time to time. Against that dreadful weapon, four-year-old Francesca didn't stand a chance.

The door was barely shut behind Zelena before Ruby was beset by a terrific yawn that made her eyes water, the sockets of her jaw pop, and which strained her ribs to the point where she could not conceal her discomfort.

"Alright, you. Come with me," Regina said, then latched onto her wife's hand and dragged her back into the living room. Ruby followed silently, though her brow was raised at the brazen action. Once back at the couch, Regina guided Ruby down and then gingerly pushed her by the shoulders until she was reclined against the cushions. As she stooped down to pick up Ruby's legs by the ankles to swing them up, she noticed a deep frown forming upon her wife's tantalizing lips.

"I'm not tired," Ruby groused once Regina had her legs up on the couch and was fetching one of the throw pillows in the corner.

Regina shot Ruby a warning glance as she tucked the pillow beneath her head. "And I'm not fooled by your attempts to hide how much pain you're in."

For a moment, Ruby looked like she was about to deny the assertion, but then she relented and blew out an exhale that devolved into a petulant raspberry. The hurt in her eyes was no longer muted by her ineffective concealment.

"Fine," she said. "It hurts. Doesn't mean I have to lay around like an invalid."

Regina held her tongue against a bitter retort, knowing Ruby was just railing against having spent so much time cooped up already. "I'm not suggesting you do any such thing. I'd just like for you to rest for a few minutes while I make sure the children aren't destroying their room. Is that asking too much?"

The pout Ruby leveled at her was as humorous as it was adorable. "No..."

"Well, then," Regina said around a smile, "be a good girl and when I get back, I'll get you a pain pill to help you relax..."

Ruby butted in before Regina could finish the thought. "That's not much of an incentive."

"That wasn't the incentive. I was going to say, and then I'll let you curl up in my lap."
Green eyes widened with excitement at the prospect of some quality cuddle time. "Really?"

"Yes, really. Now, are you going to behave while I go upstairs?" Ruby nodded fervently as she hummed her promise to do just that.

Before turning to leave, Regina ran her fingers through Ruby's hair and then carefully bent over at the waist to join their lips together. Her eyes slipped closed at the lovely feeling of having Ruby's prominent lower lip trapped between her own. Sucking with just a slight amount of pressure, she heard a sigh of utter satisfaction rush through Ruby's chest and then escape her nostrils that she echoed with a contented one of her own.

After parting with an audible smack, a sound Regina loved, she straightened back up. Fingers still tangled in the hair at Ruby's temple, she said, "I won't be long."

Ruby nibbled at her lip, cheeks flushing prettily. "I'll be waiting right here."

True to her word, Ruby was waiting exactly where Regina left her when she returned about half an hour later. Regina hadn't intended to be gone longer than five minutes, but when she'd arrived at the bedroom her daughters shared, the girls both had their noses buried in books. Like her, they were avid readers, a habit she had every intention to nurture as they transitioned from adolescence into teenagers and then on into young adulthood. Ruby read as well, but not as frequently as Regina did, and when she did read it was mostly science fiction or fantasy. Although the subjects were ones Regina typically avoided as someone who would rather keep as much distance from her fairy tale past as possible, she didn't begrudge Ruby's preference, especially since she never would have been introduced to Robert Jordan, Frank Herbert, or a handful of other author's whose tomes she'd devoured.

Looking in on the girls only turned into an adventure when they caught her peeking around the doorway, watching their little faces all scrunched up in concentration or caught in wonderment over a passage they'd just read. The books were quickly set aside in lieu of begging their mother to play a game of Go Fish, after which they'd pleaded for her help to complete the Lego palace they'd begun building with their cousin, Francesca. With her aid, it reached prodigious heights that had Sophia and Amelia dancing an impromptu jig that Regina wished she'd caught on video – it would have made a nice addition to her Facebook page.

Eventually, though, she remembered her promise to Ruby and tore herself away from two disappointed children whose pouts almost persuaded to her to give them, "Just five more minutes, Mommy!" In exchange for their acquiescence, she agreed to let them stay up an hour later that night and have their bedtime story read by both their parents, a luxury they weren't often afforded.

By the time Regina got back downstairs, Ruby was asleep on the couch. She would have left her wife alone had it not been for Ruby's unsubtle shifting and wincing every minute or so, indicating how much pain she really was in, as well as her occasional moaning which pointed to a nightmare. Regina left Ruby a second time only long enough to fetch her prescribed pain pills and a glass of water with which to take them.

Waking Ruby up proved easier than normal. Just a whisper of her name had her shooting awake, eyes huge as she panted and cast fearful eyes about.

"It's just me," Regina said reassuringly. "You're at home. Everything is okay."

When Ruby caught her eyes, she instantly deflated. "Oh, thank God. I was back there for a minute, waiting for him to kill me."
To avoid an accident, Regina placed the glass of water and the pills upon the coffee table before easing herself down onto the cushions at Ruby's hips. She then rested her hand on a propped up knee. "You're safe now, my love. Nothing can harm you so long as I'm near."

"My hero," Ruby said with a loving smile. "So ready and willing to protect me."

Regina gave her knee a squeeze. "And I always will be. That said," she fetched the water and pills, "you need to take these." Ruby glowered at the small oblong white objects as if they were a giant offense, but took them just the same. After giving her opioid-phobic wife a due round of praise for her obedience, Regina replaced the glass of water upon the table and then nudged suggestively at Ruby's legs. "Now, what do you say about me making good on the promise I made before I left?"

Ruby grinned enthusiastically and gave a little cheer. "I'd say, 'Yay!'"

Chuckling, Regina said, "Well, scoot down then and give me some room."

When Ruby complied, Regina maneuvered herself into the corner and then gathered up a few throw pillows to wedge between her body and the arm. After fluffing them, she patted her lap for Ruby to climb on. No time was wasted by Ruby in clambering up onto her lap like the big, silly kid she often was. She didn't even need to be told how to arrange herself, as this was a sort of ritual for them. Stretching out longways, Ruby's upper torso was in Regina's lap while the side of her head rested against Regina's chest so that the back of it was supported by the pillows. All snuggled in, Ruby heaved a pleased sigh that Regina echoed. Ruby had only winced in discomfort twice as she laid down.

Almost immediately, Regina's instinct to protect and nurture those she loved reared up in earnest. She began gently rocking to and fro while singing her favorite lullaby as she held Ruby just snugly enough to not aggravate her injuries. It took only until she was halfway through the song for Ruby to fall asleep again, lulled back into the waiting arms of oblivion by the swaying, her gravelly voice, and the seductive pull of the strong painkillers. Even so, Regina kept rocking and singing, as much for her own comfort as anything. Pretty soon, she too started to drift off.

But just as her head lulled slack against Ruby's crown, the sound of the door unlocking startled her away. Her grip on Ruby tightened, but not enough to wake her, and she readied her magic at her fingertips just in case the intruder was someone unwanted, though she couldn't imagine why some undesirable visitor would have a key to her house.

And as the person entered the foyer, stepped up onto the landing, and then approached the living room, Regina tensed for confrontation.

Chapter End Notes

*Sorry for posting so late. Here's a nice, long chapter to make up for it.*
A Swan's Perspective, Pt. 3

Chapter Summary

Emma gets some well deserved down time and has an overdue visit with Mommy White.

The dream from which Emma awakened had been very pleasant, so it was with some reluctance that she stirred from within the warm cocoon of her covers and blankets. She stretched like a cat, arms high above her head, as a yawn tore its way through her body. It felt delicious to be in her own bed once more. Even the deceptively brief three days spent in the Enchant Forest was enough to remind her to appreciate the things this world afforded her, foremost among them high thread count sheets, warm plush blankets, and memory foam. As comfortable as she was she didn't really want to leave the bed at all. Unfortunately, lazing about was not an option for the Savior.

Groaning, she turned to her side only to find herself alone. Killian's absence was conspicuous and she wondered at once where he was. To her knowledge, he had no pressing engagements that morning since his assistant manager down at the docks had kindly offered to take his shift so that he could have the day with his recently returned wife. Pirate or not, her husband was not one to turn down a late morning lounging around in bed. Confusion muddied her already hazy head as she frowned.

Emma scratched at her itchy scalp, pondering on Killian's whereabouts as she peered over at the clock. It was just past nine. She'd been out nearly twelve hours, which was astounding for her, though not totally unexpected. Four days had passed since her return from the Enchanted Forest before she had a chance to well and truly crash. In her absence, paperwork had piled up that only the Sheriff could legally handle, and she'd had to clear most of it before cutting out for an extended weekend in which she planned to catch up on some sleep. She was particularly grateful that her father had volunteered to mind the actual police work or else she would have been forced to deal with that on top of the tedium that was budgetary, arrest, and release reports along with documenting the fines levied through the department. So much load after the harrowing jaunt in the Enchanted Forest wouldn't have made for a pretty sight seeing how off-kilter and grumpy she'd been since returning home.

Added to all of that stress was the not-so-insignificant fact that she had been little more than a walking lump of exhaustion since her fight with Belmordan. She just couldn't seem to recover her stamina, and not for lack of trying considering she'd attempted nearly ever remedy in the book from liters of coffee all the way up to some of Regina's less savory solutions originating from less savory books. Nothing seemed to shake the pervasive sense of fatigue that had plagued her. To say she'd been a bear would have been gross understatement on the level of stating the surface of the sun was hot.

Fretting over Ruby, who was three days languishing in a medically induced coma, only made her surliness more pronounced. After handing her wounded friend over to the capable hands of Victor Whale, Emma spent nearly three hours sitting in an uncomfortable chair that numbed her ass and made the backs of her thighs ache. With her wooziness from the fight with Belmordan still prominent, having to managing a tightly wound Regina and an unusually unnerved Granny made for an experience that was less than stellar. The two stubborn women sniped at one another so much that
they almost gave her a coronary just listening.

Thankfully Mary Margaret arrived to spell Emma about three hours before Ruby was stabilized enough that Regina could go sit with her. Being stuck in a hospital waiting room for such a long time while already miserably tired was not conducive to recharging one's batteries, yet she managed to keep a positive spin on things for Regina's sake where she could. And while Regina had appeared to appreciate the attempts, Emma wasn't sure how much good she'd really done in the long run. She'd seen those ominously dark cloud descending over the former Queen upon being informed about that final run in with Belmordan. It was really no wonder when Emma herself soured upon thinking of the man's perverse fixation on Ruby.

When Mary Margaret waltzed into the waiting room singing her typically hopeful tune, Regina all but chased Emma out. Though she tried to be casual about it, legitimate concern was leaking through the stern woman's normally impenetrable mask. The thought only briefly crossed Emma's mind to protest being so brusquely shooed away when her best friend was still in surgery having nearly died – again – but her longing for her bed had been bordering on lascivious, and for the past hour she'd been nursing a desperate need to have Killian's arms around her. More than anything else, though, Emma had learned over the years of being Regina's friend that when the woman made up her mind, there was no changing it unless your name was Ruby, Henry, Sophia, or Amelia, and even they only prevailed less than half of the time. So Emma left the hospital as instructed, like a good little girl would, and then went in search of her husband.

She found Killian at the Station hanging out with her father. The sight of the two men bonding over tales of their adventures back in the old world was a heartwarming balm for her soul, so she lingered unseen with a stupid smile on her face to bask for a few minutes in the camaraderie that had developed between two of the three most important men in her life. It was only a yawn too vicious to keep quiet that alerted them to her presence. Emma was then made to patiently endure the two fawning over her, that ability being a recent development, and then chastising her for being home so long without contacting them. Then she got chewed out again when they found out Ruby got hurt and they weren't informed. To be fair, she was simply too worried about Ruby to contact them at first, but when she'd thought of it after about half an hour in the waiting room, Regina had refused to allow it.

"I won't have your whole family in here hovering over me," Regina had said in way of explanation, having noticed Emma's disapproval. "I love them, Emma, I do, but I'm not in a good place right now to deal with them. Your mother is quite enough. You can call in the rest of the bunch when Ruby's in a room and I can be with her."

Regina had been deadly serious. That vein in her forehead was practically thrumming with frustration and anxiety and an unmistakable urge to hurt someone. However much Emma thought it unfair to keep her family in the dark, she recognized when not to push a woman whose temper was on a short leash during the best of days. And it wasn't as if she didn't sympathize with Regina's position. Emma quite wanted to hurt someone, too, someone very specific. So much so that if she'd had the ability to turn back time she would have relieved Belmordan of his head rather than his hand. When she explained all of that to Killian and her father, they seemed to get the picture and back off, which was a relief because Emma was cared too much about them to bury them any time in the next few days, and was simply far too spent to do care about it if they were offended.

Anyway, after that she and Killian made their goodbyes to David, although Emma permitted her father a generous hug and a fatherly kiss to the forehead before departing that made her feel a little better no matter how irritable she felt. A bit of her stress had drained from hugging dad, and even more released upon her being surrounded with familiar smell of the sea mingling with a spicy cologne that could recognize anywhere as belonging to the man she loved. Killian, with great care,
ushered her to their house, then forced her to eat something and shower before bed. Not even the
warmth of the water or the generous meal Killian had picked up from the diner helped to rejuvenate
her heavy limbs and dulled senses, nor did the hour-long nap she took before getting up to return to
the hospital to check on Ruby. Killian wasn't happy about that, nor was he quiet about his worry that
she was still dragging as she walked out the front door against his advice. But Regina's phone call
that Ruby was out of surgery and for the moment resting in recovery wasn't enough for her; she'd
needed to see for herself before she could know any measure of peace.

Watching her best friend get tossed a hundred feet like a rag doll was frightening enough, but that
was nothing compared to the terror she'd felt when Ruby's body was crushed against the thick and
unyielding trunk of a huge tree. That scared the living hell out of her. The only other times she had
been so afraid were when Henry collapsed after eating that damned apple turnover and during the
moments after she walked around the corner of Joshua Woods' basement. Neither of those
experiences were ones Emma had any desire to revisit. Yet her heart had stopped beating all the
same when Ruby slammed into that tree.

For a moment she had honestly had thought Ruby to be dead. The speed and angle at which her
friend impacted the tree trunk left little doubt in Emma's mind that were she a normal person the
collision would have been fatal. Thankfully, Ruby was not a normal person. But being inhumanly
tough didn't mean she was indestructible, either.

The way Ruby groaned and grimaced and trembled after managing to heft herself upright alerted
Emma as to just how grave her injuries were. Blood trickled down her nose and mouth, which
indicated that she'd bit her tongue, broken her nose, had some serious internal injury aside from her
ribs, or some horrifying combination of the three. And judging by the way her head wobbled
unsteadily upon the axis of her neck in her best imitation of a bobble-head doll revealed a serious
concussion. All of these things meant it wasn't a big stretch to assume Ruby was in for a stint in the
hospital after getting her through the portal, even taking into account her werewolf regeneration,
which was as enviable as it was extraordinary.

By the time Emma arrived back at the hospital after a woefully brief recharge, Ruby was in a room
of her own. But rather than being greeted by Ruby's smiling face and a smart-ass joke, she was
instead shocked to find a dreadfully pale, grotesque imitation of her best friend who was hooked to
all sorts of machines, including – and most worryingly – a ventilator. Beyond the invasive machines
and wires hemming Ruby in, her face was bruised and cut, and Emma could see the beginnings of an
impressive bruise at the base of her collar bone that she imagined fanned out over almost her entire
right side which was the one that impacted the tree.

Regina had said nothing about the coma over the phone, and Emma was so aggrieved by Ruby's
condition that she all but tore in to the exhausted woman keeping vigil at her wife's side. That Regina
took the punishment with very little in the way of vicious counter-barbs betrayed her bone deep
weariness. As Regina sat there, glassy eyed, shoulders drawn in, looking small and frail all of the
sudden, Emma felt shame immediately overwhelm her indignation.

After apologizing profusely for her assholery, Emma was permitted to sit with Regina until visiting
hours were over. In all, she stayed for nearly two hours before her body had simply had enough and
she started yawning so much and so frequently that tears began streaming down her cheeks. With a
longsuffering chuckle, Regina insisted she go home and go to bed. Emma obeyed for the exact same
reasons as she did less than six hours earlier.

When she got home, Emma called Killian to let him know she was sacking out again. After that, she
divested herself of her outer garments and crawled into bed in her underwear. Sadly, again, it wasn't
to last long. She was up for work less then three hours later.
The next three days passed in a blur. It was surprisingly hard to concentrate when one has recently critically exhausted their reserves of magic without being afforded enough proper sleep to recuperate. Hopefully all of the reports and forms she'd filled out in her haze are legible and correct, or else when Regina returned to work she was in for an epic dressing down. The woman really did take her paperwork seriously.

The day Ruby woke up, Emma was too flustered and debilitated by lunch to do much more than drag herself home after cutting off early from work so she could pass out. She'd finally pushed her body to it's limits. The next thing she knew, she was waking up to darkness outside of her bedroom window. Bleary eyed, she meandered downstairs for food in nothing but her panties and a Pittsburgh Pirates t-shirt belonging to her hubby that engulfed her smaller frame. Crossing into the living room, she found Killian watching the Red Sox play his Pirates, beer in his hand as he shouted obscenities at the home plate umpire for calling a borderline pitch a strike.

Ever since they started dating it had been Emma's goal in life to get Killian hooked – pun intended – on baseball. As a kid, she lived with one particular foster family who were fanatical Red Sox fans. That they were actually good to her engendered an enthusiasm for the sport and the team they so loved to cheer for that stayed with her into adulthood. Over the six spring and summer months Emma was with the kindhearted folks, she watched more baseball than other programs aimed at children her age, and spent many an evening playing catch with Tom, her foster father, in their backyard. That summer Emma discovered a talent for athletics that her new family was eager to cultivate. They even made plans for her to play little league the next year.

Sadly fate intervened to torpedo those plans, as it always seemed to in her life. In a tragic turn of events, her foster father was killed on the job, and soon after her foster mother lost her own job, forcing her to put Emma back in the system. Darlene, her foster mother, silently wept the entire way to the home as Emma sat numbly in the back seat, already steeling herself against the inevitable loneliness and sadness that the bland, cracking walls of the group home seemed to be drenched in. Long used to that kind of thing happening to her, she handled the goodbyes far better than Darlene. But later that night she broke down and cried so hard that she made herself sick. That family was the only one that, even years later, she still wept over, and even though the memory was excruciating, her brief happiness with them was what got her through many of the trials she would later face.

So dear were those six months to her that the first thing she did after getting out of prison was to look Darlene up. It was a dreadful mistake that sent Emma careening into self-loathing and depression. Desperate for a job and messed up over Tom's death, her former foster mother was forced to resort to taking anything and everything in the way of employment she could find, leading to a series of progressively demeaning jobs. In the end, Darlene got hurt lifting something she had no business lifting, which lead to her getting hooked on pills. The habit did her in. Eventually, out of money and jonesing for a fix, she resorted to selling her body in the seediest part of Boston to feed her unquenchable habit. It wasn't long before she was virtually the property of a pathetic, deranged, perverse man who beat her to within an inch of her life multiple times for failing to 'earn her keep.' A year later Darlene was found dead, murdered execution style for pocketing a little too much of her paltry earnings. Before the trial could start, the cold-hearted bastard who had so cruelly used her up and then disposed of her like so much trash skipped on bail and slipped into the shadowy underworld in which men like him thrived.

Crushed at her horrifying discovery and yet determined to pay her respects to the couple who had so positively impacted her life, Emma scrounged up her rapidly flagging courage to visit St. Joseph's Cemetery. There, she said her agonizing final goodbyes to Tom and Darlene. She can still remember vividly how beautiful a day it'd been, which to her had been an extra offense atop her suffocating grief. Mercifully, the graves were well cared for, and the grass had been so green and soft that she'd laid down in between their side-by-side plots and talked to them as if they could actually hear her.
She isn’t sure when she started crying, only that the more she unloaded her wishes and regrets the more torridly the tears fell.

That day was the most Emma ever cried. Drunk as she was on physical and emotional exhaustion, it was a minor miracle she made it home without plunging her Bug into the nearest ditch. However she managed that unrepeatable feat, she eventually staggered into her apartment sometime before sunset. A few of her neighbors gave her the stink-eye as she fumbled for her keys like a true lush, but she paid them no mind as she figured they were close enough to right, just early with their assumptions by about an hour. Once inside, Emma lasered in on the liquor cabinet, crawled into a bottle of the strongest alcohol she had, and lost herself in the oblivion it offered. She stayed drunk for the next two weeks straight. During the days she maintained a functional drunkenness so as to not lose the menial job she’d picked up immediately after her release from prison. Oh, but at night...at night, she went on epic bender after epic bender. She drank her ever-loving-ass off until she passed out stone cold only to wake up retching or already having coated her floor or her couch or her sheets or her clothes with a gruesome layer of sick that smelled every bit as awful as it looked. Like a true dipsomaniacal trooper, she’d clean up the mess, wet her whistle, go to work, come home, and then do it all over again in her own Emma Swan-style attempt to disprove the popular definition of insanity people liked to attribute to Einstein.

The cycle only broke when one night she was half-drunk on awful scotch and she suddenly thought of sweet Darlene, and how she would chirp up a storm while she made Emma lovingly crafted animal-shaped pancakes. Her entire being would flush with love for her husband and new daughter as she flit about the kitchen, singing and dancing and being silly just to make Emma laugh. Darlene was a natural knock out, but her morning cheer made her seem even more beautiful, almost as if she were channeling Doris Day or something. As if the memories had been unlocked, they came in rapid succession then, the next being her recollection of the many evenings spent watching the Red Sox play while snuggled up securely between the only two people who ever made her feel safe and so happy that she felt full to bursting before she hit the age of thirty. Next, she thought of the way Tom would tuck the covers just so around her neck at bedtime before kissing her forehead with such reverence that she could feel his love for her transferring through the contact, and how after he’d said his goodnight Darlene would take her turn, sometimes losing herself in a motherly affection that just looked right on her that Emma never once shied away from the incoming flurry of gentle kisses to her nose, forehead, and cheeks. Lastly, she remembered how she woke up from a nightmare every night that first week at her new house only to discover she wasn’t alone anymore; either Tom or Darlene would be sound asleep in the floor next to her bed, and their very presence proved succor enough to lull her back into a dreamless, restful sleep.

Instead of getting three sheets to the wind that night, Emma rose from her couch, a woman on a mission. Every bottle of alcohol in her possession soon found itself being emptied into the kitchen sink. Shame over her piss poor method of honoring those precious people mixed with hatred for the evil man who could corrupt and then destroy so innocent and loving a woman as Darlene. Right alongside those emotions, though, a desperate need for justice welled up in her that she realized had never departed having been engendered by her foster father, Tom, who was a proud member of the BPD before he was shot on the job.

As she divested herself of the precarious liquid crutch she’d leaned on far too long, she envisioned a scene straight from the memory bank that had prompted her sudden change in direction.

"Why do bad men who kill people get put in prison?” a young Emma asked Tom one morning. She’d heard on the news the night before that a very bad man was caught and put in jail, but only after he murdered three women. "Doesn't the Bible say, 'an eye for an eye’?"
Emma knew that tidbit because Tom and Darlene were ardent Irish Catholics who took her to mass every single Sunday. Religion was the one thing they tried to instill in her that refused to adhere. Her cynical nature from a lifetime of disappointment and pain made her a lot like the skillet Darlene raved about that Tom bought her, the one scrambled eggs wouldn't stick to no matter how bad she burned them whenever she got distracted by this and that as she was wont to do. But that didn't mean Emma didn't appreciate some of the lessons she learned. Jesus, in particular, seemed to her young self to be a pretty neat guy with some really super cool ideas.

"You're right, honey, it does," said Tom, who put down the morning paper he was reading to give Emma his full attention.

Tom was just good that way, always treating Emma's questions like they deserved a proper answer instead of dismissing them like all the other adults did. Didn't they know that just because she was a kid didn't mean she couldn't understand stuff? Emma thought them assuming such things about her made them a bunch of useless dummies. But not Tom. Tom always took her seriously, and that was one of the many reasons why Emma loved him so very much. He was everything she'd ever dreamed of having in a daddy, and she never, ever, ever, wanted to be apart from him. Even when she was old enough to get married, Emma didn't think she'd leave Tom. How could any other boy love her the way Tom did? The idea was just stupid.

"But we also have to remember that Jesus said to forgive our enemies," Tom went on. "That isn't always easy, though. Even I have a hard time seeing those bad men not get what I think they deserve."

Emma's eyes widened at the stunning admission. Her foster parents were both so pious it was hard for her to imagine them thinking the sort of bad things she often did. "You do?"

Tom's eyes crinkled at the sides as he smiled that patient, loving smile that belonged to a man born to be a father. "Of course I do, sweetie," he said, wedding band clinking on his coffee cup as he rubbed at it for the warmth. "I'm human just like you are. Do you know what that means?" When Emma shook her head, he continued, "It means I'm not perfect. No one is. I do the wrong thing sometimes, and if that's true, how can I take the law into my own hands and thereby condemn another man, who is also imperfect just like me, to die? It would be wrong of me to do that."

"I'm not God, honey, and neither are you. That's why we have policemen and policewomen and judges and juries and laws to govern what's right and what's wrong. No one person should have the power of life and death over another. That's not justice. That's revenge. And revenge makes bad people of what used to be good ones. I've seen it happen with my own eyes too many times to think it could turn out differently for me just because I think I'm a good person. So that's why I put bad men in prison instead of killing them like I sometimes want to. I do it because I want justice for their victims that I'm not qualified to give. Divine justice is in the eternal hands of God, but on earth we place it in the hands of a jury of our peers and in judges that we entrust to uphold the law. That way none of us are making such a final decision on our own.

"Once a person is dead, there are no take-backs. Life is precious and valuable, Emma. All of it. It shouldn't be taken easily or cheaply. For example, what if a person was wrongly accused of the crime they were ultimately punished for? The guilt of that mistake is too heavy for one person to bear by themselves. That's why we have thirteen people making that decision, twelve jurors who decide innocence or guilt together by listening to eyewitness and expert testimony of really smart people before studying all the evidence they're presented in order to delivering a verdict. Meanwhile, the judge is responsible for setting the accused person free should the verdict be innocent and pronouncing sentencing should it be guilty. And while our system isn't perfect, just like we aren't perfect, it's designed to give a person their best chance of preserving their life. Is this making any
"I think so," Emma said as she sat back in her chair, weighed down a bit by the heaviness of the speech but also recognizing the wisdom in it.

Unbeknownst to her, a seed was planted that day which would only germinate years later. That precious memory of Tom's convictions were what staid her hand from blowing the pimp's head off when she tracked him down two months later. He was not, however, without bruises and a few broken bones when she hauled his worthless ass into the police station. The cop that relieved her of the trash she'd brought in was a nice guy by the name of Ian who gave her the name of a bail bondsperson in New York he was well acquainted with. Two days later Emma landed the job that would one day lead her back to Boston, where she would eventually encounter a ten-year-old runaway from Storybrooke, Maine named Henry Daniel Mills.

Despite the pain that still accompanied memories of her foster parents, they were mostly so sweet that she could still feel Tom and Darlene's warmth in her heart whenever she allowed herself to drift back in time and indulge in one of them. It was in their honor that she'd retained her love of baseball, and in time the sport came to serve as a memorial to the only people besides her real family to ever make her feel like she had a home.

It was to Emma's pleasant surprise, though, that Killian took to the game so quickly and picked up the finer points of the rules with an ease that belied some previous experience in sports. After much prodding, Emma got him to admit that where he'd come from, he'd been somewhat of a star cricket player, which was a sort of cousin to what baseball. Giddy with delight, Emma made plans to take Killian to a Red Sox game. Unfortunately, they were derailed by events in Storybrooke, but two years later, the barrier around the town could be breached without consequence to citizens, so she bought tickets to an interleague Sox versus Pirates game, determined to resume her yearly ritual but share it with the man she loved. They had so much fun and bonded so deeply over Emma's recounting of her tale behind the ritual that it became their own thing. That wasn't to say they didn't both enjoy watching games on television, it was just incomparable to the experience of attending one in person.

Stopping in the cased opening that lead to the living room, Emma split the next ten minutes between watching the game and observing her husband as he watched the game. It was kind of funny how passionate Killian got about things, particularly when umpires had a questionable strike zone. Sometimes when he got riled up, Emma would just sit and smile or giggle like a mad schoolgirl. He really was adorable. Who woulda thunk?

After ten minutes of hovering, standing became uncomfortable and Emma shifted a bit which caused the floors to creak. Turning sideways on the couch, Killian's eyes widened slightly at the sight of her.

"Morning, love," he'd greeted, that sideways grin she loved so much sliding in place. "Or rather, goodnight."

"Yeah, sorry about that," she replied, blushing faintly. It was the longest she'd ever slept before at once and she'd still felt a bit off kilter as if her brain was in a fog and her limbs were twice as heavy as they really were. Still, she'd needed the rest. "I meant to sleep a few hours and be up when you got home, but I guess I was more wiped out than I thought."

Killan nodded. "Aye, David gave me a call, told me that you were wiped out and not to disturb you. I have to say, I don't think I could have woken you if I tried. You slept like the dead."

She'd grimaced at that. "Energy wise, I wasn't far off."
"I know, love," he said, frowning. "Regina told me you came close to draining your magic, which was incredibly dangerous, and that I should keep a close eye on you for a while."

Emma scoffed at the idea of her needing a babysitter. "She worries too much. I'm fine. Just needed some rest."

Killian shrugged off her dismissal with practiced ease. "That may be. I'd still prefer if you take it easy a few more days."

A golden brow arched as Emma crosses her arms, doing her best to look intimidating, which wasn't very in her current state of dress. It's hard to strike fear in the heart of a pirate wearing nothing but a tee shirt and panties. She gave it her best shot, though.

"Is that an order, Captain?" she asked, summoning all of her sass.

"More like a request, love," Killian said with a wink. "In any case, I'm just glad you're okay. Seeing you home and well is all I need to be happy."

Emma couldn't help herself. How could she after hearing something like that? Sauntering deliberately over to him, she leaned down to give him a lingering kiss.

"What's that for?" he asked, eyes glinting with the onset of arousal. "Not that I'm complaining, mind you."

"For being you," Emma stated, and that was all she'd really needed to say.

Upon meeting Hook all those years ago, she never would have imagined him to be such a romantic. And yet he was so sweet sometimes that it melted Emma in ways she didn't know were possible. They made an unlikely couple, but somehow the jagged pieces of their personal puzzles came together to form something cohesive and, to her, beautiful. It was, Emma thought, rather like Ruby and Regina. Love truly was as strange as it was amazing but she wouldn't trade anything for the life she'd built with Killian and she was sure her best friends felt much the same way.

After her simple but heartfelt reply, Killian gave Emma a smile that was bright enough to send butterflies fluttering through her stomach. However, just as she leaned in to kiss him again, a loud grumbling erupted from her stomach. Blushing a crimson red, Emma looked at Killian and then both of them burst out into laughter.

After that, Killian dragged her by the hand to the kitchen where he indulged her craving by whipping up one of her favorites: a five egg omelet loaded with chicken, bacon, chopped onions and green peppers, and slathered in good old-fashioned American cheese. After inhaling the entire thing and downing a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice, Emma was then ushered up to bed once again.

She hopped in without a word, cocooning herself in her blankets as Killian disappeared into the bathroom to shower and change. She had just dozed off when she felt him climb in behind her and wrap her up in his arms. Snuggling up against his back, Emma sighed in almost delirious satisfaction and fell back asleep in seconds.

However, back in the present she woke to an empty bed and a lot of disappointment. Rolling her legs out from underneath the covers, she leaned over to rest her elbows on her thighs while she gathered her bearings. As she did, she caught sight of a note on the nightstand. She reached over and picked it up.

"There was a small fire in the library, gone to help your old man a while," it read. "Don't worry, us lads have it under control. See you later tonight. All my love. P.S. Your mother called. Again. Please
go see her ASAP. Don't think I can take another day of David's melodramatic lamentations over her 'unsustainable stress levels' due to you pushing yourself to the brink having just got home. Plus, it will do you both some good to spend a bit of time together. Anyway, goodbye again. Still love ya, K."

Well, that explained a lot. Chuckling, Emma shook her head as reread the part about her father. Leave it to Killian to inject a little levity to start the day off right. Emma had a feeling she was going to need it if she was going to endure her mother's overabundance of concern and hugs. Not that Emma didn't appreciate her mother or love her, because she did; it wasn't even that she didn't enjoy a good Snow White hug every now and then. Emma just wasn't fond of the hovering; though she conceded that her mother had gotten better the past few years.

Sighing, she finally made herself leave the comfort of her bed to get ready. After calling Regina to check on Ruby, who was being ferried home from the hospital that very hour, she took a quick shower and then threw on a pair of jeans and a white v-neck t-shirt. It was October but still warm enough to forgo a jacket. A few minutes later, Emma walked out the door with a coffee in one hand, her keys in the other, and a bagel between her teeth. She wolfed down the bagel the second she sat down in her bug and then indulged herself by drinking her coffee on the short drive to her parents' house. Sheriff's privilege. It was such a familiar journey that she could almost navigate it by hand, but she was careful to keep at least one eye on the road even while sipping from her travel mug.

After arriving at her parents' loft, Emma made her way inside without knocking.

"Mom?" she called out as she stepped through the doorway into the open space serving as kitchen and living room in one.

"In here, honey," Mary Margaret called out from the kitchen, her voice traveling over the air like said endearment. It still got to Emma sometimes that the woman she had become fast friends with upon first arriving in Storybrooke was in fact her mother. Their relationship since has evolved, but she had never lost her affinity for that voice. It could calm her in ways she couldn't quantify.

"Coming," Emma replied, and then made her way over to where her mother was seated at the island table scribbling notes. "Hey. Whatcha doin'?"

Turning around in her chair, Mary Margaret's countenance lit up, an enormous smile overtaking her face. She bounded out of the stool and threw her arms around her daughter. Emma winced at her mother's buoyant exclamation of her name right next to her ear. Despite not being the hug type, Emma returned her mother's tight embrace. Unable to help herself, she burrowed her nose into her mother's neck and breathed in her familiar scent.

"I was so worried," Mary Margaret said as she pulled away.

"I know, Mom. I'm sorry," Emma replied, her voice shaky with emotion. Like it had after her unplanned trip back in time, it hit Emma like an anvil just how much she loved this tiny spitfire of a woman who had survived against all odds against an evil, vengeful sorceress after her head and yet managed for the most part to keep on fighting, loving, and hoping no matter what obstacles came her way. She was the woman who had loved and nurtured Emma from conception through her own body's vitality until she was ready to make her screaming entrance into the world.

Emma had not understood how powerful a mother's love was until she was pregnant with Henry, which made her treatment of her mother after the curse broke seem rather cringe-worthy in retrospect. Anger and her ever-present abandonment issues had colored all those early interactions when she'd been reeling from her entire world view being upended in a single day. It was not easy for an orphan girl who'd long since surrendered dreams of a loving family to learn her parents were,
in fact, Snow White and Prince Charming, and that she was a Princess who technically belonged to another world starkly foreign from the one she'd been raised in. She'd hardly been able to deal with being a mother to Henry. The added stress of segueing into a ready made fairy tale family had simply been too much. That, and she'd still been wounded by the sting of what she'd believed so long to be a callous abandonment.

But now after having known her own mother so long, she finally understood that even though Snow had not raised her, she had always and would always love her beyond her ability to truly comprehend. Building relationships in Storybrooke had helped teach Emma about love, but she was still a world-weary and jaded woman at heart. So many years of loneliness, rejection, and bitterness did that to a person, created wounds that festered for so long they may never wholly heal.

At least she had learned to open her heart enough to experience love to whatever degree she was able, which must be large enough since she had a son she loved more than life, parents she cherished, and a True Love with whom she shared her life. But there were times such as now when Emma wondered how much more could she love if she had not gone through that portal alone all because Geppetto's lie prevented her mother from accompanying her to this world. No doubt it would have been difficult for her mother to raise her while alone and stranded in a strange world, but if anyone was capable of such an undertaking, it was Snow White. The woman was five feet six inches of kickass bandit rebel warrior who had survived years of attempts on her life by an enormously powerful sorceress, all because she never quit fighting. Ever.

Sometimes when Emma allowed herself the luxury of daydreaming, she imagined what it might have been like if it had just been her and her Mom against the world. There might have been hard times but nothing could have dampened her mother's love for her. Snow would have worked herself to the bone to provide a good life for her child and still come home with a smile to laugh and play all the while raising Emma to be an independent woman of character and strength. By the world's standards, their life would never have been an ideal, but by Emma's it would have been pretty damn perfect.

It was in vulnerable moments like that when she most fought against what little residual bitterness she harbored where Regina was concerned. More than anything else, it was the Dark Curse that had separated her from her parents, from her mother, and had cost her the opportunity to be raised by the larger than life and utterly incredible woman in her arms. That opportunity was one Emma would give almost anything to have back. The compassionate side of her hoped Regina didn't pick up on her feelings on those days, but Emma doubted she was so lucky. Regina was an observant woman, it was probably easy to pick up on her state of mind when she was being ultra sarcastic and hardheaded. The vengeful side, though, delighted in the Evil Queen’s shame and guilt. Thankfully, most times the good side won. And when it didn't, Emma just made sure to steer clear of the Mayor until the pulsating thorn in her heart turned free once more.

Pulling away slightly, Mary Margaret looked up at Emma, studying her face for a moment before giving her body a quick but unnecessary perusal to check for injuries.

"Are you okay?" she asked with a touching amount of concern as she touched a cut on Emma's cheek from where a hellbeast had nicked her with its claw.

Emma nodded. "Yeah, I was, as Zelena would say, just knackered. I'm better now. I promise." Even though she really was fine, she let her mother fret over her for a minute. On some level, it felt good to be doted on like she was still a little girl who had fallen off her bike and her mommy had come rushing to the rescue, all wide-eyed with soft touches and gentle kisses. Mary Margaret was that kind of mom: the best kind of mom, even to a daughter who was technically older than her.
"Are you sure?" Mary Margaret asked, her eyes still sweeping over Emma's face, green eyes swimming with so much emotion that it choked Emma up a bit. She then laid a tender caress upon Emma's unmarred cheek.

"Yeah," Emma breathed, leaning into her mother's touch. Her eyes slid shut for the briefest of moments as she reveled in the moment. Oh, how she wished her mother could have raised her. The thought brought tears to Emma's eyes.

"Why are you crying then?" Mary Margaret countered, her tone not holding the slightest bit of accusation or doubt, just the pure concern of a mother for her child.

Taking a deep breath, Emma composed herself and then cracked a smile as her eyes slid back open.

"Just happy to be home with my family. It was a tough trip." She deflected because not answering would only increase her mother's suspicion. Which some subconscious part of her clearly desired to do judging by the confession edging toward the tip of her tongue. Unfortunately as it usually did with her, the other part that wanted to change the subject won out before things got too personal.

Although Mary Margaret seemed to accept Emma's given explanation for her tears, she still seemed a bit disappointed as she withdrew her hand and stepped back. Emma was aware that it hurt her mother when she didn't open up, and honestly she was trying, but it was still so hard to break those habits that life had mercilessly pummeled into her.

Arms crossing over her chest, Mary Margaret gave a slight hum before quirking a raven eyebrow. "I imagine so since you were gone for three weeks," she said, tilting her head ever-so-slightly. "Both Ruby and Regina seemed to think it would be a couple of days at most before you left." It seemed like a statement of fact but there was clearly a little complaint laced in with it.

"It would have been, but there were complications," Emma said, not sure how much detail she should share. She hadn't had much chance to discuss her adventure with Mary Margaret, but nonetheless decided to keep it minimal unless she was pressed. Hopefully her mother was happy enough that she was home to not feel the need to press for an in-depth debrief just yet. "I don't really wanna get into it right now if that's okay. I promise I'll explain later, preferably when Dad's home that way I can just get it over with in one go."

"Alright," Mary Margaret agreed, rather easily Emma though. "Can I at least ask if you guys accomplished your mission? Did Ruby find a pack to bring back home? I went to see her this morning before your Dad went in to work, but we didn't get time to talk about it before an emergency call came in and I had to rush back home to watch Rose. By the way, you need to wake your sister up before you leave and spend some time with her. She's been asking about you every day since you got back home, wondering when you could come see her."

At the mention of her little sister, Emma smiled. Rose was a sweet child who enjoyed reading, watching informative children's programs, and primly playing with her dolls. A perfect princess in every way, and nothing at like her brother, Neal, who was as rambunctious a daredevil as had ever lived at that age. Much, Emma believed, as she would have been. Rose, on the other hand, she imagined to be a highly accurate reflection of Snow White. Which is, she thought, why she was so terribly fond of her baby sister.

"I'll do that," Emma replied, still smiling. "I've missed her. And to answer your question, we did locate a pack and brought them back home with us. They are far from ordinary wolves, though, which is another conversation for another time."

"Hmm, well, since you don't seem to be in a sharing mood, why don't we go sit in the living room so
I can talk to you about something."

Agreeing amiably, Emma was relieved her mother didn't seem particularly annoying by the continued deflection, although it was obvious her interest was at the least thoroughly piqued. There would be many questions later. Emma just wondered how she would react to the answers. Probably not well considering the implications she had drawn, which was why she had kinda wanted to avoid discussions about the Enchanted Forest for the moment. They would inevitably lead to Belmordan and whatever plans he had for Storybrooke and Ruby in particular. If it were possible or prudent, Emma would wipe that name from her memory, but it was neither. Belmordan would be cropping up like a bad weed up sooner or later and she needed to be ready to uproot him...or burn him to the ground.

After following her mother into the living room, Emma took a seat next to her on the plush love seat across from the window. They both subconsciously angled their bodies toward one another to ease conversation.

Emma crossed her legs and leaned back into the corner. "So, what did you wanna talk about?"

"While you guys were gone, some things happened here, too," her mother said, her face growing shrouded by some undefinable emotion. If Emma had to guess, it was a mixture of anger and concern. "A woman came to visit Regina claiming to have information about Ruby."

Emma perked up, sitting up ramrod straight. She was almost afraid to know what was coming next. "What kind of information?"

"The kind that pertains to her parentage," Mary Margaret supplied, looking as if the subject were distasteful.

Emma would have expected such news to be welcomed by the woman who considered Ruby her own sister, which made it strange. Quite frankly, Emma was perplexed by the curious reaction because of how much such information would mean to Ruby. Since growing close to Ruby, Emma had many discussions with her on that very topic, so she knew how Ruby felt about not knowing who her father was. Her mother certainly knew this as well, but rather than appearing happy for her friend, Mary Margaret was looking like she wanted to throw up at the very idea of this information coming to light. Emma couldn't see why, but whatever it was, it couldn't be good.

"You say that like it's something bad," Emma said, hoping to draw out further explanation.

Sighing, Mary Margaret shifted in her seat, folding her hands in her lap to keep from worrying them together. "Depending on a lot of factors, it might be."

Emma frowned. "Such as?"

"Such as whether or not the information is in fact genuine for starters." Mary Margaret looked away, biting her lip. "Or if it proves to be true, the potential consequences should Red find out."

"Okay, you're going to have to lay things out for me a little more plainly because I can't understand why you'd want to hide something like that," Emma replied as she scooted toward her mother a bit. She ignored the slip in reference to Ruby's 'real' name, the one willfully abandoned in lieu of what was provided by Regina's curse. Her mother tended to such slips when she was feeling overly protective of Ruby. "If somebody knows who Ruby's father is, she deserves to know," Emma then argued. "You of all people should know how much that would mean to her."

"I do," Mary Margaret nodded as she turned large eyes back on Emma. "But this? Oh, Emma, it
would be bad. She's already gone through so much. I just don't know if she's ready."

"Shouldn't she be the one to decide that?" Emma countered. "Deciding something like that for someone is asking for trouble, Mom, even when that someone is as understanding as Ruby."

Giving Emma a burdened look, Mary Margaret sighed. To Emma, it appeared that the secret was already taking a toll on her mother, which was more worrying than than secrecy in and of itself.

"I'm aware of that, honey, but withholding this information from Ruby was not my suggestion. It was Regina's."

Emma hadn't expected that and she was sure her face reflected her surprise. "Really? What could be so bad that Regina would want to keep such vital information from her own wife?"

Licking her lips a bit nervously, Mary Margaret looked around as if checking that no one was around to overhear what she was about to say. It was an instinctive movement but served as an indication to Emma as to how sensitive and dangerous this information might be. For a moment, Emma wondered if Ruby's father was some kind of psycho or deranged serial killer or something.

Leaning in toward Emma, Mary Margaret began to speak in whispered tones. "Okay, I'm going to tell you, but only because Regina agreed it might be a good idea and because I know you love Ruby as much as I do, if not more. I was once her best friend, but I think that title belongs to you now, and as her best friend, she's going to need you when this comes to light." Her eyes narrowed into slits, a piercing gaze that hit Emma right in her chest. "But you have to promise not to breathe a word to another soul until she knows, Emma."

Nodding profusely, Emma echoed her mother's movements to move in even closer to one another. "Of course. I'll do whatever I can to help her and I won't tell anyone else. You have my word."

"Alright," her mother began, her voice wavering nervously, "well, this woman who had the information used to be in the employ of Ruby's ostensible father back in the Enchanted Forest. He was a king, you see."

That narrowed down the choices for Emma somewhat, although Emma did not know the name of every monarch from the Enchanted Forest. But of those she was aware of, none seemed a particularly good choice to be Ruby's father, although some were certainly worse than others. It seemed that in that land, rulers and benevolence did not go together very often, or when and if they did, such individuals did not retain power for long. One of the only silver linings to her abysmal childhood was that she hadn't been raised there. The Enchanted Forest was a vicious place that Emma thought best left to memory for everyone who had ever lived there. She could understand certain aspects of the nostalgia though; she knew better than most just how hard it was for a person to come to terms with how terrible their home had been.

"In order to verify this information, Regina visited him," Mary Margaret continued. "She came away convinced the claim was true, but to be certain she got a DNA sample. The results will be back sometime next week. If they confirm this story, then she is going to tell Ruby, although I think it might be a bad idea. But if she does, Ruby is going to need someone to talk to who understands what's she's going through...that understands what it's like to hate a parent."

"Hey, I never hated you," Emma objected to the inference, reaching over to clasp her mother's hand. Mary Margaret accepted the gesture with a grateful squeeze to which Emma gently smiled. "Even during my worst days, I just wanted to know why I was given up. Hate never entered the equation."

The statement was a half-truth. While it was true that she had never hated her birth parents, she
certainly had developed an unhealthy self-loathing. "Why wasn't I good enough?" "Was there something wrong with me?" "Am I that impossible to love?" It isn't a stretch to hate yourself when such questions are always lurking in the shadows at the forefront of an adolescent mind. Emma grew up blaming herself more than her parents for being abandoned, a fault in her logic only the harsh, mentally scouring experience of prison purged.

But Emma wasn't about to tell her mother that when Mary Margaret was already sensitive enough regarding her rough childhood in the system. What's more, Emma would really rather not relive those years. She was finally happy and grounded within her family unit; she couldn't – wouldn't – risk that for the sake of total honesty.

"I know you've told me that a hundred times already," her mother said, eyes watery with emotion, "and I'm so glad you feel that way. But I was referring to some of your more...awful foster parents."

Emma's smile slipped from her face. So much for avoiding the subject. "Oh," she breathed out, "I see." She had been wrong to assume her mother's intent. For her mother to bring up the topic of her experiences in the system, Ruby's situation must be really bad, which concerned Emma on a whole new level.

While many of her foster parents had not been bad at all, there were a few that left lasting scars on her, both physically and mentally, which is why it had taken such a long time for her to feel comfortable discussing them with her parents. When she did, they had been so devastated that Emma almost regretted sharing at all. Almost. Her parents hugs and kisses, along with their heartfelt and genuine love and attention, helped to soothe those worries away and even reduced some of the sting of those memories. After that, Emma felt more connected to her parents than ever before. She felt safe with them, safe enough to talk about the things that she knew would hurt them without fear of judgment or of them withdrawing from her. In that way, they proved themselves to be the people she had read about in Henry's story book. Her parents were not perfect but they loved her and they showed it by sticking around for her no matter what, which by her own opinion, constituted a hero.

Having said that, it never got easier to talk about such things, and out of respect, her parents made a point of not bringing up those memories at their own prompting, but waited patiently for the rare occasion when Emma bridged the subject. They were good that way, content to wait on their jaded and world-weary daughter to set her own pace. So the fact that Emma's mother was being so forward with a reference to her painful childhood didn't bode well at all.

"So, the bastard is that bad, huh? Who is it?" she asked, barely able to contain her animosity toward anyone who might threaten Ruby's happiness. Her outlook toward the individual was further soured by the fact he had abandoned Ruby just the same as her pathetic excuse for a mother had.

Still, Emma's innate curiosity won out. No matter how leery she felt about her mother's negative reaction or the scumbag who turned out to be Ruby's father, she wanted to know who the man was, if only to better prepare her, as Ruby's best friend, for dealing with the fallout.

It was already clear to Emma that Mary Margaret didn't like the man, but dislike seemed too weak a description for the absolute loathing that was playing all over her mother's face. But to intimate that Ruby hated him was something altogether different.

In all the years Emma had known Ruby, she had never known the kindhearted woman to hate anyone; she just wasn't that type of person. Joshua Woods had tortured Ruby in ways that the most battle hardened soldiers would find distasteful to contemplate, yet she still never referred to him with hate. Whatever acrimony existed was for Joshua Woods in the Mills household came from Regina alone. Instead, Ruby only held a sort of profound sadness for him along with a great deal of pain and anger. But there was never any hate.
Unlike everyone else, Ruby believed that he had been a broken man, driven to his actions by a maddened form of despair. That, she had even explained to Emma once, meant that his actions were out of his control and as such, she felt that he couldn't be held wholly responsible for them. While Emma certainly admired her friend's immense capacity for compassion, she skewed more toward Regina's end of the spectrum on that one. Whatever it was that Regina had done to kill that son of a bitch, however painful it had been, in Emma's opinion it was not enough. That aside, it was Ruby's inability to truly hate which proved how unlikely it was that she held such contempt for whoever her supposed father was. Still, her mother seemed to think that there was cause for such intense emotion on Ruby's part, which made Emma both confused and concerned.

Contemplating it silently for a moment, she went through the very short list of monarchs both Ruby and her mother held such disdain for. The first that came to mind was Regina of course, but only out of reflex. So, who could it be? Emma thought. The only monarch she could think of her mother hated so much was…

"No," she gasped as it suddenly dawned on her, "it can't be. Spencer?"

Nodding sadly, Mary Margaret confirmed Emma's fears. "Sadly, yes."

Sitting back with a heavy breath, Emma raked a hand through her hair. Her heart suddenly hurt for Ruby. Such longing as Ruby had to fill in the missing half of her identity should not be resolved by discovering her father was Albert Spencer – a man who so loathed who Ruby was that he had tried to frame her for a murder she did not commit. Ruby still became crestfallen whenever she thought of the young mechanic, Billy, who had fallen victim to a power game he had no part in. Years later, it was evident Ruby still blamed herself for his death.

"Christ Almighty," Emma bit out miserably, thinking how awful the news would be for Ruby to hear. "Can anything else go wrong for her? Hasn't she gone through enough? To think that… that pathetic excuse for a human being might be her father is unfathomable. It's just…wrong!"

"Yet per someone who was there and who knew Ruby's mother very well, it's true," Mary Margaret elaborated, her eyes downcast. Sadness for Ruby was rolling from her in waves that seemed very much in sync with Emma's own turbulent feelings about the situation. "And as I said, Regina believes her, and she believes Spencer as well."

Emma recalled her mother telling her that Regina had visited Spencer in person. "I can't imagine that conversation was nice."

Mary Margaret winced in acknowledgement of Emma's point. "I'm sure it wasn't, but that's something you'll have to talk to Regina about. She didn't really go into details."

After taking a deep breath, Emma let it out slowly. On one hand, she knew she had to talk to Regina about this. It was her duty as both Regina's and Ruby's friend. On the other hand, she really didn't want to get in the line of fire if the runaway freight train that was Regina's temper left the station.

"You think that's a good idea?" she said. "Sometimes Regina doesn't react well to interference, and I'd guess she'll be even less accommodating about this."

"That's true for the most part," Mary Margaret agreed, smiling slightly at the truth of the statement. In some ways, Regina hadn't changed, which wasn't a bad thing at all. "In this instance, however, she actually asked to speak with you. It was a condition of you being read in."

Being included in the inner circle of such a secret, even though it was potentially explosive, made Emma feel a tiny bit better about the situation. Needing to break up some of the gloominess, she
allowed an exaggerated look of pride to form on her face.

"Well," she drawled, "I get to be in the know for once. I'm honored. Never thought I'd see the day."

Her mother laughed at the obvious attempt at levity, her eyes crinkling at the corners, though the shadow of Ruby's parentage still lingered. "To be frank, neither did I. There was a time I thought you'd kill one another, but look at you now, almost like bosom buddies. I'm glad for both your sakes."

"I wouldn't go that far, but I'm glad, too," Emma replied, smiling genuinely. And she was very much so to no longer be the most prominent name on Regina Mills' very long hit list.

Through the years, Regina had become a true friend, someone Emma could rely on without hesitation in time of need. But at her core, Regina was still the same woman she'd met back then who could hold a grudge like no other, reformed or not, and seeing that Ruby was her True Love, she was bound to be in full blown lioness mode, all protective and aggressive and more apt to fight than to talk or listen. While that made Emma feel more secure about Ruby's general well-being, it also made her a little nervous about potentially being caught in the crossfire.

She just hoped Regina was feeling rational at the time because with what was going on there was no telling what state of mind Emma would find her in. The always regal mayor had looked on the verge of a meltdown several times while waiting for word on Ruby in the hospital, which was totally understandable seeing that it was the second time she had almost lost Ruby. If the positions were reversed, Emma wasn't sure she could have held herself together any better. Still, she didn't want to have this talk with Regina if the former Evil Queen was worked up or feeling overprotective and suspicious. That would only make their conversation tense and uncomfortable, and after holding several such exchanges with Belmordan, Emma wasn't up for any more stress or anxiety just yet.

But however hesitant she was to talk to Regina, if Emma knew anything, it was that Regina respected directness. Mary Margaret would no doubt mention their conversation to Regina, so Emma was just going to have to pull up her big girl pants and face down the lioness one-on-one. In a way, it made her feel a little bit nostalgic, like it was the old days when she would visit Regina just to provoke her because she liked watching the outwardly stoic woman get all flustered. Smiling at the memories, Emma made a mental note to visit Regina as soon as she left her parents' house.

After discussing a few other things with her mother, Emma was waylaid longer than intended when Rose awoke from her nap and came catapulting into her big sister's embrace. Since she had nothing pressing, she thought it would be fun to spend some quality time with little Rosie, so for at least two hours they did everything the little girl could imagine, from having tea parties with the Mad Hatter to rescuing imprisoned princes from the evil king's castle. She particularly enjoyed that game since it was a both a reflection of and a variance to Snow White and Prince Charming's story at the same time.

Rose's youthful enthusiasm and infectious laughter was a nice change of pace for Emma after having such a heavy discussion with her mother. However bad a day she'd had at the Station, she could always count on her baby sister to make her feel better. The girl was a joy to such a degree that sometimes after spending a day with her, she entertained the idea of having another child of her own, though that was also something she was reluctant to tell her mother, knowing she'd never hear the end of it. If the day ever came that she decided to expand her family with Killian, her mother would be the first to know, but until that day Emma was going to keep those very tentative considerations to herself.
Chapter Summary

Emma has a domestic moment with her friends, finds out about Ruby's father, and gets yet another responsibility laid upon her shoulders.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was about an hour after leaving her parents' house that Emma decided to bite the bullet and make her way to Regina's. After parking behind the posh new Mercedes rather than old Camaro Ruby refused to relinquish, she took a deep preparatory breath before quickly exiting her own vintage Beetle.

Once inside, she announced her entry. "Regina?" As she waited for a reply, she steeped up onto the landing in one long stride. Wary, Emma began toward the living room. In the silence, her boots clacked so loudly upon the wooden floors that she winced at the noise. Seeing as how there was no need to remain quiet with her heavy footfalls, she called out again, "Ruby? You guys here?"

"Hush, Swan," Regina hissed as Emma passed by the casing leading into the living room.

Emma started, eyes wide narrowing in on Regina, who she found resting on the couch with Ruby curled up in her lap. The recovering werewolf was fast asleep with her head tucked up tight in the hollow between Regina's cheek and shoulder, and the Queen seemed to be unabashedly enjoying her cuddle time. In fact, Regina looked as relaxed as Emma had seen her since returning home.

Emma couldn't deny how happy it made her to see her friends enjoying such a domestically sweet moment, especially as it went a long way toward dispelling her concerns about Regina's mood. She gestured toward her comfortably dozing best friend.

"She okay?" she said, her voice more carefully modulated so as to not wake Ruby. Ruby's ears were very sensitive but thankfully she appeared to be as unaffected by Emma's voice as she'd been by the disturbance of her loud booted footsteps.

"Yes," Regina loudly whispered. Groaning in annoyance at having to modulate her voice while trying to carry on a conversation, she waved her hand, producing a faint cloud of purple smoke that covered Ruby's ears before puffing out of existence. "There," she then said at full volume, "now we can speak freely." She indicated toward the armchair across from the sofa. "Have a seat."

Nodding, Emma nestled into the cushy piece of furniture, lounging against the generously-padded back as she crossed her legs. "So, is she still exhausted or something? It's not like Ruby to be sleeping while the sun's up. Unless it's Wolf's Time, of course." Which it wasn't for another three weeks.

Regina shook her head in the negative. "She was in pain," she said, her face showing empathetic discomfort, which was understandable. It was always preferable, in Emma's opinion, to bear the hurt herself rather than to watch someone she loved go through it when there was nothing she could do to help. She could imagine, then, how Regina, a world-famous worry-wort, might feel watching Ruby
deal with the aftermath of her near-death experience. "Despite her accelerated healing, her ribs are still giving her grief and she refuses to take her medication as prescribed. I got tired of watching her suffer needlessly, so I made her take a pain pill. She'll be out a few hours yet."

Emma was not surprised that Ruby was still feeling her injuries, particularly to her ribs. She'd had a front row seat to Belmordan tossing her friend halfway across the field, and had watched in horror as Ruby viciously collided with an unyielding tree trunk. The snapping and popping of bones breaking upon impact was so prominent that Emma heard it as clearly as if standing close by. It was sickening to say the least. Even Whale had looked pale after coming back from reassembling the right side of Ruby's rib cage, informing Emma and Regina that it was very nearly pulverized, and that had she not been in her wolf form, she would have died from her injuries. The thought of that worst case scenario made Emma queasy. The feeling disappeared quickly, though, as she gazed back down at Ruby. Safely tucked into Regina's arms, the lanky brunette appeared to be mostly unaffected by her grievous wound.

Noting the way Ruby was literally in Regina's lap, a stray thought occurred to her.

"You just gonna let her sleep on you like that?" she asked.

Regina frowned at the question. "Why wouldn't I?"

"I just think it'd get uncomfortable after while is all," Emma said in explanation. "Your legs are going to fall asleep."

"Of course," Regina conceded sporting a wry expression, "but you forget that I also have very powerful magic. I am fully capable of sending her safely to bed with a simple snap of my fingers. However, I much prefer to have her here with me like this." Angling her head so that she could glance down at Ruby's sleeping face, so youthful in appearance and impossibly beautiful in serene repose, Regina's whole countenance changed from that of the slightly annoyed Queen Emma had barged in on to a woman so full of adoration for her wife that she seemed to glow from within. For someone who had once been accurately categorized as a Lost Girl, it was hard not to be in awe of a love so tested, tried, and true. She often felt the same way when in the presence of her parents, but they were much freer with their affection – unlike Regina, who was an intensely private person. For that reason, Regina feeling comfortable enough around her to show such open emotion was especially humbling.

"After three weeks apart, I can hardly bear to be away from her for a minute," Regina continued, her voice reflecting the adoration Emma was seeing on her face. "I almost lost her again, Emma." Tears gathered in Regina's eyes as she lifted them back to meet Emma's gaze. The depth of feelings in those fathomless brown orbs made Emma's chest constrict with emotion, both for what Regina was going through and because of her own similar thoughts.

The unenviable privilege of being given a front row seat to her best friend's death while utterly powerless to intervene was something Emma wouldn't soon forget. For whatever reason, she'd been convinced that Belmordan had intended to kill Ruby, and the prospect of failing her best friend so miserably was what she figured provided the majority of her motivation to resort to desperate measures. Breaking free of the magical bonds holding her captive had seemed an exercise in futility, and she still couldn't say what exactly gave her the idea to focus nearly all her power into the strangely familiar sword she'd found within the foreboding bowels of the Dark Palace. She'd just felt it was the right thing to do at the time. That said, it had not escaped her attention that it was a reckless gambit that might very well backfire in spectacular fashion.

Contrary to Regina's opinion, Emma was not so stupid that she didn't realize the danger she was putting herself in performing such untested magic. In her defense, she'd felt like she had no choice in
the matter. Watching Ruby die was not an option, and she'd been desperate enough to take a leap of faith at the risk of her own demise. So she charged her new weapon with enormous amounts of energy as she poured the rest into her arm to provide it strength to defy Belmordan's magic. No one was more shocked than she was when it worked, and whether or not providence was owed for her success was yet to be determined. She was grateful nonetheless that it all worked out.

Still, as hard as that situation had been for Emma, she didn't want to imagine how Regina would have reacted if the attempt had failed. That was another part of the reason Emma had set aside all rationality and just acted on instinct, damn the consequences to her own health. She was, after all, one of the unfortunate witnesses of Regina's momentary breakdown the night they found Ruby dangling like a slab of bloody meat from the ceiling of that hellish basement of horrors a few blocks away from where she currently sat. That stomach-curling moment of discovery was seared into her consciousness like a path of caustic flame had licked its way through the areas of her brain responsible for making memories, searing them in with vivid permanence.

How such an ungodly scream could originate from such a tiny body was unfathomable. Every time Emma thought about the godawful noise that tore loose from Regina's lips, a cold chill ripped its way up her spine, almost invariably producing a shudder akin to the effect of hearing nails scraping down a chalkboard. It was disgusting and disturbing and she'd never heard the like of it, never wanted to again either. That night Emma became acquainted with a sound that nightmares are made of: the death wail of shattered heart.

For weeks afterward, she woke with that scream eviscerating her mind and being chased by an indescribable sickness that had her on the verge of retching. Months passed before those recurring nightmares finally faded to the point that she slept through the night again. Looking back now, she realized that had she been unable to free herself from Belmordan's magic and survived the encounter herself, she might well have had to deal with hearing that dreadful screaming again. Regina's despair was infectious and inescapable, and Emma didn't think she could handle experiencing it again without losing every last one her damn marbles, just like Toodles.

So while Emma couldn't say she understood exactly how Regina felt, she was probably closer than anyone else alive.

"It scared the hell out of me, too," Emma finally said. She could hear the choked sadness in her own voice. "But she's here, isn't she? She's alive and well, so just keep holding on to her. I guess your legs going numb is a small price to pay for that kind of reassurance."

Smiling through her latent sadness, Regina said, "I couldn't agree more."

After that, Emma just sat back and silently observed as Regina's eyes slipped shut and she pulled Ruby's body closer against her own. Threading elegant fingers through Ruby's thick mane of chestnut hair, Regina gave out a contented sigh and commenced reverently brushing her hand through the locks at Ruby's temple. As if unaware or uncaring that she was in Emma's company, she began to hum a tune Emma didn't recognize.

The combination of Regina's baritone timbre, the hypnotic motion of her brushing, and the subtle rocking of her body in addition to the suddenly warm and relaxing atmosphere disarmed Emma so thoroughly that her own eyes drifted closed quite against her will. She hadn't realized she was so tired. Unable to stop herself, she nodded off, losing all track of time until Regina was crisply snapping her fingers in front of her face, startling her out of the unplanned nap.

"Oh, God," she groaned, her back stiff from her slumped over position in the chair. "I didn't mean to fall asleep. Sorry."
Regina smiled. It was a nice smile, homey and kind and indulgent, not one Emma was used to getting from the sarcastic hardass she knew and loved. It was a welcome sight.

"It's quite alright," Regina replied as she crossed back over to the couch and sat down, every bit the elegantly queen even in her casual element. "You needed the rest and to my eternal surprise, I didn't mind the company. I think it helped having you here because we share a mutual affection for Ruby as well as matching desires to protect her at all costs. I know how much you love her." Regina briefly ducked her head to hide a blush when Emma raised a brow and inclined her head, staring pointedly. "And me, too," she amended. "I don't want you to think I don't appreciate it. I do. So very much, Emma. I'm in your debt for saving her life."

"Which is why I went with her in the first place," Emma said. "And believe me, it wasn't for the scenery. I hated that place the first time. Never wanted to go back. God. No indoor plumbing or electricity, sweating your ass off during the day and freezing it off at night, bugs and shit like I never believed could exist crawling all over you." She shudders at the thought. "But as you said, I love you guys, so there was no way I wasn't going through that portal. I'd do almost anything for either of you, which is why it makes me feel so much better to see her back home and on the mend. Where is she, by the way?"

Regina flicked her eyes up toward the staircase. "I put her to bed about ten minutes ago. You've been asleep a little over an hour."

" Damn," Emma sighed. "I thought I was back to normal but I guess my energy is not built back up all the way yet."

"It'll take some time, dear. From what you said and what I observed, you nearly expended your energy." Eyes sharpening, Regina leaned forward a touch. "You have to know how dangerous that was, Emma. You could have done irreparable harm to yourself."

"I'm aware," Emma retorted, "but I had no choice! It was either that or watch Ruby die. I couldn't...won't ever choose that."

"I understand that, and once again, I'm grateful," Regina said, her eyes showing how true that statement was. "Be that as it may, I have to ask that you be more careful in the future. I don't have many friends in this world but I count you as foremost among them."

Emma could not contain the grin that formed across her face. She liked the thought of being both Ruby and Regina's best friend. "Gee, thanks, Regina! I always knew you loved me." Feeling a playful streak come on, Emma wished she had some gum so she could smack it in an annoyingly deliberate way as she flipped her hair back over her shoulder. "Wanna be BFFs and go shopping later so we can share some juicy gossip?"

Chuckling, Regina shook her head in amusement. "That is an intriguing offer, but in this case I must remind you of that saying you and Ruby are always quoting at each other. What is it again? The one from that ridiculous movie with the evil, phallic-helmed space Nazis and the giant brown mop-like gorilla man? Oh, yes, 'don't get cocky, kid' or something to that effect."

"Oh, my God," Emma exclaimed, barking a laugh and slapping her hands to her thighs to emphasize her joy. Regina's cute attempt to hide her intimate knowledge of Star Wars only made the whole thing more amusing, since Emma knew it to be a fact that the former queen had watched the movies countless times with Henry while he was growing up. Eyes twinkling, she said, "Regina Mills just quoted Star Wars. I've died and gone to Heaven!"

"Yes, yes," Regina tutted, smiling genuinely around a twinge of annoyance, "don't hurt yourself in
your excitement, dear, but do enjoy that one. It may be the last time you ever witness such a lapse in judgment. I would, however, recommend never mentioning that it ever happened…for your own safety, of course."

"Bah," Emma objected, knowing Regina's threats were empty and made in good fun. "Don't be such a Debbie Downer. Besides, once Ruby finds out, you'll never live it down. And who knows, maybe one day we'll even get you to recite some lines from Grease."

"Don't hold your breath for that. I'd hate for you to pass out on me," Regina snarked back without any true bite.

The fact that Emma could exchange some good-natured ribbing with Regina spoke to just how far they had come from the adversaries they had begun as. Emma like trading barbs with Regina. The woman was sharp as a tack and as challenging a person as Emma had ever met. It was totally understandable why Ruby fell head over heels in love with her (with an emphasis on heels in Ruby's case; Emma still didn't understand how the woman could waitress all day in those bright red stilettos, but by God, what a sight it was; it was almost too bad she hardly ever worked at the Diner anymore). Behind the sassy and tough exterior, Regina was an incredible person.

While Emma deeply appreciated the close friendship, they had developed and would have loved to continue bantering with Regina, she had to remind herself that she was here for a reason, and it was a very important one.

"Sadly, as much as I enjoy the repartee, there was a reason I came over," Emma said, her joking mood giving way as she broached a more serious topic. "I know Ruby is on the mend and all, but I'm still worried about her, and for a variety of reasons."

The sentence along with the shift in Emma's demeanor broke the amiable atmosphere for good. Regina reacted accordingly, growing sombre as she studied Emma's face. Ever the clever woman, she quickly pieced together the true purpose behind Emma's visit.

"I assume your mother has spoken to you, then," Regina said, referring to the situation with Ruby's paternity. "You assume correctly."

"And what is your opinion on the matter?" Regina looked interested to the point of concern in what Emma thought.

"I think it doesn't really matter what I think." Emma shrugged, feeling that to be the truth. "But since you're asking, I agree that this is a situation that needs to be handled carefully. While it makes me uncomfortable to keep a secret like this from her, I was told you intend to tell the truth should the DNA test confirm paternity. Is that still true?"

Regina sighed before replying, "Yes." Her tone indicated that she very much wanted it not to be true due to how much turmoil would be invited into Ruby's life – and hers by consequence – but had resigned herself to do the right thing.

The Regina of old would have hidden this information from her spouse until the bitter end if she felt even the least bit threatened. That Regina was determined to come clean was yet another unnecessary proof that she really was a redeemed person. Emma only wished some of Regina's more unforgiving detractors could see what she did.

"For the record," Regina continued, "I don't enjoy keeping this from her either."
"I don't doubt that for a second," said Emma, making sure her expression matched the fervency of her statement. "I think you did the right thing. As for the rest," Emma shifted to switch up her crossed legs, "I'm of the opinion that it's Ruby's decision to do what she wants with this information."

Regina leaned forward, clasping her hands to together nervously. "And what if she wants to strike up a relationship with her father? Don't say it's unlikely, either, because we both know how much this means to her. She might lose all sense of perspective about Spencer upon learning who he is, even though he is a despicable man who tried to frame her for murder."

"You're right. That might happen," Emma said, not liking the concession but seeing Regina's point. "It's still got to be her choice. That doesn't mean that we have to like it, or that we have to trust Spencer. We are under no such obligation. Our obligation is to Ruby alone. That said, I agree with the assessment you and Mom made. We have to do whatever is necessary to protect her. We'll have to watch Spencer like a hawk, and if he makes even one tiny misstep, I'll make sure he pays...legally of course."

Breathing deeply as if immensely relieved, Regina nodded in grateful acceptance. "I'm glad to hear you say that because I already warned him off any attempt to leverage his biological relationship with her." Sitting back, she raked a hand through her neat hair, eyes narrowing gravely. "Although my instinct is to deal with Spencer myself should he attempt anything untoward in either word or deed, I'm going to trust you because I know you'll do everything in your power to protect Ruby. That, and I recognize the wisdom in not causing Ruby even more stress by getting myself into trouble should my temper get the best of me." After that, Regina's expression turned to steel and her eyes plummeted to a temperature resembling that of arctic ice as her lips curled into a tempered form of malice. "But Emma...if actual harm comes to her that can be linked to him in any way, I vow to you here and now that he will die by my hand – slowly and painfully."

"Woah there!" Emma held her hands up, honestly a little scared of the dangerous air that was swirling around Regina like a gale forced wind. "I don't think there's a need to jump to the worst possible conclusion just yet. I mean, I know Albert Spencer is a terrible person, but do you really think he'd harm his own daughter? So, please, let's set aside the talk about killing for now. I've had enough of that for a dozen lifetimes since I moved here. And besides, you've changed. Ruby wouldn't want you to endanger that for anything, even her."

Regina's back stiffened as her brows drew together in restrained anger. "It's only because you are my friend, and I respect you that I'll allow such presumption."

Emma almost regretted saying anything but couldn't because she had spoken her conscience. Violence was hardly ever the answer, as it tended to only make matters worse while ultimately solving nothing. Violence, she felt, was a crutch for people who were unable to process their feelings like mature adults, and it made her leery that Regina still clung to it as a viable option. As confident as Emma was that the Evil Queen was firmly in the past, she still got glimpses of that hateful, conniving, brutal aspect of Regina's personality. That it only came out in situations where life and limb of Regina's loved ones were being threatened didn't assuage the concern that one day, should something truly unthinkable happen, Regina's tightly wound control of those dark impulses might permanently turn loose. In which case Emma, as the Savior, would be compelled to act against one of her very best friends, a woman she not only loved but looked up to for her grit and resilience and her enviable ability to love in a go big or go home way. Whatever the outcome of that showdown, the victor would not survive in tact. It was a zero sum game not worth playing. Which is why Emma encouraged the better angels of Regina's nature at every opportunity.

Having said that, part of her sympathized with Regina's compulsion to retaliate. Emma abhorred
unnecessary violence, but was willing to pick up the sword if necessary. It was another part of the
job that she’d learned to tolerate. Killing, that is. Sometimes it was simply unavoidable. Such as when
she’d had to kill Cruella de Ville. All things being equal, though, she preferred to pursue every other
avenue available to her before resorting to ugliness, and there were plenty of avenues to explore with
this situation, which made her wonder why Regina had jumped to such a seemingly outlandish
conclusion that Spencer might actually pose a threat to Ruby's life. Come to think of it, the way
Regina was behaving gave Emma the impression her royal friend knew something she was unwilling
or at the very least reticent to disclose.

"Don't get your panties in a wad," Emma retorted with a frown, suddenly finding her nerve again.
With the heightened tension in the room, it almost felt like old times between her and Regina, and not
the kind of old times she cared to revisit. "I know you're scared but don't take it out on me."

Regina visibly deflated at Emma's chastisement, her shoulders dropping as the heat of her anger
dissipated from coiled up muscles. Sighing, she pinched her nose and let her head loll against the
cushions of the couch.

"I'm sorry, Emma," she said, "you didn't deserve that."

"You're right. I didn't. But it's all good," Emma said, waving off Regina's harsh words with her
hand. With Regina's caustic nature at bay, she saw an opportunity to press for more answers. "I
know you're scared. Hell, I am, too. But I have to ask, why do you think Ruby might be in actual
danger? It sounded to me like you believe there to be a credible threat."

When the line of questioning registered, Regina grew distraught. "That's because there is," she said,
eyes watering though no actual tears fell. "Long before this particular bombshell was so
inauspiciously dropped in my lap, Spencer hired someone to kill Ruby."

Emma was shocked and she let it show on her face. She sat up stock straight on full alert. "How do
you know that?"

"He admitted as much to me." Hints of a hateful sneer returned as Regina spoke. "Naturally, now
that he knows she might be his daughter, he wants to call it off." But then all of the sudden the
acrimony poured out of her in a rush, leaving a disturbingly worried expression behind. "Of course,
he can't do it because under previous instruction, the person he hired has cut off all contact. Now
there is some maniac out there just biding his time for an opportune moment to dose Ruby."

Emma's heart gave a discomfiting lurch. "Dose her with what?"

"A potion that I have only ever read of during my reign as Queen," Regina said ominously. "The
ingredients are so exotic they cannot be obtained even in the Enchanted Forest. All I know is that it is
targeted at werewolves and that it will drive her insane before finally killing her. She'll suffer untold
agony, Emma, and then she will die and there will be nothing we can do about it. So we have to do
something now while we still have the chance!"

Emma swore. Regina was right, they had to do something and fast. Turning off her friendly
demeanor, she switched into full cop mode. "Do you know how this potion is administered?"

Regina nodded then swallowed thickly. "Orally, in general, as with all such potions." Her voice was
raspy from anxiety. "But we cannot assume it will be used in that form."

"Why not?"

"Because aside from the activation spell cast during brewing, it is made from all naturally occurring
ingredients. With that the case, it is very stable in liquid form, stable enough to be drawn into a pressurized delivery vessel such as a syringe without catalyzing, which allows for it to be administered by injection."

Emma swore again, this time more colorfully. Standing quickly, she began to pace in front of the chair, and as she did, she started working through the problem. Since the potion was able to be injected, she assumed the assassin would utilize that method for the sake of both efficiency and stealth. Through experience working with law enforcement over the years, she knew a pro could administer a lethal dose of poison via syringe without the victim even being aware anything happened. And as a man of means and influence, she had to assume that whoever Spencer hired was an individual possessing a high skill threshold.

*With that in mind, she asked herself, where is the best place to get to Ruby?*

Not at the station or when she was out on a call, she thought. Ruby was always on alert at work, and besides that, if Emma was not at the station or out on call with her, David was. Then there was the fact that Regina got off of work at virtually the same time as Ruby, so getting to her at home wasn't really an option either, 'cause honestly, a person would have to be mentally deficient to break into the home of one of the most powerful practitioners of magic alive whose wife just so happened to be a werewolf, both of whom would be highly motivated to protect their home with their children there, too. Assailing Ruby at the Mills household was almost certainly a suicide mission, eliminating that line of attack as a possibility.

Where then? Other than that, Emma could only think of a few other options, such as if Ruby were go out on her own to do some grocery shopping or some like errand, or to run (on two legs, not four), or to visit her beloved wolves. But Ruby's instincts were so keen on any given day that it would be virtually impossible to sneak up on her, and in such occasions she was rarely in a crowd big enough for anyone to get to her without being seen or heard well ahead of their strike.

The only place left that fit the criteria in Emma's mind was the Diner. Now and then Ruby would still work weekend shifts to help her aging grandmother, such as when the place was slammed or someone called in sick unexpectedly. A crowded rush hour Diner would provide the perfect opportunity for a pro to dose her without being caught. In such a busy atmosphere, the assailant could 'pretend' to bump into Ruby between tables, slip an injection into her arm, and then apologize their way out of the Diner without causing a second thought. It was, Emma decided, the perfect setup. She stopped her pacing.

"They'll try at the Diner," she said, thoroughly convinced. "I'll need you to alert me any time she goes there, whether to grab take-out or to pick up a random shift. She generally lets me know if she goes in on a weekend to help Granny out, so I can make sure someone is there watching her for those."

Regina looked at Emma with an inquisitive tilt to her head. "Why the Diner?"

"People," Emma explained, "crowds, a busy atmosphere, talking, the noise of the kitchen and silverware and such. All good distractions, particularly because Ruby will likely only be working when the Diner is at over-capacity or understaffed. In both those scenarios, she will be distracted waiting tables. I've seen how it can be sometimes since the town really started growing. She barely gets time to think let alone keep watch for some nondescript assassin that's out to kill her."

Nodding, Regina hummed as if appreciative of the impressive analysis. "That makes sense. Do you think I should tell her about this as well? I mean, from a professional point of view."

"I think you should, yeah. But like I said, it won't matter. She won't have time to react if they hit the
way I think they will. She'll need to be guarded." Emma then made her way over to the couch and sat next to Regina, leaving a comfortable space between their bodies. "Regardless, I also think it's prudent to have an antidote ready." Regina's face slipped at the suggestion. Emma recognized the expression immediately and grimaced as her hopes of heading this latest crisis off plummeted precipitously. "Wait, there is an antidote isn't there?"

"No, there isn't," was the former Queen's anguished reply. "Prevention in this case is our only hope."

For the third time, Emma swore, this time letting out a string of vile expletives that had Regina rolling her eyes in disapproval. But Emma was unconcerned, as the lack of an antidote complicated things immeasurably, enough that she knew she was going to have to come at this from a completely different angle. A good defense was simply not going to be enough. She was going to have to find the assassin before they could strike and put an end to this threat before it manifested itself. That meant conducting an intensive investigation to ferret out names and places. Considering that the hired gun was probably a seasoned pro, she realized how slim of a chance she stood of garnering enough actionable intel to prevent an attack.

She peered at Regina inquisitively, now grasping for straws. "Did Spencer happen to give up anything else? Like a location this person was staying at or even their name?"

"It just so happens that he did," Regina replied in an apologetic manner. Emma quirked a brow at the unusually recalcitrant response. "The man's name is Thomas Hatter. I believe you're acquainted with his elder brother, Jefferson."

Emma groaned at the mention of the Mad Hatter. "Oh, you have got to be kidding me," she groused, then sighed rather dramatically. "Well, at least Jefferson is not so bad since the curse broke. Paige really helped him to settle in here, and for the most part I think he's over me beating the crap out of him way back when. I mean, we're not friends by any stretch of the imagination, but he's not a bad guy. I think he'll be willing to help us."

Regina let out a noise that sounded almost like a growl. Emma wondered if that was because Ruby's wolfish ways were rubbing off on her after all these years. If so, it was too adorable for words, though Emma would never express that thought out loud. She quite liked breathing.

"He'd better," Regina then stated imperiously. "If he doesn't, he'll answer to me. And he might be a good person now, but there was a time when his moral compass skewed more dark gray than anything else. So, if he gives you any trouble, just remind him that he owes me, and that I've let his debt slide long enough. I'm calling it in now. And should he refuse..."

"Don't worry, he won't," Emma interjected, not wanting to hear the descriptive threat undoubtedly soon to follow. "I'll talk to him tomorrow, okay? We'll get to the bottom of this, but in the meantime I suggest that you don't let Ruby out of your sight unless someone is with her, like me, Mom and Dad, Granny, Zelena, or even Belle. And speaking of my parents, do they know about this threat?"

Regina nodded. "I told them when they visited Ruby in the hospital. They already knew about Spencer, and as loathe as I am to admit it, I need their help to protect her." Her visage darkened under the burden of frustration and a barely detectable sub-layer of self-recrimination. "It pains me to even admit that. As her spouse, it's my duty to protect her, yet she's already died once under my watch, and now some lunatic wants to murder her because her father is a vengeful, soulless psychopath." Learning forward to place her elbows on her knees, she dropped her head into her hands and groaned miserably. "I feel like such a failure as a wife."

"Hey, don't say that," Emma objected as she shuffled over to gently rub her friend's back. "It's not true. You're not a bad wife, Regina." When Regina looked up with doubtful, guilt-ridden eyes,
Emma's heart twisted painfully. She grasped Regina's left hand with her free one, then gave the trembling appendage a gentle, reassuring squeeze. "I promise you're not!" she reiterated fervently. "Both Ruby and I have seen some bad spouses on the job over the years. Believe me, you aren't one of them. And while I can't really imagine how you feel, you can't blame yourself for what happened with Joshua Woods."

At that name, Regina's whole body tensed so tightly that the squeeze of her hand nearly crushed Emma's. Wincing internally as well as externally, Emma apologized for the slip before saying, "I know you hate hearing that name, but it's true. What happened to Ruby is his fault, not yours. If you recall, you were kinda out of commission for a while there."

"Another failure," Regina lamented, clearly disgusted with herself over this still-open wound. That some of them were obviously still festering spoke to how deeply that tragedy had cut the overly-proud woman.

"I disagree," Emma said. "You thought it was Ruby coming home, how could you have accounted for a lunatic lumberjack ax murderer showing up at your front door? No one blames you for what happened, Regina, no one ever did."

Averting her gaze, Regina swallowed heavily. "That doesn't mean I don't blame myself."

"But you shouldn't," Emma insisted, drawing the Queen's eyes back to her own. "You saved Ruby's life, remember? After being stabbed only hours earlier, you somehow dragged yourself out of a hospital bed to run to her rescue, all without a thought for your own safety. Ruby would still be dead if you hadn't found her. What you did for her was...is incredible."

Trailing off, Emma thought about her own parents who also shared a heart. That Emma knew of, they were the only other such couple living. "You know, I always thought my Mom and Dad were the greatest love story of all time, and to be honest, for a long time I wasn't totally convinced that what you and Ruby had would last."

At Regina's hurt and mildly offended expression, Emma hurried along, "but I was wrong. So wrong. What you did changed my mind on both fronts. You and Ruby...you guys are gonna get old and wrinkly and cranky together, 'cause what you have is special. It's something worth fighting for, something to never, ever regret, even when bad things have happened along the way. So, no, you're not a bad wife, Regina. For Ruby, you're the perfect wife, just like she is for you."

Looking like she didn't know what to say, Regina just sat there as silent tears cascaded down her impossibly well-sculpted cheeks. For a long time, she stared at Emma with an expression of awed gratitude that created a warmth that radiated within her very being. She had done something right and it quite honestly made her feel like a million bucks.

"I..." Regina began, searching for words. "I...I don't know what to say besides thank you. Thank you, Emma. I needed to hear that."

Smiling brightly, Emma patted Regina's hand still clutched in her own. "And I needed to say it. But you know what else I need to do? Get going so I can check up on Dad and Killian. There was a small fire at the library they were investigating. I trust them and all, but you know me..." she trailed off, knowing Regina understood her need to be involved despite also needing to rest.

"I do," the woman said as she released Emma's hand to wipe her tears away. Once her face was dry (and a little bit smudged from where her makeup ran), she then said, "I hope everything is okay at the library, though. Was anyone hurt?"

Emma shook her head. "I don't think so. I called Dad on the way over and he said Belle caught it
before it got bad and was able to put it out. Luckily it started in a small storage room where a bunch of old books were. They lost a few but he said most survived. Belle wasn't happy at all, though."

"I imagine not," Regina commented, giving Emma a knowing look. Belle did love her books. "In any case, as mayor I'd appreciate being kept apprised of the situation if you don't mind."

"I'd be glad to," Emma replied before clapping her hands on her knees and shoving herself off the couch. "Well, I better get to it, but listen, I'll visit Jefferson first thing in the morning and I'll call you after, okay?"

"Alright," Regina nodded, then stood herself and followed Emma to the front door. "Thank you again, Emma."

Giving Regina's shoulder a squeeze, Emma caught the woman's still-tense eyes. "You're welcome," she said, "and don't worry, I've got this. I'll do whatever I have to do to protect Ruby. You have my word."

Regina's answering smile actually reached her eyes. "I know you will. Goodbye, Emma, and do drive safely."

Before turning away and walking down the sidewalk, Emma grinned. She knew that was a subtle jab at her beloved Beetle. Regina never did warm up to the car but she was still Emma's baby, one that would be driven until she literally fell apart.

"Always do. Give Ruby a kiss for me." Regina raised a brow at that, to which Emma smirked, knowing how much it bothered Regina how close she came to making a move on Ruby back when she was new in town. "An innocently platonic one, of course," she playfully amended, to which Regina rolled her eyes affectionately.

And with that, she departed from the Mills house and made her way to her car. Tomorrow she would visit Jefferson with the hopes he could help her find his brother. If she was unable to find Thomas Hatter before his opportunity arose, she knew the odds of stopping him were slim to none, so she prayed that Jefferson knew something that could lead to his brother's location. Ruby's life was once again hanging in the balance, and if Jefferson couldn't help her, it was more likely than not that she would fail. If that happened, it would all be her fault and that was a burden of guilt that she was unequipped to handle.

As a child growing up in the system, Emma had been broken many times. So many times that after a while she stopped hoping, stopped investing herself in any prospective parents. Allowing her heart to callous over saved her a lot of grief as she grew older and wiser in the ways of the world. But now that callous had softened, leaving her vulnerable once more, and she had to wonder whether or not Ruby's death would be the final break in her walls that brought the lot of them crumbling around her head to crush her beyond repair.

Fear of the very possibility made it imperative for Emma to succeed. She could not afford to lose Ruby, nor could Regina, nor could Sophia and Amelia, and nor could the town. Without even trying to, Ruby had become the invisible glue that held everything together, selflessly weaving herself into so many tapestries that deprived of her, countless lives would become unraveled. The wailing and weeping that would surely take place at the funeral of such a well loved and respected person might drown out the ocean, which in of itself was an appalling thought.

Shaking her head of such a terrible contemplation, she drove away from Mifflin Street, her entire body was tense with reluctance to put any amount of distance between herself and Ruby. But overriding that heavy responsibility was an eagerness to get started on her search. She just hoped the
fire at the library wouldn't take long to process, because she could really, really use a good back rub from her husband, even if he was a one-handed pirate.

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully the many threads woven throughout this fic - and its forerunner - are beginning to emerge into a cohesive picture. This plot has been a long, sinuous one that may have seemed interminable, but I assure you it is coming to a climax in the near future. And probably not in the way anyone is envisioning.

As for why the Emma chapters, I wanted to keep consistency between installments in the series. And I just love Emma to pieces. I won't be able to watch the show without her.
Chapter Summary

Emma visits Jefferson, then stresses over how that goes down.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 28 – A Swan's Perspective, pt.5

Emma raised her hand, prepared to knock upon Jefferson's door save for a sudden anxiety that arrested her knuckles short. She was not looking forward to this visit.

Under a mutually unspoken agreement, it had been quite some time since she'd really interacted with the maniac who had abducted two women for the sole purpose of forcing one of them to energize a new magical hat. Emma hadn't forgotten that trespass, even if she now understood and at least somewhat sympathized with Jefferson's erratic, inexplicable actions during the Curse. That said, he was a good father to his daughter, so she was willing to extend him some modicum of mercy in giving him a wide berth. And so after the curse, they settled into a mutually beneficial relationship in which neither spoke to the other beyond pleasantries or necessity.

Unfortunately, that became unsustainable when Henry and Paige became friends. By the time high school rolled around, the two kids had grown to be inseparable, and that meant Emma had to endure many tense dinners with Paige's father present. She did it for Henry, though, not for Jefferson, a sentiment she didn't have to be told was wholeheartedly reciprocated. Cordiality was the best they could do. Emma just hoped the detente would afford her some leeway in the coming conversation; she needed Jefferson's help to stop his brother from hurting Ruby.

"Well, Swan," Killian drawled from beside her, drawing her attention, "are you going to knock or just stare at the door?"

Her husband had volunteered to accompany her when Esperanza got unexpectedly roped into a double shift at the Diner. Since being introduced to Storybrooke, Esperanza had been staying at the B&B courtesy of her cousin, though that was about to change. Now that she had a steady supply of income from her job waitressing, the woman's pride demanded she take responsibility for herself, even though Regina and Granny both insisted it was unnecessary. Like her elder kinswoman, Esperanza was stubborn, tenacious, and prideful as a damn mule, which made her a particularly deadly fighter and someone Emma had quickly learned to trust in a scuffle. When the hellbeasts had attacked them in the forest near the Dark Palace, Esperanza had saved Emma's life by intercepting one of the demonic creatures about to pounce on her unawares from behind.

It was an unfortunate, she thought, to not have Esperanza's blade with her should Thomas Hatter make an appearance. But nothing could be done about it. Granny was especially shorthanded with Ruby temporarily disabled and unable to fill in, and with Esperanza only just now wading into the flow of modern life, Emma didn't want to upset things more than necessary. Besides, she had someone on whom she could always rely to have her back, and he was pretty handy with a blade, too.
Emma frowned, more at her hesitance to be at Jefferson's than Killian's sarcasm. There was an ominous bite to the air that had her teeth on edge. "I was planning on knocking, but I always get a little antsy around this place," she said, which was true. Drawing back her hand for a moment, Emma gazed up at the edifice of the Mad Hatter's home, remembering a time her only association with it was when she was drugged and held at gunpoint by its owner. She could still remember the woozy feeling of panic as she came to, tied up next to a similarly restrained Mary Margaret, wondering what the hell was happening as her mind started conjuring up all sorts of equally horrendous possibilities.

Laying a gentle hand on her shoulder, Killian stepped to her side, offering his unwavering support. "I get that," he said with a slight smile. "I have every confidence you could do this alone, but you don't have to. As always, I'll be by your side."

Breathing deeply, Emma took his hand and gave him a grateful smile. His uncanny ability to read her had long since become a comfort rather than an annoyance. Without a word, she turned back to the door and raised her hand then knocked loudly. When nothing happened, not even a stir from inside, she tried again, pounding on the door with her fist several times before she finally heard heavy footsteps approaching.

"Alright, alright!" Emma faintly heard Jefferson complaining through the thick wood. "I'm coming." With a flourish, he pulled open the door, an exasperated pout on his face. "Emma?" His wary greeting was accentuated by tightly drawn brows. "What do you want?"

"To talk," she supplied succinctly, not at all bothered by the rude reception. "Can we come in?"

Jefferson leaned against the door, wariness transforming into a mischievous smirk. "Depends on what you wanna talk about."

Sighing, Emma stepped forward and pushed through the doorway without his permission. "I don't have time for your games," she said as she passed by the protesting Hatter. Killian follow her inside with a smug grin.

"By all means," Jefferson commented as he closed the door, "come right in. Make yourselves at home."

"Thanks, mate. Think I will," Killian responded, grinning piratically as he gave Jefferson's shoulder a resounding slap.

"You're welcome..." Jefferson sighed and then followed Emma and Killian into his living room.

Once everyone was present, Emma rounded on Jefferson. "Were you aware that your brother is in town?"

Jefferson's eyes popped as his entire frame went rigid. "Wait," he said, tenor unsteady, "Thomas is here? In Storybrooke?"

"Apparently so," Emma said, crossing her arms over her chest. To her side, Killian copied the intimidating posture. With his dark brows lowered into a rather menacing glare and his silver hook gleaming against the black leather of his jacket, he cut a figure that was, quite frankly, super sexy. While Emma would have loved to ogle her husband some more, she reminded herself of her purpose for visiting Jefferson in the first place. Returning her attention to the Hatter, she went on to explain, "Per Regina, Albert Spencer hired him to do something nasty. I'm here to stop that from happening."

Cocking his head, Jefferson looked at Emma in confusion. "I don't see what that has to do with me."
If you talked to Regina, you should know that my brother and I aren't on the best of terms. I haven't
seen or spoken to him since well before the Curse."

"And why is that?" Emma prodded, hoping to lead Jefferson into revealing something that might
help her locate Thomas Hatter before he could hurt Ruby.

Shaking his head, Jefferson gave Emma a pleading look. "It's a long story I'd really rather not get
into."

Emma groaned, frustrated at Jefferson's reluctance. With Ruby's life on the line, she wasn't inclined
to care whether or not Jefferson wanted to get into it. She leveled him with her best threatening glare.

"I didn't come here to walk away empty handed. Give me the CliffsNotes version."

After giving a longsuffering sigh, Jefferson crossed over the room and plopped down heavily onto
his couch. He then scrubbed a hand over his face. "Our father gave me the family business rather
than him," he said. "The realm jumping...I was never interested in it, but Thomas was. It fascinated
him. I would say his fixation on it was unhealthy. He used to sit and stare at the hat for hours,
imagining all the worlds he could visit and the adventures he could have. But he was the younger
brother, so when our father died, the hat came to me. Thomas always held that against me."

"Which explains why he doesn't like you," Emma said, "but not why he's working for Spencer or
what he's going to do."

"I wouldn't know that kind of information," Jefferson replied. Emma could discern no detectable
deception in him, so she held her tongue and let him continue. "I lost contact with my brother when
he turned twenty. He wrote me a letter informing me that he'd procured another hat, didn't say how,
and that he was going into business for himself." Shrugging, Jefferson looked almost unaffected by
the separation that had occurred between himself and his sibling, a clear indication to Emma that they
had never been close in the first place. "By that time, I'd met Grace's mother, so I can't say I
expended much in the way of effort to track him down."

Emma started to deflate the more Jefferson spoke, and by the time he grew silent once more, she
began to fear that her best lead was a serious bust. She couldn't afford it to be because she had
nothing else to go on other than personally visiting Spencer in prison to grill the old goat, and Emma
would prefer to avoid that at all costs for fear of strangling the bastard when she saw him. Landing in
prison for assault wasn't going to help anyone. Which left Jefferson as the only option, and that
rapidly losing relevance.

"I did hear something, though," Jefferson began to speak once more, his tone changed significantly
as if he had just recalled something relevant. Emma's hope flared to life once more. "About the time
Grace was born, I got a visit from an old friend of my father who had heard about Thomas ferrying
individuals of...ill-repute between worlds. Said he was worried because of the type of service he'd
heard Thomas was offering. When I asked him about it, all he could, or would, say was it was the
kind of work I'd never do. Things that required getting your hands dirty in a more direct way."

Looking at a scowling Emma, Jefferson had the common decency to look contrite for the part he'd
played in Regina's descent into madness. "I'll admit I did some pretty sleazy things back then, but
nothing like that." He shook his head. "I just couldn't believe it, though. Not about Thomas. I guess I
still remembered the starry-eyed kid he used to be, dreaming about watching sunsets on other worlds
and dancing with exotic princesses. I knew he started to change as he got older but I never imagined
he could change that much."

"It's a good thing I did," a voice suddenly cut in from the corner of the room. Emma whirled in place.
There, next to a window where the drapes were hanging down loosely, a shadow moved. A man who looked very much like Jefferson stepped out into the light. "My line of work is so much more...lucrative. And interesting. You always were an underachiever, brother."

"Thomas!" Jefferson exclaimed, bursting out of his seated position. Pulling her gun, Emma leveled it on the intruder, but Jefferson waved her off. Against her better judgment, she lowered her weapon, but kept her finger on the trigger as she watched Jefferson cautiously approach his brother. "How the hell did you get in here?"

"The same way I get in everywhere," Thomas said evasively, grinning with an air of superiority.

"What are you doing here?" Jefferson then asked. Emma noted the tense line of his shoulders, coiled as if ready to react at a moment's notice.

Shrugging, Thomas picked at his fingernails as if bored. "I assumed she'd already told you." At that, he gestured to Emma in the same unconcerned manner as he had addressed Jefferson. "I'm on a job."

Those words seemed to cut through Jefferson like a knife. He stumbled back a pace, jaw hanging loose. "It's true?"

Thomas turned disappointed eyes on his older brother. "You really are painfully naive, aren't you? Of course it's true. I always said I was better suited for the family business because I'm more willing to go the extra mile to satisfy a client. There was an untapped market in what we could offer and I knew you didn't have the stomach for it."

Disgusted, Jefferson ran a jittery hand through his hair. "But murder? Thomas..."

"Don't," Thomas interrupted. "I didn't come here for a lecture. I'm here to issue a warning to you, Jefferson. Stay out of my way. I came here for a job and I won't leave until I've done it, and family or not, I won't let you stand in my way." Cutting his eyes over to Emma, he glared menacingly. "That goes for you as well, Sheriff. If you know what's good for you, you won't attempt to intervene."

Drawing herself up to her full height, Emma clutched her gun in a white-knuckled grip. She could feel the tension radiating off Killian as well.

"If you think I'm gonna stand by and do nothing while you kill my friend, you are one seriously delusional idiot," Emma replied with her own warning. "I've fought for her and killed for her, so consider that when you hear this. This is my warning to you. Walk away. Right now. I won't stop you, I won't prosecute you, and I won't follow you. Leave Storybrooke a free man and never return. But if you so much as touch a hair on Ruby's head, I'll..."

Thomas laughed. "You'll what? Shoot me?"

"For starters," Emma nodded. "But I won't kill you. That I promise. I'll shoot to wound and then I'll just hand you over to Regina and let her decide what to do with you. I imagine she can get very creative with punishments, what with all her expertise in the area being an ex-Evil Queen. Hell, I think I'd actually pay to watch her dismantle you one piece at a time."

"Oooooo, I'm scared," Thomas mocked, childishly feigning fear.

"Aye, as well you should be," Killian said, every bit as annoyed as Emma at Thomas' antics. "I've seen what the Queen can do up close and personal. So if you won't listen to Emma, take the advice of an old pirate who learned a long time ago when to fight and when to retreat: leave now while you still can. You're one man and Ruby has a whole town of people who love her and would gladly avenge her. The odds are not in your favor, mate."
Drawing back a step, Thomas gave Emma a conniving and unnerving expression that reminded her of a coiled up snake, preparing to deliver a death blow to its unsuspecting prey.

"I disagree," he then said, shadows falling over his face as he backed into the darkened corner, lending a sinister effect to his face. "You've no idea what I'm capable of. Many have tried to evade my grasp only to fail. Say your goodbyes to your friend, because when you least expect it, I'll strike. And then it will be too late for you to save her."

"Thomas!" Emma exclaimed as she advanced, realizing she had forgotten to mention the only piece of information that might convince Thomas to cease his efforts against Ruby. "Stop! Spencer has called off the hit!"

But with a wicked gleam in his eye, Thomas shrugged, producing a small white ball in his hand from his coat pocket. "I don't care. He's not the one I answer to."

Rushing toward him, Emma raised her weapon to fire, but just as she squeezed the trigger, Thomas threw the ball to the ground, which exploded in a blinding flash and a billow of suffocating white smoke. Emma heard her round strike the wall behind her. Thomas had escaped. As she covered her nose and mouth with her elbow to block the smoke from entering her lungs, she heard Jefferson and Killian coughing behind her, their own lungs protesting the abrasive smoke.

Emma glared angrily into the slowly dissipating cloud, Thomas' threat hanging heavily in the air. She had failed, and now, she had no idea what to do. How was she going to face Ruby after letting the assassin escape? Or Regina? How was she going to look Regina in the eye and tell the fearsome woman that she had failed to apprehend Thomas when he was right in front of her? She'd had every chance to end the threat to Ruby's life before it became a serious reality; a single shot would have been all it took. But as usual since her arrival in Storybrooke, her stubborn sense of right and wrong intervened, preventing her from taking the opportunity that fate had presented to her.

The uncomfortable reality set in that she was going to have to tell Ruby and Regina what had happened. She didn't want to, of course, but both women deserved the truth, if only to be prepared that Thomas was out there, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. As both Sheriff and the couple's closest friend, she was obligated to inform them of her terrible mistake, and that was a conversation she was dreading more and more as each second ticked by.

For the first time in a very long time, Emma felt like an absolute failure. She had forgotten how miserable it was, but at the same time, she couldn't complain because she'd earned it. If something happened to Ruby in the days to come, if Thomas made good on his threats and she was unable to stop him, she wasn't sure that she could live with the guilt.

Laying her head in her hands, Emma plopped down on her parent's bed and groaned. A month had passed since the day Thomas Hatter escaped from Jefferson's home and she was no closer to putting him in cuffs than in the moments before he'd used some kind of ninja crap to disappear. After that abysmal failure, she stormed out of the house, but not before leveling a few pointed threats at Jefferson demanding his cooperation should his brother resurface and attempt to contact him. In no way did Emma believe that would happen, but just in case it did, she wanted her bases covered. In any case, Jefferson agreed.

The next several hours passed in a flurry of activity. Sending Killian to the Diner, Emma personally went to check in on Ruby, who she found asleep on the couch in a medicated stupor. Apparently she had been in pain again so Regina had forced more pills down her. It made Emma uncomfortable to see Ruby in such a condition for the second day in a row but at least she was still breathing.
Regina, on the other hand, had been wide awake and in rare form.

_Tromping into the living room with a stony countenance, she announced herself to Emma with hard-set eyes. "You're here awfully early." It was nearly noon but Emma understood the reference to be relative._

_Dreading the unenviable task of facing the intimidating woman's wrath, Emma tensed. "Regina..."_

"What are you doing here?" Upon sweeping her eyes over Emma's form, Regina's frame coiled up tightly as if a starved cobra preparing to strike her hapless prey. "I was under the impression you were going to give Jefferson a visit."

"I did!" Emma gulped, feeling a bit too much like a plump little field mouse. "It didn't go well. Thomas Hatter dropped in unannounced to level some threats and warn me off trying to save Ruby."

At the mention of the assassin, Regina's eyes widened dramatically. "And? Please tell me he's in cuffs right now."

_Shuffling her feet in a guilty manner, Emma ducked her head. "He isn't. I'm sorry. He kinda...escaped."

"He what?" Regina exploded, anger flooding her face, twisting it into a vicious sneer. "How could you allow that to happen, Swan?!"

_Facing Regina's fury head on, Emma narrowed her eyes. From experience, she knew open confrontation was the only way to deal with the woman when she was worked up like she'd been. Any show of weakness was like chum in the water, drawing the predacious shark in for the kill._

"I didn't allow anything to happen," she argued. "The second I noticed he was fixing to bolt I charged him, but he used some ninja powder crap to cover his escape. I fired two rounds into the cloud but both missed. I owe Jefferson for that damage, by the way, so it's not as if I purposefully let him get away. I did the best I could!"

"Poor Emma," Regina mocked, now clearly shifting into a more habitual mode of dealing with her feelings of anxiety. Like the predator she was, she stalked forward until nearly in Emma's face. The tension that built between them was the worst it had been in years. "A few dollars lighter and a brand-new boatload of guilt resting on her sculpted shoulders...ever the Savior, but of what, I wonder? Or better yet, of whom? Certainly not of my wife! You've saved everyone in this town but this makes thrice you've failed Ruby!"

_Gulping down a lump of red hot shame along with a healthy dose of indignation, Emma averted her eyes, "I'm sorry, Regina. I tried, I swear."_

"Not good enough," Regina growled, so close now that her breath was warm on Emma's face. Those pearly white teeth of hers glinted dangerously. "Like always, it falls to me to do what is necessary. How many more times must I run to your rescue, hmm? I must say, I'm getting quite tired of it, if only because your failures always cost me more than I can bear to pay. If something happens to her because you let that cowardly sack of horse dung slip through your fingers..."

"You'll what?" Emma burst out, tears pricking at her eyes. "Blame me? Scream at me? Set me on fire? Believe me, Regina, you won't need to. I already blame myself!"

"As you should! This is on you, Miss Swan," Regina punctuated her words by painfully pressing the
tip of her index finger against Emma's shoulder. "So go out there and do your damn job! For once in your life, save someone that matters to me!"

"I already have," Emma ground out, hurt and lashing out herself. "I saved our son. Or have you forgotten?"

Blanching, Regina stumbled back before straightening suddenly after recovering from the remark. "That was different. You did that for Henry and for yourself."

"And I'm doing this for myself!" Emma pressed on, emboldened by Regina's stumble. "Have you also forgotten that I love Ruby, too? You think you're the only one who cares about her? Stop being a selfish bitch, Regina! It doesn't suit you anymore."

Eyes wide and gaping, Regina grasped at her chest as her anger at last began to fade. Shame replaced it almost immediately. "I-I'm sorry, Emma," she gasped, looking aghast, "I don't know what came over me."

Regina might not have known the root cause of her meltdown, but Emma most certainly did. Once, during a scuffle with a djinn summoned by Jaffar – an exceptionally pernicious creature with wind-based magic that managed to lay waste to a couple of shops in the town square before Emma could subdue it – dislodged bricks and used them as projectiles, one of which hit Ruby in the head and knocked her out cold. Since Regina had been busy protecting the citizens milling about the square during the attack, she'd very loudly blamed Ruby's injury on Emma. They argued for five minutes in front of a half-rapt, half-terrified audience ready to run at a moment's notice should the two come to blows. Cooler heads only prevailed when David arrived to separate irrationally hot-headed women. And while Emma had apologized almost immediately, Regina just huffed dismissively and waltzed away to check on Ruby at the ambulance parked nearby.

Later that night, though, Emma got a call from a surprisingly contrite Regina, who explained – even though she didn't have to – that concern for Ruby's welfare had made her, "regrettably revert to admittedly problematic habits," which was Her Royal Highness' diplomatic way of saying she'd gone apeshit for a few minutes. Since the incident scared the white out of Emma's already pale complexion, too, she'd considered the explanation perfectly understandable if not totally inappropriate. And though she accepted the apology, things were tense between her and Regina for a few days because she'd sailed way past sick of being Regina's favorite blonde punching bag.

Sighing at the thought that she ought to be used to it by now, Emma stepped forward and laid a comforting hand on the former Queen's shoulder. "I do. You're scared. Guess what? So am I. But I promise I am going to do everything in my power to catch Thomas Hatter. I've not failed yet, so give me time."

With a sadness and vulnerability in her brown eyes that Emma rarely ever got to see, Regina gazed up and asked, "What if she doesn't have time?"

Squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin, Emma returned Regina's gaze with one of resolve. "Then I'll find another way. If I must, I'll die trying. I love her, too, Regina, and just like you, I'm not ready to let her go."

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Looking back, Emma regretted allowing Regina such precious insight into the depths of her feelings for Ruby. But at the time, it just seemed like the right thing to say. Plus it worked, so she dismissed the words until she was back at home later that night. Resting comfortably in her husband's arms, it suddenly struck her that she had never really moved beyond her feelings for Ruby, not in a
completely-over-it way that eradicated those occasional fits of intense attraction. They had gotten rarer as the years went by, but Emma would be lying if she said she didn't have them anymore. Those old feelings were still there, stubborn to the end to die out, and seemed to crop up at the worst moments possible.

It was difficult for her to reconcile the reality that she could love two people at once, something she had once thought a ridiculous notion. When she was younger, she'd read a modernized version of Sir Thomas Mallory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* and found herself questioning whether Guinevere had ever truly been torn between Lancelot and Arthur. The more she contemplated the problem, the more she came to believe that if Guinevere had loved Arthur at all, she could not have fallen in love with Lancelot. To her teenage mind, it seemed absurd for the heart to work in such a way that it could be so easily swayed from one True Love to another, so as a consequence she became convinced that Guinevere had never truly loved Arthur or if she had, that love had long since faded.

But that night at home after carrying around her paralyzing fear for Ruby's safety for the entire day along with her crushing guilt at having failed to secure it, she was suddenly struck by the revelation that she had become a living contradiction to her own conclusion. For while it was an incontrovertible fact that she loved Killian with all her heart, she also loved Ruby, and not exclusively in the way best friends ought. There were still yearnings there, however deeply buried, that were completely inappropriate for a married woman to be having for another married woman.

To be honest, her feelings for Ruby were so complicated that it was hard to put any kind of label on them. There was a platonic love there for sure, and it was incredibly strong, True Love strong really, but Emma had other friends besides Ruby and none of them made her ache with the need to just be close to them or with the nearly irresistible desire to touch them. When she hung out with Elsa, she didn't sit and stare in awe at the Ice Queen's beauty, nor did she shamefully daydream about what it would feel like to kiss her. But with Ruby, Emma stared and she daydreamed, and though those flights of fancy didn't occur very often, they did enough that she lived almost constantly cognizant of how very easy it would be to slip up and cross a line that couldn't be uncrossed. If only Ruby proved willing, that is. Which she wouldn't, because honestly, Emma didn't think it was humanly possible for anyone to love another as much as Ruby did Regina.

Of course, there was also her firm belief to consider that if things had not happened as they did, there would be no her and Killian just as there would be no Ruby and Regina. Had she only been given more time to settle into life in Storybrooke before being thrown into the crucible of serving as a Savior she'd never wanted to be, she would have acted on her feelings for the vivacious waitress who, other than Henry, was the first person to make her want to settle down in one place long enough to establish some roots. If given the opportunity to be with Ruby, there was no doubt in her mind that in such a scenario, they would have inevitably taken that next step and would still be together at the present. That was how sure she was of their compatibility.

In times when she was feeling weak, she still thought about what might have been like to really be with Ruby in every way that mattered. To come home after a long day at the office to Ruby's otherworldly smile and inhumanly strong arms. To spend the evenings cuddling on the couch watching TV and the burning away the nights with unquenchable passion. But for the most part when that happened she would stuff those kinds of thoughts down deep where they would not resurface for a very long time. Thinking that way was dangerous, for while Emma loved Ruby and probably always would, she had pushed her feelings away for so long that eventually the flames faded into little more than dimly smoldering embers. So if she contented herself in the way things were and let those dreams lay dormant, the embers would remain just so within the secret recesses of her heart where they could not be stoked back to life without her permission.

Yet, it had been that background radiation of love, as it were, that drove Emma to accompany Ruby
to the Enchanted Forest. She'd put her life in danger just so she could have the peace of mind of being personally responsible for Ruby's safety. It was also why she could access the life-threatening amounts of magic required to save Ruby's life from Belmordan. Keeping Ruby close as she had these past ten years, satisfying herself with being Ruby's best friend, was the only way to keep her inappropriate feelings at bay so that they did not have a negative impact on her life, for as Ruby's best friend she could act on her deeply held affections through little acts that were both acceptable and safe.

However, none of that meant she was emotionally unfaithful to her husband because she wasn't. Really she wasn't. Emma loved Ruby but she was in love Killian and there was a distinct difference between the two. If there was anything in her life she was certain of it was her love for her husband, which was evidenced for a second time a few years back when having fallen under a sleeping spell after an accident in Regina's brewing lab, it was Killian's kiss that awakened her. Since Emma was aware that True Love was not a one-way street, she knew what she had with him was real and tangible, and that it was that same cosmic force that had driven her parents together and which was responsible for making her into the magical being that she was. So, whenever those stray thoughts of Ruby popped up, she made sure to remind herself of that, which proved thus far to be an effectual measure of putting the proverbial genie back in the bottle.

Still, a part of her heart, however small it was, would always belong to the vision of beauty she'd first glimpsed walking down the steps at Granny's B&B, a girl whose alluring green eyes rivaled an emerald for radiance and whose smile was so impossibly gorgeous that it could steal even the breath of the wind away. And that simple fact was what worried Emma so much about the possibility of Ruby dying. Having lived through it once already in Joshua Wood's basement, Emma was in no hurry to have a repeat performance of that harrowing day.

She could still vividly remember the aftermath of that nightmare fuel of a discovery. After leading her parents home that night, Emma had fled despite their protests, unable to stomach the suffocating pressure of their concern. After hastily climbing into her car, she sped through the streets of Storybrooke, barely able to hold herself together until she got to the Sheriff's station, which she knew to be empty. Once inside, she locked herself in her office, pressed herself into the corner of the room, slid down the wall so heavily that she bruised her ass, tucked herself into a ball and then cried harder than she had in years.

At the time, Emma could remember feeling like she was about to unravel from the inside out, almost as if all of that repressed love for Ruby that lived in her heart was fixing to burst out of its prison, weakened as it was from the gaping wounds made by discovering Ruby the way she had. All she could think about was the sight of Ruby dangling from the ceiling of that dank basement, stripped of her clothing as well as her humanity, humiliated and debased and brutally tortured to an extent beyond comprehension. If it hadn't been for Killian finding her some hours later, she might spent the whole night on the dirty floor, wallowing in a misery that threatened to engulf her. Only his unflappable strength and unwillingness to let her drown under the weight of her sorrow navigated her through that night relatively unscathed but for the scream inducing nightmares that woke her from sleep over the next week.

Thankfully, Ruby's quick recovery along with Killian's support helped Emma to cope with what she'd seen, but the damage had already been done. It took a long time and a lot of patience from Killian for Emma to get to a place where she could repair and restore the broken walls that had once held her emotions for Ruby in check. Yet even though he had become aware through her reaction to Ruby's ordeal that a part of her heart belonged to someone else, and though it pained him greatly, he never wavered from standing beside her and never once judged her for what he reassured her was something beyond her control. Emma could never adequately express in words how much she loved him for how he conducted himself during that time, but she tried her damnest every day and in
every other way possible.

But now with the present threat to Ruby's life, all that progress was being threatened, and the only possible solution to the dilemma at hand hinged on her ability to do her job. With so much riding on stopping Thomas Hatter, she couldn't afford to make any mistakes, though she supposed she should be used to operating under such pressure by now. It seemed par for the course that being a Savior meant you were expected to never fail.

In any case, where Regina was concerned once her initial anger was spent, she cooled down enough to accept Emma's reassurances that she would do everything in her power to keep Ruby safe while employing every technique she had learned during her bounty hunter days to track down the assassin. Emma then went on to explain her plan to protect Ruby in detail, and though Regina did not apologize for her earlier chastisement, she did express her gratitude to Emma for all she was willing to do on Ruby's behalf.

With things somewhat smoothed out between herself and the formidable woman who still managed to rule over Storybrooke despite being democratically elected, Emma went by the station to check in on things there. Her father and Killian were hard at work investigating the arson at the library and seemed to have things well in hand, so she took the opportunity to go home for an early rest. The next day, Emma put her plans in motion.

Over the weeks that followed, there was an almost constant watch on Ruby, mostly in the form of her overprotective spouse, but it also seemed many of their friends were eager to help in whatever way they could. From the usual suspect such as her parents, Belle, Mulan, the Dwarves, Blue, Nova, Tinkerbelle, and Robin and his Merry Men to the new arrivals to Storybrooke, Esperanza and the Dire wolves, the volunteer list to watch and protect Ruby was rather impressive. Emma accommodated most of their requests by assigning shifts to reconnoiter the Mansion at 108 Mifflin Street from an empty house across the way, instructing them to alert her of any movement of either strange individuals who didn't belong and to follow Ruby at a discreet distance if she left the house.

During the first week the watch was active, not a single attempt was made on Ruby's life, nor was there a sighting of suspicious activity in or around the house, so Emma was grudgingly forced to approve a stir crazy Ruby's request return to work a week after that. Things seemed to settle into a semi-normal rhythm after that. Ruby spent most of her time doing paperwork she had fallen behind on while on paid injury leave and Emma tackling what few cases that trickled in with her father.

The arrangement worked well up until Ruby started to get stir crazy. For the past two days, she had inundated Emma with request to return to field work, all which Emma begged off as best she could. While Ruby was certainly healthy enough to get back to working cases, to Emma's dismay she discovered that it was she who was not yet ready. Apparently what Ruby had gone through back in the Enchanted Forest was still a source of immense discomfort and was paralyzing her from taking that final step by putting Ruby back on active duty.

It should not have been a surprise. The threat of Belmordan's return was a specter lurking over her shoulder everywhere she looked to the point that even Killian had picked up on her jittery nerves. When he'd confronted Emma about it, she reluctantly opened to him about what had happened, filling him in on the major details.

"Bloody hell," he'd sworn after she finished her tale. "This bloke seems dangerous."

The understatement was so gross, Emma had laughed almost derisively. "Dangerous? No. Walking across a busy intersection is dangerous. Neverland was dangerous. Saving me from the dagger was dangerous. But this guy? Belmordan? He is something altogether different."
Looking perturbed, Killian's brows drew together darkly. "You sound as if you're actually...frightened of this man."

Without even bothering to meet his eyes, Emma stared into the fire roaring in the little brick fireplace in their home. Her eyes danced with the flames, so wild and barely restrained as they sought for the tiniest opportunity to leap out of their confined area to devour everything in sight. The flames, she thought, understood her fear because they were kin to the source of it.

Much like a wildfire burning out of control, Belmordan was an unpredictable and totally unstoppable force, a man to be feared and never to be underestimated. The magic he possessed was more than enough reason to view him as a credible threat; it was so potent that it had choked her whenever he was nearby and was stifling to such a degree that she was certain beyond a reasonable doubt that if he'd wished it, none of her party would have made it out of that castle alive. It was only by his design that they could leave, though what that design was she could not guess, nor could she understand why he'd suddenly changed his mind and then tried to stop them at the bean portal.

The only thing Emma did know was that it was a stroke of good luck that saved them. Had they not stumbled across the sword in the stone during their breach of the Dark Palace's secret entrance, all of them would be dead. It was the power of that ancient weapon calling to her combined with her panic at Ruby's imminent death that enabled her to summon the potentially deadly concentration of power required to shear through Belmordan's shield.

*Excalibur,* it had whispered in her mind, a warm inviting sensation that was as familiar to her as her own thought. *I am Excalibur who sunders bonds and breaches barriers. Wield me, my mistress, for save you none now living are worthy.*

As if something mystical happened, Emma felt herself connect with the sword in a way that should not be possible. It was like it was no longer a weapon but a part of her body that fed into her magic and which her magic fed into. Tightening her grip, she felt a surge of energy flow through her body unlike anything she had ever felt. It was so stimulating that she lost herself in ecstasy, swimming with an untold power that made the impossible seem mundane.

Somehow intuitively understanding what needed to be done, she summoned her will and focused her magic down into the blade. The rush of strength it produced propelled her arm forward, straining Belmordan's magic in way that made it audibly began to groan. Once free, Emma strode forward, barely aware of her own movements. She was acting on an instinct that seemed to have been unlocked from the dark recesses of her mind, having been unleashed by a sword shaped key called Excalibur.

*Strike down our ancient enemy,* the sword chanted as she closed the gap on the stunned Belmordan, and in her mind's eye time slowed down to an infinitesimal crawl as she was transported to some other time and place.

*Emma could see herself on a darkened plain during a great battle. Armored knights were squared off in combat all around her, the bodies of the slain strewn two and three deep so that there was barely a place for her to step without it being over a corpse.*

*Before her was a foe she had never seen, a young man in the flower of his youth with dark, shaggy hair and the saddest, most regretful blue eyes she had ever seen. In the background, she could make out two figures perched upon an outcropping of rocks, watching the battle unfold. One was a woman with wild raven locks and striking features, beautiful but terrible to behold. The other was a man enshrouded in black robes, a hood thrown over his head so that his face was obscured, but jutting out from beneath the shadows was the line of a bearded chin that was so familiar Emma's breath was stolen from her body.*
Suddenly, the young man advanced. "You gave me no choice," he said, bitterness dripping from every syllable.

Raising her hand to defend herself, she parried the first blow with Excalibur, noting with awe that her hand, protected by heavy leather gloves and chain mail bracers, was not her own, but much more masculine in size.

"Rose, why don't you go pick out what you want to wear to Aunt Ruby's party, okay?" Mary Margaret's booming call shocked Emma out of her daydreaming. Looking up with slightly hazy eyes, she found her mother standing in the door of the bathroom where she had been putting the finishing touches on her makeup for the party later that evening. After noticing Emma staring blankly, she frowned.

"Honey, are you sure you're alright?" It was the fourth time in the past two hours she'd posed the question to Emma.

Obediently, Rose stood, leaving her crayons and coloring book on the floor from where she'd been coloring a picture of Big Bird. The party they were scheduled to attend was an hour away, so Emma had volunteered to watch Rose while her mother finished making the finger foods and got ready. She hadn't meant to zone out on her sister like that. Thankfully Rose hadn't seemed to notice the lapse.

The reason Emma was watching her sister in the first place was because David was scheduled to work late that day, so he was unavailable. Normally, Emma would have offered to cover for him if something came up, but because Ruby's birthday was a special occasion neither were willing to miss out on, he decided to work as long as he could until it was time for him to run home, shower, and change. If her father hadn't made arrangements for someone to spell him for the party, Emma would have found done so herself. With everything going on, Ruby needed the people she loved most around her on such a special day.

Once Rose cleared the room, Emma returned her eyes to Mary Margaret from her seated position on the floor. Her mother looked so beautiful that Emma felt moisture gathering under her eyelids, but the serious expression on her face had those nascent tears drying up quickly. Emma didn't have to inquire as to what line of thought her mother was intent on pursuing because lately, it was all Emma thought about. Her fretting over Ruby's safety had gotten to the point it consumed her waking moments. Emma knew that her family was worried about her, but with her best friend in mortal peril, she couldn't find it in herself to be concerned about her own welfare.

She knew she was going overboard with things, especially since there was a rotation of people watching over the Mills household. What's more, Emma had personally employed the Merry Men to discreetly shadow Ruby whenever she was not with Regina, herself, or anyone else she trusted enough to be sufficiently vigilant against such a threat as the Madder Hatter (which is what Emma called Thomas, much to Jefferson's displeasure) posed. Unfortunately, Ruby was too perceptive for her own good sometimes.

Ever since the detail was put into effect, Ruby was almost constantly on edge. While Emma had to commend the Merry Men for their extraordinary skill at clandestine surveillance – which was to such a degree that any normal person would not have been able to detect that they were being followed – the fact remained that they were not guarding a normal person. Ruby's heightened senses had picked them up on the first day she'd gone somewhere by herself, which just so happened to be a recently scheduled sparring session with Mulan.

After what happened with Belmordan, Ruby got it in her head that she needed to learn to fight outside of her wolf form, and since Mulan was an expert in kung fu, she had approached the stoic woman who often traveled with the Merry Men to train her. To Emma's surprise, Mulan agreed,
saying she had always admired Ruby for her strength in dealing with the monster inside. Anyway, on the way to the little studio Ruby had helped Mulan rent, she scented her tail, and the ensuing confrontation between Emma and her best friend was not pleasant.

Once she'd completed the session with Mulan, Ruby called, justifiably angry that she was not consulted about the detail. At first, Emma was confused because she thought Regina would have passed on her plan to Ruby, but for whatever reason, she hadn't, though Emma said nothing about it. It was easier to let Ruby blame her than Regina, since the last thing they needed was for there to be a rift in their relationship over what Emma thought to be an inconsequential deception at a time when, more than ever before, they needed to be a united team. Thankfully, Ruby's anger hadn't lasted long after Emma explained what was going on.

"Look, I get it, it's just..." she'd said with a sigh. "Ever since Joshua, I don't like the feeling of being watched. It gets me all twitchy and makes the scars on my back tingle."

"I'm sorry," Emma had apologized. "I wish I didn't feel like this was necessary but I do. So please don't fight this. I know it's uncomfortable for you but I need for you to stay safe, okay? This is the best way of doing that. Besides, they're not going to be on you 24/7, just on occasions when you might be distracted, like when you work at the diner on an extra busy weekend or something."

Emma could almost see the roll of Ruby's eyes and faux expression of annoyance when she huffed. "Fine. Have it your way. But please, for the love of God, tell them to take a bath before they start their shifts. I don't want to smell pine sap all day while I'm waiting tables."

"That," Emma chuckled, "I can do."

With Ruby's agreement secured, Emma felt a sense of relief settle over her. Her plan was a good one and everyone was on board, which would make things go so much easier. If Ruby had fought her on the detail, she wouldn't have been able to put her full attention to tracking Thomas, but since she hadn't, Emma could start tracking the assassin's possible movements right away.

Hours, however, turned into days, which soon turned into weeks, and with their passage, Emma's disappointment and frustration mounted. She was making little progress, as it seemed that when Thomas Hatter wanted to disappear, he did so with such skill that not even she could track him. As a professional, Emma admired that the man could remain undetected with half the town after him, but as a concerned friend she wished he would mess up just once so she could make good on her promise. The line of thought brought her back to her mother's question.

"How can I?" she finally replied. "Some lunatic is out there right now, plotting to kill my best friend and I'm here babysitting. I should be out there searching instead!"

Rather than looking offended at Emma's complaint, Mary Margaret approached and gently knelt down in front of her fully-grown daughter.

"Emma, Ruby is safe," she said evenly, as if dealing with Emma's outbursts were a frequent event, which sadly they were lately. "I just talked to Regina, she is with her right now and on high alert. No one is going to try anything, especially not tonight when we'll all be there with her. So for just one night can you stop worrying so much? You're pushing yourself too hard, sweetheart."

Blowing a gust of air through tense lips, Emma nodded reluctantly. "Listen, I know that you're right. My brain has grasped that, it's just..."

Mary Margaret sighed, knowing what was coming. "Honey, you have got to stop beating yourself up. No one blames you for letting Thomas get away."
Her face shadowed by self-admonishment, Emma replied, "I blame me."

"Emma..."

"I know, Mom, I know! I hear you. But hearing and believing are two very different things."

It had been over a month since Thomas' disappearance and not a hint of him had been found. With each day that passed, Emma felt more and more guilty about her inaction, something that Killian, her parents, and even Ruby took every opportunity to chastise her about. But not Regina.

Emma still had bruises on her ego from the castigation she'd received from her Majesty the Queen over Thomas Hatter's escape, which is exactly what Regina had been that day. The fiery indignation in those brown eyes did not belong to Regina the wife, mother, friend, or even the Mayor; rather, it belonged solely to the woman who had once ruled the Enchanted Forest with an iron fist, demanding standards of excellence of her subordinates that were beyond the scope of human possibility.

And even though Emma had been tacitly forgiven that first day, Regina still let her wallow in guilt for weeks, cutting accusing glances at Emma whenever Ruby wasn't watching, or behaving coldly towards her whenever they interacted alone. It was less than Emma felt she deserved. Since that initial outburst, Regina hadn't exploded at her or threatened to turn her into something squishy, which was good, but the cold shoulder treatment was almost less preferable to the Queen's famously explosive temper. At least then, Emma would have been in familiar territory.

As it was, she just wanted it to be over. She wished she could magically snap her fingers to make Thomas appear so she could slap her cuffs on him, drag him kicking and screaming to Regina's house, and then hand him over so that the Queen could dispense her own brand of justice on him. But wishing was an exercise in futility that Emma didn't have the luxury of. Still, her mother was right. For at least one night, she could set aside her worries and try to have a good time.

"That said," she continued, brushing a hand through her hair, "I'll try my best to have a good time, if nothing else for Ruby's sake. She needs this."

"Yes, she does." Mary Margaret took her hand, worry warring with love in green eyes that Emma had inherited. "So do you. You're carrying too much, stretching yourself too thin. It's not healthy how you're obsessing over this, Emma."

Emma sighed. "Mom..."

"I know you can take care of yourself," Mary Margaret said, already knowing what Emma was going to say. "But it's my job as your mother to be nosy and pushy."

Emma smirked at her mother. "And you do those things so very well."

Mary Margaret preened dramatically at the backward compliment, smiling that cheeky smile. "Why, thank you, honey."

They shared a laugh before Emma took her hand back and slapped at her thighs before standing. "Alright, let's go wrangle Rosie so we can get this show on the road. Can't let it get too much sappier in this house or else people might start to think you're starting an Arbor Day Foundation."

Mary Margaret groaned. "God, that was terrible! You need to stop spending so much time with Ruby because her penchant for corny jokes is rubbing off on you."

After another moment of levity, Emma and her mother fetched a wriggling Rose who wanted to keep playing, got her ready, and then made their way for Regina's for the party, which was a big success if
only because Ruby spent most of it gushing from such happiness that her joy overflowed onto everyone else. Laughter was shared, stories were told, and the adults even played a game of Monopoly while the kids played upstairs. In all it was a cheerful affair that only concluded well after sundown.

Chapter End Notes

The RedSwan stuff in here is purposeful. My introduction to Ruby as a character I enjoyed reading about was in early season RedSwan fics. Which inevitably lead me to the wonder of RedQueen. I've always kept that soft spot for RS, though, especially since I love Emma so much.

Anyway, if anyone is still reading, thanks for hanging in there! My posting schedule isn't the best atm for all sorts of reasons, mainly I'm busy finishing up projects for the last RedQueen Week ever. Makes my heart sad, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't expecting it to come to a conclusion. If you write, I'd like to encourage you to whip something up. The event is in late October. You can find the blog for it here. It's run by the amazing thegirl20. Go give her some love for her dedication to the fandom. I wouldn't be writing this if it weren't for her awesome stories!

After RQW is over, I'm probably going to write a very quick wrap up to this story and spam post it so I can move on to other things. Until then, expect sporadic postings. Love y'all!
Chapter Summary

Emma helps Regina break some important news to Ruby.

Mary Margaret and David had offered to stay to pitch in with the cleanup, but Rose was getting sleepy after all the excitement, so Regina had shooed them off with Emma's aid in promising her parents that she and Killian would stay to help. Reluctantly, they'd agreed and departed soon after, with a tuckered Rose safely ensconced in her father's arms. After that, Ruby took the girls upstairs to play for a while longer before their baths, Killian in tow being dragged by his hook by a pleading Sophia.

As he was tugged up the stairs, he turned to mouth a dramatic, "save me" at Emma, who laughed.

"You're on your own, buster," she called up, causing her husband to groan. Soon after, she heard Killian's playful cry of: "Alrighty, who among ye scurvy dogs is to be my first mate?" Cutting her eyes over at Regina, Emma grinned. Killian loved to protest being lassoed into Sophia and Amelia's idea of entertainment, but in reality, he loved every minute of it. Whenever he talked about his pirating adventures, the girls would sit in rapt attention, hanging on every word. Regina liked to scold him for 'corrupting her children' but it was only ever in half-jest. Emma knew Regina had long since given up her grudge, and had learned to appreciate Killian, if only for his seemingly effortless and constructive rapport with the twins. It was doubtful there would ever be any double dates in their futures, but progress was progress.

With the children occupied by their respective spouses, Emma and Regina settled into a relatively silent rhythm of cleaning up the mess left in the wake of the crowd's departure. A peaceful sort of serenity seemed to descend upon the house as Emma realized that, for perhaps the first time since coming to Storybrooke all those years ago, everyone was truly happy. Unfortunately, in her experience, such blanket contentment was so far outside the realm of normal that it made her uncomfortable. It was as if they were all in a bubble – a wonderful but delusion one – about to be mercilessly burst at any moment. Dread lurked in the pit of her stomach, just beneath her own happiness, and there was nothing she could do to banish it. Especially with Jefferson's insane brother skulking about Storybrooke bent on hurting Ruby.

Emma was wiping down the kitchen counters, fretting over Thomas Hatter again when Regina abruptly stopped her rifling. Out of the corner of her eye, Emma caught her friend pick something up and then her back stiffen up until she was so rigid she looked fit to snap. Tossing the dishrag into the kitchen sink, Emma turned to face the regal woman who once struck fear into the hearts of an entire realm. Right now, though, Regina just looked tiny and afraid. "Hey, what's wrong?" she asked, then pointed a sudsy finger to what she now saw was an envelope in Regina's hand, which was being held as if it contained the secrets of the world inside. A worried feeling began to gnaw in the pit of her stomach. "What is that?"

"It's from the lab," Regina replied, not needing to explain further. Emma was easily able to put two and two together.

"Oh," she breathed. "It's here, then? Damn. That really bad timing." Looking up to Regina, she
found the former Queen eyeing her uncertainly, as if stuck in place and unable to move due to the weight of the decision before her. Gently setting the plate she’d been washing back into the dishwater, Emma wiped her hands clean with a rag and then moved over to Regina. "What are you going to do?"

"I need to tell her," Regina said. "This needs to be her discovery, but I can't help but feel like I need to be prepared for what she's going to find out. Is it wrong of me to read the results before showing them to her?"

Emma shook her head. "I don't think so. You don't know for sure that Spencer is her father, so what if you tell Ruby what you've learned and give her the results and the test shows that he isn't? You will have upset her for nothing. I know the whole privacy thing is a big deal, but this is one instance I'd be inclined to break it. If it were me, and Killian's life were about to change because of what's in that report, I would want to know if only so I would be in a better position to help him."

Exhaling, Regina nodded, looking to Emma as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. "That's sensible, I suppose. Thank you, Emma."

Emma reached out to gently squeeze her forearm. "You're welcome. I'll leave so you can be alone."

As she turned to head out of the kitchen, Emma was rather unexpectedly stopped by a hand grasping her elbow. "Don't," Regina said, her eyes showing an unusual amount of vulnerability when Emma turned back. "Stay. You're her friend and I don't want to do this alone."

Patting the hand on her elbow, Emma gently smiled. "Of course. Whatever you need." And then without comment, watched in silence as Regina retrieved a pair of scissors from a nearby drawer and proceeded to carefully cut the end of the envelope.

Once the scissors put away, Regina leaned her hip heavily against the cabinet wearing an expression that betrayed her nervousness as she fiddled indecisively with the flap of the envelope. Inside she would find a print out detailing the results of a paternity test that would either be discarded as folly and quickly forgotten or would forever change Ruby's life – and Regina's and their children's by extension. Emma held her breath, feeling a momentous shift in the air, when Regina steeled her features and slid the piece of paper out, then began to read its contents.

Regina remained the picture of composure as her eyes flitted to and fro across the page, digesting the test results one line at a time. As she neared the bottom of the page, the tension in the room began to build until it snapped as if a taut rubber band when her hand shot out to clutch at the counter-top with a white-knuckled grip. All color fled from her face, making her olive complexion seem pasty and wan. Emma's heart sank.

"It's true," Regina bit out, her brows drawn tightly together as her teeth clenched with such force that her jaw muscles rippled. "I had hoped..." drawing short of finishing the sentence, Regina shook her head in dismay, her expression twisting into a muted anguish that was reminiscent of the one she often wore during Emma's early days in Storybrooke, back when Henry was rebelling against his mother and hurting her far more often than he should have.

"So it was positive?" Emma asked, daring to break her silence only because Regina seemed temporarily trapped in her consternation, brooding darkly at the deceptively thin piece of paper as if it carried upon it the weight of the whole world. In a sense, for the tight-knit Mills family, it did.

*Can't they catch a break?* Emma found herself wondering, suddenly bitter at fate. It seemed to have an affinity for testing True Love that went beyond the call of duty, particularly where Regina and Ruby were concerned. For them, it was one trial or tragedy after another in unending succession.
Emma found it hard to fathom how they were still standing having endured so much heartache. She supposed if they hadn't been blessed with at least as much joy as pain, they wouldn't have.

"Yes," came Regina's raspy response, and the hurt in that one word resonated within Emma's chest. It spoke volumes as to how fervently Regina had been hoping Albert Spencer's claims were false.

That they weren't meant Ruby would soon have to face the reality that the father she'd dreamed about all of her life had once committed murder and framed her for it just to get revenge on someone else. That the someone else was one of Ruby's best friends wasn't going to help matters. And even if this danger with Thomas Hatter passed, Emma couldn't envision a scenario in which Ruby wouldn't demand the right to confront her felonious sire. Regina was going to have to witness all of that, was going to have to watch Ruby get disappointed at discovering a biological parent for the second time, and then be there to support Ruby whenever she decided to visit Spencer in prison.

Emma ached for Ruby. Of all people, she knew what it was like to have blank lines for parents on her birth certificate. She knew the yearning to discover her roots, and the desperation that followed when every lead turned up a dead end. She knew the warring rage, grief, and comfort that came from letting her imagination run wild with the possibilities of who her parents were and why they couldn't keep her. The only difference was the filling in of her blanks was better than she'd ever dreamed – with some faltering on her part and a lot of patience on her parents, yes, but otherwise a joyous occasion upon which she looked back fondly. For Ruby, it was going to be a Greek tragedy come to life. Ruby had killed her own absentee mother to defend Mary Margaret's life, and now she was going to learn that her father was not only a tyrannical despot, but a cold-blooded killer. Honestly, Emma could hardly wrap her brain around it, so she couldn't imagine how Ruby was going to feel.

At the same time, she most certainly did not envy what Regina was about to endure. The woman had her work cut out for her being a supportive spouse while also balancing the reasonable, or Emma thought it was anyway, desire to murder Albert Spencer and then resuscitate him just to kill him all over again. Emma knew the last part because it's how she would probably feel put into the same position. There was no justice in this situation, not for Ruby, which was bound to stick in Regina's craw as it was her invariable sense of justice that drove her to extremes. For instance, young, naive, hotheaded Regina had thought her plots against Snow to be perfectly fair recompense for what had been taken for her. Every heinous crime that proceeded ultimately boiled down to that same pursuit of justice for a wrong she simply couldn't let go of, which made them all justifiable in her own grief-twisted mind. Albert Spencer, aka King George being written in to the family tree was going to test Regina's painfully developed restraint to keep from doing something unforgivable, like gleefully lopping off the new branch with a dull, rusty machete.

As the friend of both women, Emma felt she had a duty to do whatever she could to help, if only to take the pressure off and babysit a few nights a week. Anything, really, within her power to help them through this, she was willing to do.

"No matter what happens, I want you to know I'm here," she said, stepping forward just slightly. The motion prompted Regina to glance up, her eyes swimming with turbulent emotion. "Whatever you guys need, I'll do it. Just tell me what I can do to help."

"I don't know there is anything you can do, Emma," was Regina's disquieted response. "I've been preparing myself for over a month and even I don't know how I'm supposed to help her through this. She's going to be crushed."

"She's stronger than we give her credit for," Emma countered. "I'm guilty as any of underestimating her. Maybe it's because I project my own reactions onto her or whatever, but I've watched her get hit with so much crap over the years, Regina, and she always comes out of it standing tall. I think she
can handle this. I think you both can."

Regina sighed, rubbing her forehead as if a stress headache was forming. "For everyone's sake, I hope you're right."

Emma agreed, and told Regina so. "Are you going to be okay telling her?" she then asked. "Do I need to stay?"

Pushing off from the counter, Regina strode over to the doorway. "I can handle it," she said as she walked, "but perhaps you ought to just in case. She's going to need all the support she can get."

"I'll stay then," Emma replied as she fell in behind Regina, following her out of the kitchen and down the hallway to the stair case.

At the lowest step, Regina paused, her hand gripping the banister. "Wait here," she said. "I'm going to ask the pirate to stay with the girls so Ruby can come downstairs."

"Alright," Emma nodded, not bothering to chastise Regina for demeaning her husband because the jab came from an apprehension that she shared. "Maybe I'll just wait in the living room if that's okay?"

"Suit yourself."

And with that, Regina began climbing the stairs, the test results and envelope still in her hand. Once Regina disappeared from view, Emma ambled over into the living room and plopped down into her favorite arm chair, the one across from the sofa that she'd fallen asleep in nearly a month before. Leaning her elbows onto her knees, she dropped her head into her hands and took a deep breath, counting to ten before she straightened back up. To not put Ruby on edge upon noticing her presence, she adopted a casual posture, leaning back into the cushioned back of the chair with arms resting comfortably on the rests and her legs crossed ankle to knee.

Some minutes later, the sounds of footsteps on the stairs alerted Emma that Regina and Ruby would shortly be joining her. When both women rounded the corner, Emma noticed that Ruby appeared confused whereas Regina was as highly strung as she'd been in the month since Emma stumbled through the bean portal with an unconscious Ruby in her arms. They took their seats on the sofa next to one another, and when settled, Regina offered an even more confused Ruby the envelope.

"What's this?" Ruby asked.

Playing nervously with the hem of her blouse, Regina said, "About a week before you came back some information came to light about your past."

As she spoke, Regina appeared caught between guilt at having kept this from Ruby and fear at her wife's possible reactions. Emma could not particularly feel sorry for Regina, as she'd been upfront about her misgivings about keeping a secret of such magnitude. Yet she had understood Regina's motivations, and while perhaps not the ideal way of handling the situation, Regina was only doing what she thought was best for her wife. Emma could not fault her for that.

"What kind of information?" Ruby interrupted, instantly engaged by her natural curiosity.

Rather than get upset, Regina merely took the question in stride, answering succinctly, "The kind that requires a DNA test to confirm."

With wide, almost terrified eyes, Ruby gasped. "You mean..."
Nodding, Regina worried her lip for a moment before launching into her tale of the event that precipitated this revelation. "A woman named Reila visited me at the office claiming to have known your mother while employed with your father and his wife. She said that your mother, Anita, confided in her about the affair she was carrying on, and that after your mother fell pregnant she fled. Reila accompanied her, was present for your birth, and was the individual who delivered you to Granny. At the very least, the last bit has been confirmed as true by Granny herself. But before I go on, I need to explain something."

Reaching out for Ruby's hand, Regina began to softly rub her thumb over Ruby's long digits as she thought about how to best proceed. Emma held her breath as Ruby watched on, visage a tenuous mixture of so many emotions Emma could not begin to discern.

"This person Reila named as your father," Regina continued, "is a man with whom we both have...distasteful histories. I felt compelled to confirm this story with hard evidence before presenting it to you, so I paid him a visit and demanded a DNA test. These," she held up the lab report and envelope, "are the results of that test. Before I tell you who he is, I want you to read this report so that you are clear about what's going on."

"Okay," Ruby agreed with a great deal of apprehension, after which she hesitantly lifted the papers up and began to read. As she had with Regina, Emma watched the emotions play across Ruby's face as she processed the conclusions of the DNA testing, beginning with an aching sort of hope and then shifting into barely restrained joy before fading back to apprehension again. She returned her eyes to Regina. "The results are positive. That means that this guy is definitely my father."

"To a ninety-nine-point-nine percent degree of probability," Regina confirmed.

Closing her eyes, Ruby clutched the papers to her chest before opening them once more. Again, she seemed to inflate with hope only to have that balloon burst once more, deflating her as she processed what Regina had said as a preface to her reading the results.

"You said we both have a bad history with him. That doesn't leave many options, and none of them are good."

"Which is the reason why I waited to tell you," Regina said, guilt leaking through her facade of control. "I did not keep this from you because of how I feel about this man or out of some need to control the situation, despite how much I admit I wanted to do that. I kept silent only because of the potential repercussions for you. This man is someone I do not trust, so I feel justified in my concerns."

There was a pleading in Regina's eyes for Ruby to understand that even Emma could discern, and for a tense moment, Emma was concerned her fears would come to fruition. That the secrecy would do serious harm to Ruby's trust of Regina was a very real possibility. Ruby was a person who highly valued honesty, and while Regina had not technically lied, the omission would feel nonetheless feel like a betrayal. Tense to the point of being unsettled, Emma clenched her fingertips into the plush material of the arm chair.

But even though Ruby did appear at least somewhat angry, she tempered her reaction, tilting her head to request clarification for her wife's motive for keeping such a huge secret. "If that's true, why go through with it at all?" she asked. "Why visit a man you don't trust and confront him with a claim you're predisposed to disbelieve?"

"Isn't it obvious?" was Regina's heartfelt reply. "I did it for you. I know how much this means to you, Ruby. No matter how much this might hurt you, you deserve to know the truth. I just couldn't give it to you until I was certain. Take it from someone who knows something about genies, mi
amor, once this one is out of the bottle, there is no putting it back in. So, I didn't want to risk upsetting you for what might prove to be a false claim."

After a deep breath, Ruby nodded. "Okay, I get that. And I'm not mad, but now that we know it's true, there is still a problem here. You say you don't trust this guy, but from the way you're acting, I can tell there's more to it. You're afraid he's going to hurt me, aren't you?"

Shifting on the couch, Regina turned in even more toward Ruby. "I won't lie to you. I do think that, but I can deal with him, Ruby. I have plenty of experience in that regard that you don't, so I can act as a buffer if necessary." She then gestured toward Emma. "Emma has promised to protect you as well."

For a long, tense moment, Ruby sat in silence, absorbing all that Regina had told her. As she ruminated on the life changing information she was about to receive and the events that lead up to its indulgence, her jaw twinged briefly before settling into a trusting acceptance that spoke volumes about the relationship between the two extraordinary women.

"Alright," Ruby then said, "I trust you, Regina. I always have." Giving Regina a slight smile, Ruby then glanced over to Emma. "Do you agree with her assessment, Em?"

Sighing, Emma nodded. "Unfortunately, yeah, I do. I'm really sorry, Ruby. I wish I could say different, but he's not to be trusted."

Rubbing her hands over her jean clad legs nervously, Ruby's face took on a more desperate appearance. "Okay. Okay." She breathed as if trying to work up the courage to hear Regina give a name to the man who had sired her.

Ruby couldn't possibly even have imagined that her father would turn out to be a man who had also tried to destroy her. It was, Emma thought, as sad a situation as she had ever personally heard of in paternity cases. During her time as a bounty hunter, she had dabbled a bit as a private detective and had worked a few cases where paternity revelations broke up families and shattered lives, all of which were due to infidelity. What Ruby was facing, though, was an altogether different degree of tragedy that left a bitter taste in Emma's mouth. That it was happening to her best friend made it even worse.

"Okay, now that you've prepared me just tell me," Ruby then blurted out, her eyes somewhat wild. "I need to know. This is something that has haunted me my entire life. No matter how bad it is, I need to know."

"I realize that," Regina said, choking on emotion. "But please know that whatever you decide to do with this information, I will support you. Alright?" When Ruby nodded, Regina took a very deep breath and then uttered the words that Emma knew would change Ruby's life forever. "In the Enchanted Forest, your father's name was King George. In this world, he goes by Albert Spencer."

"The D.A.?" Ruby asked, her face drawn in horror. "The one who murdered Billy and tried to frame me for it?"

"Yes," said Regina, clearly hurting for Ruby.

"You're telling me that my father is the same man who tried to execute Charming and cursed Snow to be barren?"

"Yes."

Shooting up from the couch, Ruby began to pace, her hands in her hair, and then cradled over her
mouth, and then back in her hair again. "I...I don't...Emma?" Cutting imploring eyes over to Emma, Ruby appeared to be wrestling with acceptance of the bombshell that had been dropped on her head. It was as if the revelation was too jarring, too sickly ironic, too incomprehensible for her to process.

From the tormented expression on Ruby's face, Emma could guess as to her line of thought. Knowing Ruby as she did, her friend was probably already doing the math in her head that if a psychopathic king was her father and a murderous werewolf her mother, she had literally hit the all-time jackpot for genetic misfortune. Emma could already see it in Ruby's eyes, the self-loathing, the understanding that the beliefs that had once held sway regarding her nature were true after all, that she wasn't just born a monster but that she also was born to become one.

Oh, how Emma wished there was something she could say to quell those erroneous thoughts, that there was some reassurance she could give to convince Ruby that a piece of paper about a man for whom the extent of his contribution to the person she became was to be a half contributor to her DNA. Unfortunately there was little she could say to alleviate the pain of this truth; yet as Ruby's best friend, she had to try because it was eating her up inside to see Ruby like this.

"It's true, Ruby," she said, confirming Regina's identification of Spencer, "but it also means nothing. Who your father is does not reflect on you, not after all you've done, all the good you've accomplished. Just because Spencer is a monster doesn't mean that you are."

"She's right, Ruby," Regina spoke up from the edge of the couch where she sat leaning forward as if ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. Emma could see in the older woman's eyes that she was preparing for Ruby to have an emotional breakdown. "Genetics do not define who you are, actions do. You have proven yourself time and time again. Please, don't let this drag you down into the kinds of poisonous thoughts that once corrupted me."

"How can I not?" Ruby scoffed, a solitary tear rolling down her cheek which was flushed from the stress of her emotions. "I've seen it first hand with Emma."

Sitting back stunned, Emma gaped. "Me?"

"Of course!" Ruby responded, gesturing with her hands as if it should have been obvious as to why. Emma felt clueless. "I always thought you were such an incredible woman even before I knew you were the Savior, ya know? You just had this glow about you, this aura of heroic awesomeness that drew me in like a moth to a flame. When I got my memories back and realized that Snow and Charming were your parents, I remember thinking to myself: 'well, that explains it.'"

Shaking her head, Emma drew her brows together. "I don't get it, Ruby. How does that explain anything?"

"Don't you see, Emma? You were the Savior because you were born to be the Savior! It's not a knock on you, either, it's amazing, and you should be so proud! But no matter how much you don't want them to be, your parents do define you." She then shifted her focus onto her wife, who flinched back. "Don't they, Regina?"

With stricken expression, Regina gasped. "That's not fair." It was the wrong thing to say.

"None of this is fair!" Ruby shouted. "It's not fair that I'm the product of a sordid affair! Or that I'm a werewolf or that I got kidnapped and tortured and stabbed through the heart!"

Standing, Regina approached Ruby, her hands out in front of her. "Ruby, calm down. You're going to make yourself sick and scare the girls." Reaching out, she laid her hand on Ruby's forearm.
Tearing away from the touch, Ruby began pacing once more. "Don't tell me to calm down, goddammit! I can't deal with this. I can't, Regina, I can't...I can't..." Stopping in place, Ruby stared forlornly at her wife, her green eyes radiating such pain that it stole the breath out of Emma's chest. "Why?" she lamented, tears beginning to stream from her eyes. "What did I do to deserve this? Why does this keep happening to me? Is there something wrong with me?"

Stepping forward boldly, Regina framed Ruby's face with her hands. "Absolutely not," she firmly stated. "There is nothing wrong with you, Ruby. You hear me?" Ruby weakly nodded. "I mean it!" Still grasping Ruby's face, Regina leaned forward to rest her forehead against Ruby's, her eyes burning with an affection that could not be rivaled for brilliance. "You listen to me, Mrs. Mills: this changes nothing. You are still my wife and I am so damn proud of that I would broadcast it to the world if I could! And I still love you more than the moon loves the stars. These past ten years have been the best of my life because of you. You deserve every happiness that life has to offer and I aim to see you get just that. I won't settle for anything less. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Ruby gasped against a choked sob, and as her strength finally gave way to the crushing tide of complicated emotions she was being bombarded with, she collapsed into Regina's welcoming arms.

"Shh," Regina cooed, tucking her distraught wife's head into the crook of her neck and then threading her fingers into the hair at the back of her head. "I've got you, sweetheart. It's going to be okay. We're going to get through this just like we have everything else."

Feeling like an intruder upon a private moment, Emma stood to depart. As she did, Regina caught her eyes and gave her a small smile, a tacit appreciation for her presence and an approval for her to depart. After making her way over to the cased opening separating the living room from the rest of the house, Emma paused to turn back.

"Before I go upstairs, I just need to say one last thing to you, Ruby" she said, drawing Ruby's attention. Lifting her head, she focused bleary eyes on Emma, sniffing a few times as she listened. "Spencer being your father does not make him your family. Regina, Henry, and those precious girls upstairs are your family. Granny is your family. Mom and Dad are your family...I'm your family. And I don't care what he does or says, we've got your back. Always."

Lifting her hand to her mouth to hold in another sob, Ruby nodded gratefully. It took her a few seconds to be able to manage a reply. "Thanks, Em."

Emma gave her deputy, her friend, a wink. "No problem, Mills. Listen," she indicated her head toward the staircase, "I'm gonna go check on Killian and the kids, okay? Just remember: you're going to make it through this."

"Yeah," Ruby sighed, resting her head on Regina's shoulder, who curled her arm over to brush it through Ruby's hair. "I think I will."

"Alright, just yell if you need me."

"We will," Regina replied, looking almost as grateful as Ruby. "Thank you, Emma."

"Anytime."

And with that, Emma left the couple to have some time alone. Quickly making her way to the staircase, she made it halfway up before everything caught up with her all at once. Collapsing forward, Emma braced herself and then shifted to sit as she dissolved into a fit of silent tears.
A week later, Emma was sitting at her desk, twirling a pencil between her index, middle, and ring fingers. It had been an exhausting day. She and Ruby had responded to two domestic disturbances, both petty disagreements that turned into shouting matches, and one of which had then escalated into a memorable melee between a man, his wife, his wife's lover, and his wife's lover's wife who just-so-happened to be the husband's lover. With curses, accusations, and fists flying in proportional amounts, it was like living through a bad episode of Jerry Springer or something.

During the ride over to the station, the husband and wife (who were in Emma's cruiser, with the other couple in Ruby's) worked back up into another screaming match, which raged pretty continually until Emma had enough. Her threat to lock them both up for a week worked, shutting them up, but the tension remained roiling. After reaching the station, she hauled her charges out of the car while Ruby did the same. The second the couples spotted one another, the bickering began again in earnest.

Emma had only just locked up the last of the cells and was fixing to level some more threats when Ruby snapped. In an uncharacteristic display of anger, she surged toward the cells, gripping the bars until they groaned in protest as her eyes glinted yellow.

"If all of you don't shut up right now," she growled, "I'm going to rip these bars off and eat every last one of you."

To punctuate the threat, her eyes turned that wolfish gold that indicated a transformation was coming on and to Emma's immense shock, she bared her teeth, which were no longer wholly human but sharpened and tapering to a point as if she were some sort of wolf/woman hybrid. Emma had witnessed Ruby transform into the wolf many times, but nothing like that had ever happened. Ruby had been acting awfully strange lately, but Emma figured it was a combination of stressors causing her to displaying irrational fits anger. Not only was Ruby dealing with the fallout from that paternity bombshell dropped on her head, but the Dires' had made almost no progress in diagnosing the ailment of the local wolf population. But the unsettling physical manifestation of the wolf was scary enough for Emma to consider taking drastic action. The only reason she initially decided against forcibly sending Ruby home was the previously unshakable trust that existed between them. However, when Ruby started stewing again a few hours later because she was getting irritated at her paperwork, Emma decided enough was enough. She needed to act preemptively to prevent catastrophe. So she sent her protesting partner home early. It was only once Ruby was gone that Emma allowed herself to officially fret about her best friend's behavior, and not just over the past week. Since the day before yesterday, Ruby had been fidgety and off-kilter, and even though Ruby assured her that she was fine, Emma almost picked up the phone to consult Regina more than once. She only held her peace out of respect for Ruby's marriage, though that did not stop Emma from confronting Ruby the next day.

"I just have a bunch of excess energy all of the sudden," Ruby had told her, physically exhibiting the signs of that being true. She'd been pacing like a caged tiger. "No matter what I do, I can't burn it all off, even with Regina's help."

Unwilling to touch the innuendo with a ten foot pole, Emma ostensibly accepted the explanation. Sure as she was, though, that Ruby hadn't lied, she remained unconvinced that the odd behavior was solely due to excessive energy. There was something tingling at the back of her mind about the situation that set off all kinds of warning bells. And now with Ruby's blatant and objectively dangerous lapse of control, those earlier worries were being compounded.

For a long while after Ruby dramatically stormed out of the station, Emma wrestled with the problem in her mind, trying to discern what her instincts were telling her, to no avail. She was still ruminating.
when her phone suddenly rang. Leaning forward from where she'd been slouched in her chair, she picked up the receiver and glanced at the clock on the wall. It was nearly six. She hadn't realized she'd been lost in thought so long.

"Sheriff Swan," she answered with a breathy sigh.

"Emma?" Regina's panicked voice came over the phone, causing Emma to bolt ramrod straight.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Ruby," Regina said, tension bleeding through the speakers of the phone. "She's sick, Emma. God, she's so sick, and the girls need to eat and I have supper on but with Henry away at school, I don't have anybody else to call..."

"Say no more," Emma cut in. "I'm on my way. I'll call Dad en route to come spell me."

Regina breathed an audible sigh of relief. "Thank you, Emma."

"No problem. See you in five, okay?"

"Alright."

After slamming the phone to its receiver, Emma gathered her keys, badge, and gun and rushed toward the front doors of the station. Ignoring the cries of the detainees whom she'd left unguarded in locked cells, she pulled out her phone as she exited the building and dialed her father. Not even bothering to wait for him to speak when the call connected, she blurted out, "Dad, I need you." And as she tore a path toward her car, she rushed to explain the situation to her father, who needed no persuasion to pick up what was left of her shift. Emma thanked him profusely and promised to make it up to him before hanging up.

Once in her trusty bug, she cranked it up and pulled out of her parking spot, then maneuvered it onto the road. Driving far beyond the speed limit, she made her way down the familiar route leading to the Casa de Mills, making record time.

The second her car screeched to a halt in the driveway, she launched out of it and sprinted up the pathway to the front door. Without bothering to knock, she let herself in.

"Regina! Ruby!"

"In here!" Regina called from what sounded like the half-bath on the main floor. Emma made her way there quickly, hearing the unmistakably gross sounds of retching as she approached. She winced. It literally sounded like Ruby was heaving up her guts. After knocking twice, Emma hesitantly pushed the door open.

Inside the little hall bathroom, Ruby was splayed out on the floor, half sitting, half kneeling at the base of the toilet as she gripped the porcelain rim with white knuckles and a wild expression of distress on her face. She made no indication that she had even heard Emma enter. Regina, who was on her knees behind Ruby, placed a small glass of water on the floor beside her before regathering her wife's long, thick tresses into her hands. She turned frightened eyes up to Emma.

"She's been vomiting non-stop for the past ten minutes," Regina said, voice raw with fear. "I gave her some of my prescribed Phenergan that I keep for migraines, but it's done nothing and I'm back and forth between her and the girls..."

"Slow down," Emma interrupted the exasperated woman obviously at her wit's end. "Where are the
"Upstairs," Ruby croaked, her voice barely audible from how ravaged her throat was. She looked up at Emma with bloodshot eyes. Her sickness was so violent some of the tiny capillaries in them had burst. "Hey, Em."

"Hey, you," Emma replied, her heart aching for her friend. "You don't look so hot."

"Understatement of...the year." Ruby tried to smile but the expression turned sour as another wave of nausea had her blanching then scrambling to hover back over the toilet. Gritting her teeth as if to physically hold the sickness in, Ruby's face turned beet red as she grit out, "God. I can't take...much...more."

"Emma," Regina called almost frantically, drawing Emma's attention back to her, "the girls are waiting upstairs for you. Their dinner is warm in the oven if you don't mind. Please."

"Yeah, yeah, it's no problem at all," Emma said, cutting her eyes back worriedly to Ruby, whose brow was now beaded with sweat. Emma couldn't deny how panicky she felt to see Ruby in so much distress. But what could she do about it? She knew next to nothing about healing magic, not compared to Regina, and since Regina hadn't done anything about the illness lead Emma to believe that there was nothing to be done. In other words, whatever was going on it's course. Emma just hoped that happened before Ruby dehydrated herself, and judging from her friend's complexion, that wasn't far away. When Regina cleared her throat a second later, Emma took the hint and snapped out of her thoughts. "Right..." she looked back at Regina, who was glaring pointedly, "'kay, I'm gonna head up and take care of the munchkins, but if she's not better soon, you need to take her to the E.R."

"No!" Ruby protested, the words strangled as if requiring an enormous amount of energy and concentration. "No hospital. It'll...pass." But as if to spite the feigned confidence of such an assertion, her body rebelled. With a groan, she lurched forward to vomit up what little water she had sipped on previous to Emma's arrival and then immediately began dry-heaving.

Wincing a second time, Emma stepped out of the bathroom and backed into the hallway. As she turned to head toward the staircase she heard the sound of Ruby's half-frantic sobbing and Regina's valiant attempts to soothe her.

Something was very wrong with Ruby, and it didn't take a PhD for Emma to diagnose that this was more than just a medical illness. That Regina hadn't stopped it with magic advertised as much. Whatever was causing, she had a hunch it was likely to be linked to Ruby's temperamental outbursts and the weird manifestations of her lupine counterpart. Emma could not begin to guess what it was but this feeling was persistently niggling at the back of her mind that the answer was right in front of her nose. Sighing, she pushed the thoughts away for the moment as there were more pressing matters that required her attention.

After making her way upstairs to Sophie and Amie's bedroom, Emma stopped in the doorway and knocked. The teary-eyed and distraught faces of two very scared little girls craned up to stare at her from where they were sitting together on the floor in silence. The second they caught sight of Emma, they shot up to their feet and launched themselves at her legs.

"Aunty Em!" they cried in tandem, throwing their arms around her thighs.

With both girls hanging on to her, Emma managed to maneuver herself inside the bedroom, where she carefully disentangled herself from her charges. Freed of their tiny vice-like grips, she dropped down to her knees and opened her arms. The girls sprang into her embrace, clinging to her neck
desperately in a clear show of how frightened their were. Their little bodies were even trembling.

For a long time, Emma just sat there and held them, letting them cry on her shoulder and sniffle against her neck as she rubbed soothing patterns on their backs. "There now," she cooed, "don't be scared. It's gonna be okay. Everything is going to be just fine."

Pulling back slightly, Sophia's fearful chocolate colored eyes locked on Emma's. "Is Mama really gonna be okay?"

Emma's heart sank. She didn't want to lie to the girls but she didn't particularly want to be honest either. Prognostication was not part of a Savior's skill set, much as she wished otherwise. Whatever was going on with Ruby was bad, maybe worse than it looked even, but how could she tell Sophia and Amelia that? How could she break their hearts that way? As their aunt in all but blood, it was her job to love them and help their parents protect them, but this seemed beyond the scope of her ability to perform those duties.

Yet, as uncomfortable as the situation was for her, it was just as wrong to avoid the question altogether. This, Emma decided, was one of those situations where it had to be okay to lie.

"Yes, she is," she said, hoping she sounded convincing, "I promise, Sophie. Your Mama is gonna be just fine. Mommy is taking care of her right now." Emma prayed the girls believed that more than she did.

Nodding, Sophia tucked her head back down into the crook of her neck and snuggled as close as she could with her sister also occupying half of Emma's body. And as she sat there holding on to the children she loved like they were her own, she allowed herself the luxury of shedding a few tears of her own. Deep in the pit of her stomach, a feeling began to swirl, one that Emma hadn't felt since that day she'd been sitting in the station listening to three drunken dwarves bicker and it just hit her, this sense beyond explanation that things were about to go to pot. Moments later, the hospital had called with news that Regina had been stabbed, kicking off a shitstorm of events that nearly ruined two of the strongest people she had ever met.

This feeling was so similar that Emma had to steel her nerves to keep from shaking with horrible anticipation. Fear bubbled up within her chest. However, unlike before, she knew without a doubt what it meant. Belmordan was coming and when he did, all hell would break loose.

_Give me strength_, she thought, repeating the mantra in a desperate bid to hold on to hope. This, she knew, was to be the greatest test yet of her calling as Savior, and she needed everyone ounce she could get. _Give me strength, give me strength, give me strength._

But the low, rumbling voice in the recesses of her mind – the one that was left behind after the Dagger's darkness was purged from her – began a chant of its own. _Terrible things_, it said, _terrible things. Pain. Death. Darkness. He is coming._

Clutching the children even more tightly, Emma prayed to whatever and whoever would listen for the safety of those she loved and that when the moment of truth came, she would not hesitate to do whatever was necessary to defeat the enemy. Even if that meant laying down her own life.
The Curious Case of Professor Ambrose

Chapter Summary

Henry, a grad student at Harvard Law, has a fortuitous run in with his favorite ungrad professor. Little does he know the secrets his mentor hides will have a direct impact on events simultaneously unfolding in Storybrooke.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After stepping outside the confines of Langdell Hall, Henry Mills wove his way through the crowded entryway and down to the perfectly manicured lawn just outside the building. Taking a moment, he lifted his face to the sky, allowing the sunlight to warm his skin. Two interminable hours of lecture had sapped his vitality, and he was not only glad to be upright once more but the warmth of the sun was helping to restore his waning energy. The course instructor was a good man and well-versed in the history of environmental law, but his dry method of presenting facts and events left much to be desired. The only positive Henry could find in the lecture was that the semester, and the course by consequence, was almost over.

By the time the first hour had passed, Henry was wishing he was an undergraduate back in History 1048. Professor Ambrose, the charismatic and interesting young instructor whose expertise lay in European and British histories, was the most engaging lecturer Henry had sat under at Harvard. The man had a way of describing history that made it come alive, as if he were no longer sitting in some musty old lecture hall but was present on the battlefield at Agincourt, watching as armored French knights mired in mud were cut down by deadly arrows shot from English longbows.

Storytelling ability aside, Ambrose had an air of age about him incongruent with his youthful appearance. There was something concealed behind the carefully manufactured veil of his eyes, a lurking power and wisdom that Henry never could positively identify. At first, he had dismissed the professor's strange aura as exuberance for his field of expertise, but the more Henry observed the man lecture the class, the more he became convinced something was amiss. Spellbound by the way Ambrose wove words to create a moving and breathing tapestry of history, students known to be rabble-rousers behaved as though mature adults and infamous coasters suddenly paid attention to every idle fact. It was almost as if there was magic at play, and were it not for the fact that this world was devoid of it, Henry would have been sure the professor was a sorcerer in disguise. But the whole of Earth was a magic-free zone, so rather than dwell on possible occultist conspiracy theories regarding the staff at Harvard, he settled in to learn all he could from a man who seemed to have more knowledge to offer than any other on campus.

Taking a deep breath to clear his thoughts, Henry glanced down at his watch. He had an hour to kill before his next lecture, so he decided to loiter about for a while and check his phone for messages. He hadn't heard from his Mom in a few days, so he was beginning to get worried. As he began walking along the paved path leading away from Robinson Hall, Henry veered in the direction of his next class until he happened by a place to sit, a set of two benches just off the pathway bookended by potted hydrangeas. Flinging his backpack into an empty bench, he pulled his phone out of his hip pocket and got comfortable.
To his slight dismay there were no messages from his mother. Bringing up his message app, he shot a text to Ruby, his step-mom, asking her if everything was okay. Having done that, he put his phone away, then fetched the latest book he'd been reading through, Plato's *Republic*, one of his Mom's favorites.

"Hello, Henry," a voice cut through his concentration a few minutes later. The smooth yet lilting English accent immediately registered in his brain.

Henry glanced up, smiling at the amiable man. "Hey, Professor Ambrose."

"Bah, we can dispense with honorifics," was the jovial reply. "To my favorite former student, it's Morgan."

"Alright, Morgan," Henry nodded, swelling with pride.

Since that first day in class, Henry had felt a kinship with the professor, and could often be found loitering after classes in his office or after hours to discuss the finer points of history both ancient and modern. There was something about Professor Ambrose that struck Henry besides his unique, almost elfish facial features. His raven black hair was kept short and neatly styled, he had piercing blue eyes, and sharp facial features which were only slightly subdued by his scruffy beard. All the girls – and some few guys – in the class swooned over the young and handsome professor with the accent, but what interested Henry was the agelessness of his eyes. Professor Morgan Ambrose had seen things in his short life that left a lasting impact; Henry knew this because he saw it in his own when he studied them in the mirror.

Though the two had struck up a genuine friendship in the intervening years, Henry had to admit his curiosity in the professor's peculiarity played a significant part in his striking it up. The man was a mystery in nearly every way that mattered. A public life without blemish protected an intensely private life away from campus shrouded in a heavy veil of secrecy which did not engender trust. And if there was one thing Henry hated, it was secrets. The first ten years of his life were defined by perhaps the biggest secret in human history, so for him, common sense prevailed that the people who were most worthy to be trusted were those who were most open and honest. Even so, the good professor seemed to strike a balance between his secrecy and his honesty that allowed Henry to look past the subterfuge for the most part, and the more Henry got to know the man, the more the secrets didn't matter.

"May I sit?" Ambrose's blue eyes were earnest in that same familiar way they always were whenever Henry interacted with him. Mysterious he may be, but the man was always sincere both in his intentions and with his attention.

"Sure," Henry nodded, aware that the professor had approached him for a reason other than to exchange idle chit-chat. Once the professor was seated, turned slightly askew to face Henry, he inquired, "Was there something you wanted to talk to me about?"

"There is actually," Ambrose said. "I was browsing through a recent collection of photographs my friend in the Art Department, Kate McGraw, is preparing to debut. Do you know her?"

Henry knew of her. Kate McGraw was the most talked about professor among the undergraduate male population. The combination of her stunningly chiseled features, piercing green eyes, and silken Irish accent was like catnip to the stable of hormonal young men who populated the Harvard campus. Henry considered himself a person of strong character, but even he was not immune to Ms. McGraw's prolific charms.

Blushing at the thought, he replied with a half-chuckle, "Yeah, kinda hard not to."
"I know what you mean," Ambrose shared the laugh, obviously aware of the implication and if Henry was judging correctly, somewhat affected by Ms. McGraw himself. Interestingly, Henry thought, filing the information away. "Anyway," Ambrose continued, "her exhibit is called *A Visual Interpretation of Modern Love*, and when I started looking through her portfolio I couldn't help but think of you."

This surprised Henry, though it shouldn't have. "Me? Why?"

Ambrose quirked a sable eyebrow, his lips turning up in amusement. "Have you forgotten showing me your own portfolio not many months ago?"

For a moment, Henry sifted through his memories until the one the professor had referred to returned to him. It was, as Ambrose said, a few months back when Henry had been visiting his favorite instructor at his office with the purpose of discussing a book he'd read at Ambrose's insistence – E.M. Forster's *A Room with a View*. They engaged in a friendly debate concerning the validity of choosing with the heart at all costs versus the head. Whereas Ambrose, nestled comfortably behind his desk, argued for rationality, Henry sat opposite countering for love. It was during some intense discourse that Henry had casually mentioned his mother and how hours after being viciously stabbed she left the hospital to rescue the woman she loved.

When Ambrose remarked how reckless such an action was and the potential consequences, Henry hadn't bothered to disagree. Both Ruby and his mother had been reckless that day, but in time he'd come to realize that love like theirs was inherently so. True Love encouraged risk taking because once a person tasted it, they could never, ever get enough; and once a person had it, they would do anything to hold on to it. Love trumped rationality every time. Henry had seen it over and over again in Storybrooke.

"You might could say True Love is a family tradition," Henry had said when Ambrose pressed for clarification on his meaning. "I know what it can do, what it can endure, what kind of life it can build. Nothing else in the universe can touch it."

"Ah, but rationality brings order to an otherwise chaotic world," Ambrose countered. "If we all chased after our passions, where would humanity be? Would we not still inhabit caves and knock each other about with clubs? Our brains got us where we are, not our hearts."

"That's true," said Henry. "But what is rationality without love? A world driven by cold logic alone is capable of horrors beyond imagination. I think World War Two and the totalitarian regimes that instigated that conflict bear out that point through the tens of millions who died and countless others who lost limbs or loved ones or properties that could never be replaced."

The professor leaned forward and gestured idly. "Yes, but were those regimes not also motivated by emotion? Did not hate fuel their aggression and inspire their atrocities?"

"Even if that's true, what runs counter to hate?" Henry paused to let his question sink in. Ambrose cocked his head in concession, but then raised a brow inviting elaboration. Henry went on, "Love does. And when love is pure it leads people toward happiness and away from hatred. Love stops conflict rather than instigates it. But even using pure logic, violence is sometimes the most reasonable choice. Kill or be killed. Survival of the fittest. And every creature with some measure of intelligence is capable of such logic. But love transcends logic. Our brains are obviously our keenest tool for survival but they are not our greatest gift.

"You know, I once had this very debate with my mom, and this is what she told me: 'True Love, in whatever form it may come, is the rarest and greatest gift a person can receive. It's worth fighting for,
worth dying for, because it can never be substituted or replaced. I once spent my life in pursuits that my own reason convinced me were just and righteous only to later discover, to my horror, that they were anything but. All I had to show for my life of deprivation from the falsely perceived dangers of love was an emptiness that could not be filled and a loneliness that could not be relieved. Cold logic won't keep you warm at night, Henry, and it won't be what you're wishing for on your deathbed. Take it from someone who knows. 'And she was right. I had to learn it for myself but she was right.'

"Your mother sounds like a very wise woman." Ambrose had a strange interest in his eyes Henry had never seen before. "I should like to meet her some day. Anyone who can inspire such belief in the existence of True Love is someone worth knowing."

For a brief second, Henry studied the man he had come to admire as a mentor. There was something about the way he was holding himself, a sort of sad tint to his normally vibrant blue eyes and a weight about his normally loose shoulders that indicated an experience that haunted him. Curiosity, ever Henry's weakness, drove him to inquire further. "Do you not believe in True Love, Professor?"

A weary smile slid across Professor Ambrose's lips. "I did...once upon a time."

"What happened?" Realizing how rude the question was, Henry's eyes widened. "Sorry. I don't mean to pry."

Waving off Henry's concern, Ambrose replied, "It's fine, Henry. To answer the question, I knew a couple, my best friend and his wife, who I thought to possess the truest love I ever saw. They made me believe what your mother taught you, that love was something worth experiencing, worth risking everything for. Unfortunately, my friend died far too young. After his passing I tried to comfort Gwen, my friend's wife, but her sadness was too much to bear along with my own. I left within a year and haven't returned since."

"Wow," Henry said, not really knowing how to properly express his feelings at such a sad story. "That's really depressing."

Despite the macabre subject, Ambrose's eyes glittered, probably because of Henry's social ineptitude. "It is, isn't it?" He smiled crookedly. "Anyway, it's been so long now that I don't believe I could even recognize True Love if I saw it."

"You'd be surprised," Henry spoke up, digging around in his backpack for his portfolio book, suddenly glad he'd impulsively decided to pack it for his visit to Professor Ambrose. He had several on the same subject matter, but this one was special to him. When he found it he pulled it out and slid it across the desk. "People think they don't know what it looks like when they do. They just don't realize it. It's why I decided to take this set of photos, to show that True Love is something real and tangible and possible for everyone. It's around us every day, we just have to be open to it and willing to see it for what it is."

As he listened to Henry, Ambrose took the book and opened it. The first image was one of Henry's mother and step-mother at his eighteenth birthday party. His mom was dispensing ice cream while his step-mom cut the ridiculously extravagant cake his mom had baked. Ruby, his step-mom, being the mischievous prankster she was, had stealthily swiped a large dab of icing onto her finger and then called his mom's name. When his mom turned to see what Ruby wanted, the icing was promptly deposited onto the tip of her nose, causing her to gasp and cross her eyes on reflex to examine what exactly had been so rudely plopped onto her nose.

Henry can still remember nearly choking on soda at witnessing the admittedly hilarious expression as Ruby giggled uncontrollably. Unfortunately, he didn't have his camera ready so he'd scrambled
to get it in position to capture his normally uptight mother looking so goofy. By the time he was set, the opportunity had passed. But there was a silver lining: instead he caught the aftermath of his mother's retaliation.

After grabbing a can of whipped cream, his mom sprayed a generous helping in the palm of her hand and then proceeded to smear it over the left half of Ruby’s face. When the shock of that act wore off, Ruby burst out into raucous laughter. Soon enough his mother was joining in, as well as the rest of the extended family hovering around the table. The part Henry caught on photograph was when his Mom and Ruby had looked at each other, both still caught up in the humor of the moment, smiles a mile wide, faces and noses decorated with confections, but with so much love shining in their eyes that it practically jumped off the picture.

Nobody made Henry's mother laugh the way his step-mom did, which was one of many reasons he was convinced beyond persuasion that they were perfect for each other. He was so caught up admiring his fond memories of that day that he almost missed Professor Ambrose gasp aloud.

"It can't be!" he breathed out.

Henry sat back in confusion, brows furrowing deeply. "Pardon?"

Gaping, Ambrose struggled to rein in his reaction. "I-I, well...it's just these women look exactly like a couple I knew long ago. Their names were Eleni and Elaine."

Quirking his head to the side, Henry peered oddly at his professor, wondering if this was another one of those moments when the eccentric and sometimes strange man confused reality with history. During his lectures, the professor often lost himself so deeply in recounting an event that it was like he was telling it from the first person, as if he had been there to witness it – which was impossible, of course, seeing as the courses mostly dealt with things that happened beyond the lifespan of people currently alive.

Deciding to correct his sometimes unconventional mentor, Henry said, "Sorry, professor, but that's not them."

Ambrose shook his head with chagrin as a faint blush bloomed upon his cheeks. "Oh! I apologize for the mistake."

"It's alright," Henry smiled in gentle acceptance, and Ambrose returned it with one of his own, tight-lipped though it was. Something, Henry knew, was amiss, but because he wasn't getting that roiling in his gut that usually accompanied impending danger, he let it slide.

Once recovered from the mistaken identity, the professor cleared his throat and then began to flip through more of the pages. His face grew increasingly awed with each photograph.

"Henry, these are brilliant!" he said in an almost reverential tone, his suddenly ancient eyes betraying the fact that he was reliving something from the past. "My God. It's just like Arthur and Gwen. This is the way they looked at one another. Who are these women, Henry?"

"My Mom and step-Mom," Henry told the professor, pride reflecting in his eyes.

Professor Ambrose looked up from the book in shock. "Are you serious? These are your parents?"

"Yep." He pointed to his mother. "This one is my mom, Regina, who adopted me as a baby and raised me to be who I am today." Pointing to his step-mother, Henry then said, "And this is my step-mom, Ruby. She used to babysit me all the time before she and my mom fell in love. She's kind of more of a buddy than a parental figure. To me anyway."
Looking back down at the photograph he stopped at, Ambrose stood to place it upon the desk so that Henry could see as well. It was opened to the photograph Henry had taken in Spain of his Mom and Ruby at the Castell de Sant Nicolau.

"This is one of my favorites," Henry had said, pointing at the picture, and there was a reason for that.

Standing hip to hip so that the hems of their complementary sundresses flitted and fluttered together in the gentle breeze, his Mom had her hands resting on Ruby's waist as Ruby cupped his mother's face in her hands and crooned the entirety of Lionel Richie's "Endless Love" before launching seamlessly into the Bee Gees "How Deep Is Your Love" all the while they swayed back and forth to the rhythm of the songs. The sun had been fading so that it hung low in the sky and a brilliant cascade of orange rays bathed the horizon as the gentle summer wind blew nature's kiss of approval for a love that had overcome so much adversity.

Henry could remember standing with Sophie and Amie clinging to his legs as he took the picture, the three of them enraptured by the magical moment along with a crowd of other bystanders who gathered around. Some of them were even inspired by Ruby's heartfelt serenading to join in with their own lovers. Soon half the couples present were dancing and singing along. That was the moment Henry realized he wanted to live long enough to find what his Mom had with Ruby, a love so strong that it infectiously spread joy and resiliently survived the worst catastrophes life could throw at it.

As a boy, he had grown up with True Love all around him. His other mother, Emma, had broken the Dark Curse by giving him True Love's Kiss, and she was herself the product of his grandparents' True Love. A kiss of True Love from his Mom had broken the curse on his memories after a year away from Storybrooke. Henry knew what True Love was, he believed in it with all of his heart. But until that moment with his Mom and Ruby, he had never really seen it out in the real world working in a real way that had nothing to do with magic or fairy tales or alien worlds populated by heroes and villains of epic stature. That evening he realized True Love was a marvelous paradox in that it was an extraordinarily powerful gift to humanity but that it could also operate in very ordinary ways. True Love didn't have to be shown in grand gestures of romance or proven by kisses that broke curses. And while those things were wonderful, they could not encapsulate the intricacies of a human experience that stretched from the heights of the majestic to the plains of the mundane but which also sank low into the valleys of depression. Life was varied and complex yet so very simple and was everywhere all at once. The same, he'd learned, could be said of love.

For most of his life, Henry had been wrong in his assumption that True Love was rare. It wasn't. People all over the world shared it each day in millions of different acts, touches, smiles, kisses, and by simply by saying – and meaning – those three little infinitely precious words. He had discovered that it could be found in acts that most people would dismiss as insignificant and could look indistinguishable from the travesty that too often passed as love in this modern day of fleeting emotions. But to those who cared to observe closely, True Love was everywhere, which he should know, because he saw it a thousand times in a thousand different ways on ordinary days at home.

True Love was dancing near an old Spanish watchtower to the rolling symphony of the sea and the prayerful strains of songs that emanated from the strings of a devoted heart. It was sitting underneath a tree in the park reading a book together while the kids played in the near distance. Even doing the dishes was an expression of True Love when undertaken as a couple, side by side, one washing and one drying when a puff of foamy suds dabbed upon one of their noses causes both to laugh with twinkling eyes. And it most definitely could be seen in stolen moments seated next to an opened bay window underneath the pale, luminous light of the moon.
Each of those were incidents he had captured in photographs to preserve the ordinary magnificence of the True Love his mother shared with Ruby, and it was those pictures that had captured Professor Ambrose's keen interest. They spent the next half hour talking about each picture with Ambrose inquiring Henry as to how he'd taken it and why.

Come to think of it now, Henry should have realized the professor had something up his sleeve that day. Ambrose was sneaky that way.

Shrugging, he finally replied, "Yeah, I kinda did to be honest. My work load has been a little crazy of late."

"Understandable," Ambrose said. "If it's alright with you, though, I'd like to introduce you to Kate. I believe she'd be extremely interested in your collection. Maybe even enough to feature some pieces alongside hers."

Henry couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. Not only was Ms. McGraw gorgeous but she was also one of the most talented photographers on the east coast. No one was certain why she was even teaching a course at Harvard when her services were so in demand all over the country, but at the same time, no one cared enough to question it. Ms. McGraw was amazing at what she did and easy on the eyes which was a perfect combination to inspire class enrollment. Her lectures were always stuffed to beyond capacity.

"Are you serious?" he asked, not quite believing his work to be up to snuff. It was good, he could admit at least that much, but good enough to show Kate McGraw? Henry couldn't help but doubt Professor Ambrose's assertions that she would be interested in his collection.

"Of course!" Ambrose countered, his eyes expressive in their fervency. "It's brilliant, Henry! The way you were able to capture the raw emotions present between the subjects is without peer."

Ambrose had taken to calling Henry's mom and step-mom 'the subjects' because it made Henry a bit uncomfortable to talk about them as though they were works of art. They were in a way, but to Henry, they were just Mom and Ruby. He didn't want to tarnish that image of them by associating them as symbols for something else, even if that something was as amazing as True Love. "I think," Ambrose added, "it might be just the thing to jump-start a possible career for you."

"Wow," Henry breathed, flabbergasted. "You think so?"

Despite Ruby's insistence that he had an eye for photography and his mother's constant biased agreement, he'd never seriously considered making it into a profession. He'd always wanted to follow in his mother's footsteps with the law, but the more he thought about it, the more the idea appealed to him.

Nodding, Ambrose replied, "I do."

Taking a deep breath, Henry thought it over. For a moment, he was decided to go ahead with the professor's suggestion, but then he realized that the subjects of his collection were his Mom and Ruby. While Henry knew for a fact Ruby was born to be in front of a camera and would revel in being the subject of a publicized work of art, his mother was a totally different story. Henry could not think of anyone off the top of his head who was more private than his mother.

"While I'm very interested," he said with some measure of disappointment, "I don't know if I can show these photos to anyone."

Tilting his head curiously, Ambrose furrowed his brow. "May I ask why?"
"Well," Henry replied, rubbing his knees in a semi-nervous tic, "my Mom is a really private person. I dunno how she'd feel about them being out there for other people to see."

"Yet you showed them to me," Ambrose countered. An excellent point.

"True," Henry conceded, "but I mean, it's different with you. You're not the rest of the world. I know you and trust you."

Nodding once, Ambrose stroked his bearded chin for a moment. "I see. Well, would it help then if I said Ms. McGraw has earned my utmost regard and that I have in the past trusted her with secrets that she has never once divulged? She will remain discreet, I assure you, and should she wish to include your collection in her display, she would only do so with your consent along with those of your parents."

"That does help," Henry said, "and I'm inclined to accept with that in mind, but I have to ask you something first." At that, Ambrose raised a brow to welcome said question. "Why do you think my collection should be included in Ms. McGraw's?"

Mulling the question over for a moment, Ambrose looked out over the field before them, studying the row of buildings dotting the landscape. "I think what you've captured needs to be seen," he eventually said, not turning his eyes away from the near distance where Henry could see people passing to and fro, some hurrying to class as though late, some loitering aimlessly, and others meandering as if a lazy country stream with no true path or purpose. "People currently have lost their sense of magic, of romance. Love has become as ephemeral as a summer cloud, as temporary as sand in a sieve, something to be grasped for but rarely achieved and equally difficult to hold on to. What I saw in this photo of your parents... well, it's an inspiration, Henry, even to a jaded old soul like me. I look at them and I see that love is real and it's possible. I think everyone should have a chance to see it, too."

"It makes you sad, doesn't it?" Henry asked, noting the melancholy in Ambrose's typically vibrant eyes. "To see my Mom and Ruby? It reminds you of your friend and his wife that died."

"Very much so, yes," Ambrose confirmed, smiling sadly. "Thinking of them also reminds me that love has its downsides as well, which reaffirms my decision to keep my private life hidden from public view, though there isn't much of one to speak of beyond my work."

"No offense, Professor, but that's kinda sad."

Ambrose grinned ruefully. "It is, isn't? I suppose I'll have to do something about that."

Returning the grin, Henry nudged the professor with his elbow. "Hey, I hear there's a really nice lady in the Art Department who seems to like you. That she's smokin' hot doesn't hurt, either. I say you should give her a call." When Ambrose blushed and his eyes widened, Henry laughed. "Just a suggestion."

Chuckling himself, Ambrose shook his head in amusement. "How about this. I'll make you a deal. You consider my suggestion and I'll consider yours."

Gripping Ambrose proffered hand, Henry gave it a firm shake. "Alright. Deal."

"Very good," the Professor replied, slapping his hands to his knees before standing abruptly. "Now that we have an accord, what do you say we go pay Ms. McGraw a visit?"

Henry gaped, a bit startled by the abrupt nature of the request. "Now?"
Cocking his head to the side, Professor Ambrose replied in a condescending way that was more playful than mocking, as he tended to do on the sparse occasions his lectures were interrupted, "No time like the present."

Sighing, Henry nodded his assent. He would have to run back to his dorm and then run all the way to University Hall to fetch what he needed, but it was doable. "I suppose I can do that. I'll just need to go grab my portfolio first."

"Is it out of your way? You won't be late to class will you?"

"No, I think I can make it. I might just have to drop them off and come back later."

"That won't do," the Professor shook his head, frowning a bit. "Just go about your day as normal and meet me at the steps of University Hall at five in the evening. Sound better?"

Henry let out a breath of relief. "Yeah. That works better for me. Thanks."

"Alright then," said Ambrose, giving a curt but kind nod, "I'll be on my way. As always, it was good to see you, Henry."

"You, too, Professor."

As he turned to walk away the Professor gave an amused laugh, obviously at Henry's continual inability to be informal with his name. "Until later, Mr. Mills."

*Yep, laughing at me,* Henry thought as he gathered up his backpack to make his way toward his next class. Oh well, it could have been much worse, like the time he bumped into Ms. McGraw when he wasn't watching where he was going and knocked her files out of her hand. He'd blushed like a hormonal teenager. Thankfully, Ms. McGraw was as patient and understanding as she was gorgeous and had thanked Henry for helping her gather her scattered papers.

Wincing at the memory, Henry hoped she didn't bring that up when he met with her later. The last thing he wanted Professor Ambrose to think was that he was being dishonest. Other than that brief interaction, he really didn't know Ms. McGraw and what he'd said about the opinions of the males on campus was definitely true. Still, he found himself getting nervous at the very thought of showing his photographs to someone he had developed a semi-crush on.

Distracting himself with thoughts of his girlfriend, Emily, who was a fellow Law aspirant, Henry plowed forward with his day and soon enough, all thoughts of the discussion with Professor Ambrose and of their meeting with Ms. McGraw fled from his mind.

Chapter End Notes

This detour sets up some things later. It's not without purpose, I promise.
I Have Hope

Chapter Summary

Henry meets the mysterious Kate McGraw, and gets a phone call that will significantly alter his plans for the immediate future.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Five hours later, Henry burst through the doors of his dormitory, quickly speeding up to a full sprint. After classes, he'd lost track of time studying in his room and had forgotten all about his appointment with Professor Ambrose. He was already inexcusably late.

Running as fast as he could with his portfolio in hand, he made good time, swerving between people milling about campus to reach University Hall in a respectable five minutes. When the entrance came into view, he noticed Professor Ambrose already there, waiting with his back against the building, looking up into the late afternoon sun with a smile on his face, much as Henry had been earlier.

"Sorry I'm late," Henry panted as he skidded to a halt next to the Professor. "Lost track...of time."

"It's alright, Henry," said Ambrose, returning Henry's smile. "I was rather enjoying the afternoon. It's a beautiful day." Focused on regaining his breath, Henry was unable to respond, which drew an amused chuckle from Professor Ambrose, who then pointed down at the object tucked beneath Henry's right arm. "I see you brought your portfolio." When Henry presented the sleek leather bound binder, Ambrose nodded. "Well, let's head in, shall we?"

Without waiting for Henry, the youthful Professor made his way inside. Henry followed closely behind through the first hallway and up the stairs, where they took a right. After passing by several classrooms, they arrived at the end of the hallway where a single office was located. Stepping up to it, Ambrose rapped on the door with his knuckles.

"Kate? It's Morgan."

"Come in," came the melodic voice of Ms. McGraw, tinted by a barely detectable Irish lilt. The enchanting timber of her voice started Henry's heart to racing. He felt Ambrose's amusement being directed his way over the reaction, so he straightened up his shoulders and, as his aunt Zelena liked to say, put his best face forward.

Reaching forward, Ambrose turned the knob, pushed the door open, and then walked in with a brilliant smile on his face.

"Good afternoon, Kate," he greeted as Henry followed him in. Together, they stood before Ms. McGraw's desk as the woman in question stared up at them. With kindness in her green eyes, she leaned back in her chair and gave Professor Ambrose a pointed appraisal that almost made Henry blush. Beside him, Ambrose shifted uncomfortably before gesturing to his guest. "This is Henry Mills, my student from last year, the one I told you about."

talks about you all the time. Says in all the years he's taught at this highly esteemed institution, you were his best and brightest."

"Well, I dunno about that," Henry replied, ducking his head and blushing for real. Internally, he derided himself for being so affected. He had a girlfriend he loved for crying out loud! It was hard to resist Ms. McGraw's incredible beauty, though, when it was even more pronounced up close.


"Leave the lad alone, Kate," Ambrose said in a good-humored attempt to deflect Ms. McGraw's teasing. "Anyway, I bought Henry here to show you his collection of photographs. I believe you'll find them relevant to that exhibit in New York you've been planning."

"Is that so?" Ms. McGraw's high pitched tone of interest drew Henry's gaze back up just in time to watch her sit up straight and pull her chair forward so that her legs were underneath her desk. With her elbows on the surface of the desk, she rested her chin on the backs of her fingers and directed her eyes at Henry. They were no longer teasing, but full of genuine interest. "Do you have your collection with you?"

"Yeah," Henry nodded, and then nervously went about handing the black book to Ms. McGraw. He nearly fumbled the exchange, but recovered just in time to keep it's precious contents from spilling out all over the floor. "This is it," he said, presenting it to Ms. McGraw, who was looking amused again due to his adolescent bumbling. Idiot, he castigated himself.

After taking the portfolio, Ms. McGraw laid it gently on her desk and then upon opening it, began to flip through the introductory pages to the first photograph, just as Ambrose had. She gave Henry an amused smile at the picture of two condiment smudged faces regarding each other before flipping over to next the page, which just so happened to house Henry's personal favorite of all in that collection.

For a long time, he had been aware that on occasion his mother and Ruby would loiter together before retiring to bed upon the little nook in the master bedroom. He'd interrupted their cozy lounging more than once to ask his Mom a question about his homework or quiz Ruby about the latest news about the Patriots. Framed by a grand window which overlooked the back yard, the alcove made the perfect space to decompress after a hard day, especially in autumn when the leaves were a thousand shades of yellows, oranges, and reds or in winter when the back yard was blanketed with freshly fallen snow and the moon was looming large and bright just within sight over the canopy of trees at the far end of the property.

Knowing it was the perfect frame for a photo in his set, he devised a plan with Ruby to corral his Mom into a snuggle one night when the moon was full. Ruby hadn't been keen on it at first, seeing as it would be Wolf's Time and she'd be itching to go for a run. But as usual, Henry pulled a face and pleaded egregiously and got his way. Unlike his Mom, Ruby always was a pushover. The only caveat, of course, was that Ruby wasn't allowed any funny business that night. Getting an eyeful of them kissing wasn't an uncommon occurrence, but he liked to avoid it where he could. 'Cause, for real, they were his parents, and no kid wants to see his parents making out. Thankfully that night, Ruby managed to keep it in her pants. And as Henry snuck round the corner to take his photo, he caught artistic gold. The image he captured that night was as close to perfection as he believed was possible.

In it, his Mom was sitting to the left, her hair tucked carefully behind her ear and dressed immaculately in her work clothes consisting of a powder blue blouse and light gray tailored slacks. Her feet were bare and her left leg was curled up on the small bench built into the nook with the right hanging down so that foot was resting on the floor. She was leaning forward very slightly so that her
left arm was fully stretched out to support her weight against the bench. Leaning in towards her was Ruby sitting cross-legged on the bench, her hair caught up in a low pony tail and dressed in a pair of black leggings and a cream-colored sweater that fell loose around her shoulders. Of all the pictures Henry had taken of his Mom and Ruby together, none of them captured the depth of emotion that was present in their eyes, evident on their faces as they gazed at one another, so lost, so wholly consumed by the enormity of their love that nothing else existed for them beyond each other.

It was, Henry thought, the most meaningful picture he'd ever taken.

"My God, this is incredible," Ms. McGraw said, tracing her finger along the edges of the photograph as she leaned over the book. Judging by the breathless tone, she was as completely enthralled by the photograph as Henry had been. "Such profound love, and so delicately captured." As she continued to stare, her eyes suddenly narrowed. "And there is something so familiar about this woman. I feel as if I should know her." As she sat back a bit, she pointed a manicured finger at Ruby and studied her face for a moment. When it apparently registered to her why she should have recognized Henry's step-Mother, she looked up at him with intensely probing eyes. "You took this photograph personally?"

"I did," he explained. "I had insider knowledge that the couple liked to sit there sometimes to talk before they go to bed, and I used it to snag the photo."

"And you came by this insider information how, exactly?" she inquired, clearly intrigued.

Figuring he was going to have to tell the truth eventually if Ms. McGraw expressed interest in his work, Henry replied with a proud smile, "The one on the left is my Mom, Regina Mills."

Looking back down, Ms. McGraw's eyes widened further, though not for the reason Henry thought. "And the one on the right?"

Because her finger was still pointed at Ruby, Henry supplied the answer. "My Step-Mom."

Ms. McGraw stared back at Henry with a complex expression that made it seem as if she was shocked by the revelation but in a delightfully unexpected way. "Wait a second," she then said, her voice laden with barely restrained excitement, "you're telling me that your stepmother is Megan Miller...the Megan Miller? The model who took the world by storm a few years back after Jerome Conner discovered her in New York? The exclusive series he produced of her in iconic locations about the city created such buzz that select images graced the covers of *Vogue*, *Elle*, and *Glamour* within months of one another!"

"Yeah, that's her," Henry replied, again with no small amount of pride. "But Megan Miller is a pseudonym."

As Ms. McGraw gaped in awe, Professor Ambrose took the moment of silent opportunity to lean over and drape his arm across the armrest of his chair as he turned his attention to Henry. There was a bit of bewilderment evident on his face.

"So, let me get all this straight here, Henry," he said. "Not only are you a secret savant at photography but your stepmother is a world-famous model as well?"

Henry shrugged. "Kinda? Though I wouldn't say I was a savant at anything, and my step-Mom is just my step-Mom to me. She's been a part of my life since I was ten, a long time before she got famous. Well, before her pseudonym got famous anyway."

"Blimey," the professor exclaimed. "Got any more secrets you'd like to reveal? Perhaps your mother..."
was once Queen of Morocco?"

Though the professor was clearly joking, his little suggestion hit so close to home that Henry visibly winced. And while he trusted Ambrose to know this information about Ruby, he did not trust the man so much as to reveal his mother's identity. "Not really. Other than that, my life is pretty ordinary, relatively speaking at least."

Having recovered from her stupor, Ms. McGraw cleared her throat to grab Henry's attention. "If I may be so bold, would it offend you if I asked a semi-personal question?"

"Kate..." Ambrose began to warn away from such sensitive lines of questioning but Henry stopped him by holding up his hand.

"It's alright," he said, looking between the two faculty members of the most prestigious university in America. "I think I can trust you both to keep this information between us. Right?"

"Of course!" Ms. McGraw swore, and Ambrose nodded sincerely.

After crossing his legs, Henry leaned back in the chair and relaxed. "Then ask away."

"Well, I was wondering..." Ms. McGraw began, biting her lip a bit nervously before continuing. "I mean, I always found it odd that Ms. Miller so suddenly exploded onto the scene but only ever crops up a handful of times a year since that auspicious debut. Most models who come by such success are inundated with offers."

"Oh, she was," Henry answered, remembering that hectic time in their lives. "But she only takes a couple of bookings a year with Conner and a few other photographers she trusts implicitly, mainly because my Mom is super private and my step-Mom has a regular job that she loves too much to quit. She only takes the modeling gigs because the pay is ridiculous and she genuinely enjoys the work. Ruby is a ham for the camera, just not enough to sacrifice her privacy or my Mom's."

"At first she refused the offers outright because my Mom didn't really take it well when she found out her wife had moonlighted as a model without consulting her. But eventually Mom came around and convinced Ruby not to quit altogether when she finally saw a couple of the other published shots. After that, she was convinced that Ruby was born to be a model, which I happen to agree with obviously."

After realizing what he'd done in revealing Ruby's real name, he internally cursed himself. *Idiot.* Knowing it was too late to take it back, he went on to say. "That's my step-Mom's real name, by the way, Ruby Mills. Just don't let that leave this room. She kept the pseudonym active so that she could protect the life she built with my Mom."

"How sweet," Ms. McGraw effused saccharine wonderment. "That's a much better story than the one I heard."

"Which was?" Ambrose inquired, having obviously been sucked into the story and now seeming as interested as Ms. McGraw was.

"I had heard she was some kind of erratic recluse who only came out a few times per year to satisfy her contract."

"That's not at all the case. She's one of the most gregarious people I know." Upon seeing how interested Ms. McGraw seemed, Henry elaborated, "She's also a deputy sheriff in our hometown who's been partnered with my biological mother, Emma, for the past eight years."
"That's quite impressive," Ambrose commented, meaning the sentiment. "Though it begs the question as to how she came to be a renowned subject of this Mr. Conner."

"That's where the story gets interesting," Henry replied to Ambrose, angling himself so that he was addressing Ms. McGraw at the same time. "My Mom...I mean, Emma, used to be a bail bondsperson, and during that time, she accrued an extensive network of contacts, a few of which were in the FBI. Anyway, she heard they were setting up a computer forensics training seminar for the New England area that was invite only and she pulled some strings to get Ruby on the attendance list.

"Ruby made some friends there that she liked to hang out with between courses. During a lull in the seminar they decided to go sightseeing one afternoon and wound up in Rockefeller Plaza. While they were by the Atlas statue, Ruby asked one of her friends to take a picture of her to send to my Mom, but as she was posing a man walked by. When he stopped and stared, she confronted him. Turns out it was Jerome Conner on his way to a meeting with a potential client. To make a long story short, over a period of several phone calls, he sweet talked Ruby into being his subject for a new series – the one you were talking about. Her only stipulation for taking the job was that he credit her under an alias. Thus, Megan Miller was born."

But one thing Ruby had not anticipated was that despite the barrier of the pseudonym she had established, her decision to participate in the photo shoot created a ripple effect that eventually cascaded into her private life. The aftermath of that collision was one that effected Henry as well, causing him many nights of sleepless worry over his mother's marriage.

It all happened only a few months after Ruby returned from New York. His Mom had been out grocery shopping and was standing in line at the check-out when she noticed the latest issue of Elle magazine on the shelf beside her. Lo and behold, there was Ruby right on the cover, in startling technicolor, stretched out on the beach in a brown polka-dot bikini with her left foot in the air and her hands dug into the sand as she gazed forward with an alluring expression on her face. It was, Henry thought, a tastefully done photo but apparently, his mother had disagreed, though that was only part of the reason why she was upset.

Having not been informed of Ruby's side-job in New York, discovering the secret in that way had the unfortunate effect of setting his mom's epic temper off. Upon arriving home from the store, she immediately tore into Ruby, angrily berating her for what she deemed a 'selfish little stunt' before then proceeding to chew her up one side and down the other over having also "blithely put the safety and anonymity of the entire town at risk." In fact, his Mom was so furious that she kicked Ruby out of the house for the rest of the evening, a turn of events that severely strained their relationship.

Henry spent several hours that night on the phone with his distraught step-mother, comforting her through a very real fear that she had ruined her marriage while also having to help her work through the intense hurt his Mom's accusations had provoked. That the woman she had solemnly pledged her life to could so easily believe that she would put everything they had built together at risk without even bothering to hear her side of the story had devastated Ruby. Her distress was so acute that by the end of the phone call, Ruby was clearly on the verge of a breakdown, which had Henry so concerned for her safety that he'd made her promise to stay the night with Emma and Hook just so that she wouldn't be alone. And although Ruby conceded to his logical suggestion, she had likewise made him swear that he would not tell his Mom where she was. Because it was only fair, Henry had no choice but to agree.

Later that night, he of course got a call from his Mom, who was in tears over not being able to contact Ruby and wondering whether he had heard from her. Left in the very awkward position of wanting to reassure his mother but honor his promise to Ruby, Henry had little else in the way of
options but to tell his mother the truth: that he had indeed heard from Ruby and that she was safe but
that she wanted to be left alone for the night. Hearing that Ruby had cut her off only made his Mom
feel worse, which resulted in Henry having to listen to his mother's torturous guilt over her perceived
mishandling the situation and fear that she had at last managed to drive Ruby away for good.

"Mom, listen to me. Don't go there," he had interrupted as his mother went on listing the plethora of
reasons Ruby had to leave her. It was, Henry knew, her age-old insecurities talking. "You know
Ruby loves you and you know that she understands why you reacted that way. I also know that she
messed up by not telling you what went on in New York, but you hurt her bad, Mom, and she needs
this time for that hurt to subside. Just trust me, okay? She'll be back home tomorrow and you guys
can talk things out."

"You sound so sure," his Mom had said, her voice rough from a night of stress, anger, and bitterly
repentant crying.

"Because I am," he'd replied. "I was there, remember? In the hospital when you got stabbed. I saw
how Ruby reacted. Mom, I don't know that she can live without you any more than you can live
without her. I think you guys are kinda stuck with each other forever."

At that, his mother had finally released some of her anguish through a deep breath which also served
to calm her down a bit. "You're right. I know you're right. I'm just..." she then sighed. "I said some
awful things, Henry. I don't understand why I can't get rid of this anger in me."

Henry had known why and so did his Mom, she just needed to hear it from him to believe. "It's a
part of you, Mom. Just like Emma and her trust issues. You are who you are and that's not a bad
thing. When I was a kid, I used to want you to change but I realize now that is not healthy. You were
never a bad person, just a flawed one, and I had to learn to accept that. A lot of me getting to that
point is thanks to Ruby, who I also happen to know to have for a fact doesn't ever want you to change.

"She loves you, Mom, and accepts you just the way that you are. Does that mean you're always
going to get along with each other? No, of course it doesn't. You're both too pig-headed for a bed of
roses kind of life. But you know what? A bed of roses kind of life is pretty damn boring if you ask
me."

Laughing through her tears, his mom had answered, "Amen to that, sweetheart. Somehow, I knew
talking to you would help me. You always were too wise for your own good. Thank you, Henry."

With a smile on his face, Henry had replied, "Anytime." And he had meant it. Turns out that was a
good thing because his Mom had availed herself of his free counseling services many times since
when there was contention in the house, whether between her and Ruby or her and the girls or Ruby
and the girls or even the girls with each other. Although he constantly missed home and never missed
an opportunity to go back, there was a lot of alpha female going on in that house that Henry was glad
to not be present for.

But more to the point of what Ms. McGraw was inquiring about, after Ruby's little side-job as a
model, copious amounts of offers came in via the P/O box she'd set up for her pseudonym while she
was in New York. Those were then relayed to the agent she had hired through Emma's
recommendation. But because she loved her life, she hadn't wanted to give up her anonymity to live
in the spotlight. As such, she only took jobs with a handful of photographers she trusted not to pry
beyond the surface of Megan Miller and only then between four and six times per year. It was a
compromise that his Mom was willing to live with, particularly with the healthy income Ruby
received for her gigs. She was, as Ms. McGraw stated, highly sought after.

"I know I'm probably overstepping my bounds," said Ms. McGraw, "but I can't help but be curious,
not just about your step-Mum, but about your mother as well. How long have they been married?"

Henry smiled, thinking back to the day his parents married. It was one of the happiest of his life. "Almost seven years now. Together for eleven."

"And were they married when you took this?"

Henry nodded. "Yep. I took it last winter on a visit home."

Ms. McGraw's brows shot up to her hairline. "And they still look at one another that way?"

Chuckling, Henry replied, "Yeah. My Mom won't ever admit it, but they're kinda adorably in love. I tease her about it sometimes, but usually not too much. They've been through a lot, so they both deserve to be happy."

"That is almost too sweet to even comprehend," Ms. McGraw sighed, flopping back into her chair dramatically. "You ought to learn something from them, professor."

"Really, Kate?" Professor Ambrose scoffed in annoyance.

"Settle down," she grinned. "I'm just teasing. You always were too easily riled, Me-organ." The slip in her address caused Ms. McGraw's eyes to widen, much as it did Professor Ambrose's whose his jaw to clenched. Neither seemed willing to comment on it, which was strange to Henry because it seemed like Ms. McGraw was about to call Professor Ambrose by another name. Intrigued, Henry observed their silent interplay of worried glances, narrowing eyes and raised brows.

Finally, Professor Ambrose cleared his throat. "Anyway," he said, "aside from your interest in Henry's family, what do you think of his photographs?"

After opening her mouth and shutting it several times as if she wanted to say something else, Ms. McGraw finally turned back to the book.

"Let me have a look at the rest before I comment," she said, gesturing toward the chairs in front of her desk. Obeying the silent instruction, both Henry and Ambrose sat, exchanging slightly worried glances though for very different reasons as Ms. McGraw began to flip through the rest of the pages of the book. Henry watched anxiously as she proceeded to study each photograph intently and without comment, page by page, taking her time to catch every little nuance and detail before moving on the next.

When done, she flipped the book closed and folded her hands over the cover. "This is," she said looking right at Henry with sincerity shimmering in her green eyes, "without a doubt one of the most extraordinary set of photographs I have ever seen in terms of raw, palpable human emotion." Henry felt a thrill run through him at the lofty praise and he saw Professor Ambrose grin with delight out of the corner of his eye. "I would be honored to display these at my exhibition. In fact, I daresay they may steal the show from my own work. What you've done here is incredible, Henry!"

Breathing a deep breath of relief and no small amount of exhilaration, Henry beamed at the world-renowned photographer who had given his humble work such merits. "Thank you, Ms. McGraw. Really, you have no idea how much that means to me."

"You're welcome," she said with an equally happy expression, which turned playfully serious, "though I insist you call me Kate. May I ask what you're studying currently?"

"I'm in my last semester of Law School," he answered.
At that, Ms. McGraw sat up straight, visibly impressed. "Wow, a brilliant mind and an artist's eye. Quite a combination."

"Nah," Henry shrugged, flushing bashfully. He never had acclimated to receiving praise without becoming embarrassed. "I'm nothing special."

"Quite the contrary," Professor Ambrose spoke up, directing his comment to Ms. McGraw. "Henry here is slated to graduate Summa Cum Laude. Right, Henry?"

"Yeah," Henry said, "I've done alright. My mom graduated first in her class from Yale, so she still has bragging rights, I suppose."

Quirking her lips up to one side, Ms. McGraw batted her eyelashes, teasing Henry yet again. "Humble, too. My, my."

At that, Henry was sure he turned red as a beet. It was pretty disgusting that at twenty-six years old, he could still be reduced to a blushing little boy by a pretty girl. Then again, Ms. McGraw was far beyond just a pretty girl. There was a mystical quality about her that rivaled the mysterious aura of Professor Ambrose. It was easy to see how people were drawn to her. She was like a people magnet.

"Oh stop it, Kate," Ambrose chuckled at Henry's obvious discomfort. "He might decide to withdraw his collection if you keep teasing him."

"Well, we can't have that, can we Morgan?" Ms. McGraw drawled. Turning her eyes back to Henry, her expression leveled out to a more serious demeanor. "So, Henry, would you be interested in displaying your collection at my exhibition in New York? As far as I'm concerned, I would be thrilled to include them. As I said, I think they are absolute show-stoppers that will garner some serious press for my collection."

"Not that you need it," Professor Ambrose commented.

"Not that I need it," Ms. McGraw agreed with a conspiratorial smile. "So, what do you say?"

Henry, for his part, did not even have to consider the proposition. However, he had his mother and Ruby to think about, as well as his sisters. He would have to talk to his family first before agreeing to anything. "I'm game," he said, "but I'll have to speak with my Mom and Ruby first. You know, to get their permission."


From the chair beside him, Professor Ambrose started to say something but was interrupted by the ringing of a phone. It took Henry a moment to recognize the ring tone. It was Merle Haggard's "Mama Tried." Only Ruby. One of these days he was going to learn to keep his cell phone out of his mischievous step-mother's reach.

Rolling his eyes, Henry fished around in his pocket before drawing it out. It was, as he thought, his mother calling. "Crap, it's my Mom. One sec." The other occupants of the room nodded as he answered. "Hey, Mom."

"Henry," his mother's voice came over the line in an obvious panic. "Henry are you there? Something's happened. Oh, God. What am I supposed to do if she...if she...I just can't, Henry. I can't do it again. I can't..."

Panicking slightly, Henry sat forward in his chair, running a nervous hand through his hair. "What? Wait...slow down." His mother began rambling again. "Mom. Mom. Slow down. What's wrong?"
"It's Ruby," she said, clearly terrified, which made Henry's heart lurch. Glancing over at Professor Ambrose, Henry had obviously let his worry leak out because the Professor returned an expression of deep concern. "She's sick, Henry. God, she's so sick. She's been throwing up almost non-stop for two hours and she's burning up. Emma and I have tried everything to get it to stop but she kept refusing to go to the hospital, so I had to put her under a spell. Your mother and I are going to take her now."

"What about Sophie and Amie?" Henry asked, now standing and pacing.

"Hook is with them until Snow and Charming arrive. Listen, I just wanted to call you and let you know. I'll call again when Emma and I get to the hospital and we know more, okay?"

Henry could hear in his mother's voice that she was trying to be brave but was failing miserably. The call was indicative of how desperate she was for support now. With both his mother and Ruby needing him home, there was nothing that was going to keep him away.

"Okay, listen," he told his mom, "I let Nicholas borrow my car for the weekend, so I'll have to find another way there but I'm coming home. Tonight."

"You don't have to do that, sweetheart," his mom replied. Again, she was trying unsuccessfully to be brave.

"Yes, I do, Mom." When his mother started to protest, Henry cut her off. "Just go take care of Ruby, okay? Get her to the ER and I'll be home as soon as I can."

"Only if you're sure."

"I'm sure, Mom, just go!"

"Okay, sweetheart, okay. I'm going. Please, just drive careful. Please. I need you to be safe."

"I know, Mom, I will. See you soon. I love you."

"I love you, too, son." With a choked sob, his mother hung up, leaving Henry gripping his phone in dismay.

"What's wrong, Henry?" Professor Ambrose asked, standing and stepping next to Henry.

"I, uh..." Henry sighed, pinching his eyes shut to keep tears from forming. He couldn't afford to feel right now. He needed to act. Opening his eyes with renewed purpose, he said, "My step-mom...she's really sick. It was sudden and it sounds bad. And I have no way back home." The second the words crossed his lips, Henry realized that he, in fact, had no way back home. His hope crumbled.

His face a picture of sympathy, Professor Ambrose gently grasped Henry's shoulder. "That's terrible, Henry," he said, "but not entirely true. You live in Maine, correct?" Henry nodded. "Well, I can drive you home if you're comfortable with that. I've never been to Maine before and I've been meaning to visit for the longest."

Henry gave a sigh of relief, looking gratefully at his professor, his friend. "Are you sure? I mean, that would be awesome, Professor, but I don't want to cause you any trouble."

"For the last time, Henry, it's Morgan," Ambrose smiled, "and it's no trouble at all. I'm due a few days and my aide needs some practice lecturing. He'll cover for me."

"Listen to Morgan, Henry," Ms. McGraw said, her face covered with nearly as much sympathy as
Professor Ambrose's. "I think you know you can trust him."

"I do."

"Well, then," said Ambrose, "when do we leave?"

The question made Henry realize he had some things to do before he could leave, such as call his professors to apprise them of his pending absence and the reason for it and to talk to his roommate about what to do when Nicholas returned his car. "Right," he breathed, running over the list of things to do in his head and getting them organized, "I need to talk to my professors and grab some stuff from my dorm before I can leave. Can I meet you here in an hour?"

"Yes," said Ambrose agreeably. "I'm done for the day, so just come directly back here when you're ready to leave."

"I will. Thanks so much, Prof...Morgan," Henry corrected. "You have no idea what this means to me." At that, Henry ran for the door and wasted no time in running down the hallway, determined to move as fast as possible. The desire to get home was pressing down on him like the crushing jaws of a compactor and he was powerless to fight it.

And as Henry disappeared down the hallways, Professor Ambrose said sadly, "Oh, but Henry, I think I do." A moment of silence descended over the room in which neither he nor Kate McGraw could speak. Something terrible was happened, something momentous, something prophetic. He could feel it in the air. The tides were shifting, the pieces on the chess table were positioned for the final moves to be made. It would soon be over one way or another.

"What is it, Merlin?" he eventually heard his lone companion in the room speak, addressing him by the name she had not dared speak in years. It seemed that even she sensed the magnitude of the moment.

Turning sad blue eyes to her, he sighed. "It's happening," he said to her, already knowing who had set the events in Storybrooke in motion. "He's found a way to this world. What happened to Henry's step-mother is the opening gambit of his end game."

It was no coincidence that Merlin had chosen to apply his vast knowledge acquired over centuries of study to land a position at Harvard University. Sometime in the early 80's he had noticed a shift in the tides of magic, a great disturbance that alerted him to the passage of monumental events. Having lost contact with his apprentice some years before, Merlin went about tracing the source. After much spent effort, he could find it in an area of Maine located near the northern coast around which a magical barrier of immense power had been erected. He spent the next few hours studying the barrier and was eventually able to determine that it was a time bubble effectively sealing off the land within from the notice of the outside world. Had he wished to, he could have easily penetrated it, but he knew his interference might damage the course of fate and he had already done too much of that in the past to repeat those mistakes.

Still, he realized that with the arrival of the folk from Misthaven, the time was drawing near for events to unfurl which he had been long anticipating. Patiently he waited over the decades that followed, watching over the Savior from a distance as he milled about the modern world trying not to attract attention to himself. He was there when Emma ran away from her first foster family, aching for the little girl's pain but knowing it was necessary to forge her into the Savior she would become. He was also there when Emma was arrested, watching surreptitiously as the betrayal registered across her face, and he was there when Henry was born some months later, not in the room, but nearby in the infirmary disguised as a security guard. And he was there when a ten-year-old Henry
arrived at his birth mother's apartment with a head full of questions and a heart full of belief.

After Emma returned with Henry to Storybrooke, Merlin knew it would soon be time to put his affairs in order. Less than a year after that it happened again. Realizing Emma had broken the Curse, he packed his things and moved to New York, shadowing the son of the Dark One while waiting for the story to unfold. After Baelfire went with Emma, his son and his father back to Storybrooke, Merlin remained in New York. The proximity to Storybrooke allowed him to keep a feel out for things without being too close for comfort. It was not yet time for him to reveal himself.

In the end, he had to wait another seven years for events to progress to the point that he could finally begin making preparations for his final move. Then it happened yet again. He could vividly remember that day, standing in his tiny apartment overlooking the Hudson river, lost in thought when a quake in the magical ley lines invisible to all in this world slammed into his chest. The key had been created.

One of the great myths of this world, Merlin had always found it amusing that people believed Earth was devoid of magic when that was so very far from the truth. Rather, the Earth teemed with magic, so much magic that it was an axis on which the energies that permeated the Nine Realms rotated. But because of how vast and concentrated it was, it had been sealed off far beneath the surface of the planet long before humans existed. Beings that dwelt far beyond the blue and green gem of the Nine Realms had deemed humanity incapable of handling access to such power. It was one of the reasons why Gryffyn coveted the Earth above all other Realms. Here, he would have access to incomprehensible stores of magic with which he would become strong enough to at long last destroy the Olympians who had dared to sunder him from his beloved.

Yet Merlin also knew that the other reason he would come to this planet was due to the fact it was Artemis' prison. Zeus, the greatest of Olympians, chose earth as the place of incarceration for the daughter who had sought to usurp his rule over Olympus and overthrow the Nine Realms of Yggdrasil. Magic was inaccessible on earth and he believed none could ever free her without its aid. And so, furious with betrayal, he personally bound Artemis his daughter within a tomb carved by his own hands into the walls of a cavern beneath the earth. There she was locked away in stasis, not given the mercy of unawareness but rather sentenced to an eternal punishment in which she would ever be aware of the passage of time but unable to move or to speak or to free herself. It was a cruel thing to do, Merlin believed, for he would not wish such torment even on his worst enemies.

Yet even so, there Artemis remained, alone in her misery until one day many centuries later, a town materialized over the place where she was entombed. Drawn by the latent magic of the prison, the Dark Curse had anchored Storybrooke right atop where Artemis laid, awaiting rescue from her lover. And finally, after so long pillaging and ransacking every planet but two among the seven, Gryffyn was at last ready to free Artemis, all he would require was the key to open the door which Zeus had sealed using the blood of his granddaughter, the offspring of Gryffyn and Artemis.

Once again packing all his belongings, a thrill of joy ran through Merlin despite his fear at what may come, for at long last his sojourn through the mountains and valleys of this world were nearly over and the time of his passive observation past. Yet tempering that joy was his despair at the inevitable confrontation between himself and the last surviving member of his bloodline. He did not want to have to destroy Gryffyn, but realized that was the most likely outcome. People who became lost to evil rarely ever found their way back, and complicating the situation was the fact that he would come after the last surviving member of the bloodline Merlin had worked so hard to see flourish.

And now, having heard what was transpiring in Storybrooke with Henry's step-mother, Merlin at last understood that the time was at hand. Already having been forged into the key by her death and resurrection, all that remained for Ruby Mills née Lucas to be fit to open the door was for her to be
activated by the hand of Gryffyn, who would soon arrive to collect his key.

With sorrowful eyes, he lifted his head as if looking beyond the ceiling of the office in which he sat to peer into the heavens, hoping that his question would somehow traverse the cosmos to be heard by his wayward cousin. "What have you done, Gryff?"

No matter how dark the hole grew into which Gryffyn fell after the imprisonment of Artemis, Merlin wished for a way to retrieve him, to bring him back from the void that had sucked all goodness out of him. Once he would have thought such a thing impossible. After watching Morgana fall, he had lost his belief in redemption. But at least in that matter he had been proven incorrect, so hope remained that his cousin might be saved. Whatever happened, Merlin owed it to himself to try.

From behind her desk, Merlin felt his longtime companion stand and move around to the front of the desk. As she slipped in beside him, she reached for his hand. Tangling their fingers together, she gazed up at him, green eyes full of equal amounts of anticipation and dread. Love for her flooded his heart, warming him from toe to crown.

How he wished it could have been this way the first time. If only he had done things differently, perhaps Arthur might have lived to see his destiny fulfilled, for with her at his side, anything would have been possible. But the fact of the matter was, he hadn't chosen differently, and it had cost him dearly. And yet, the past is the past, he thought, resolving himself to move forward.

"Do you think it's time, Merlin?" she suddenly asked, breaking the heavy silence that had descended upon the room. Again, she used his given name and again he allowed it, finding himself warming to reclaiming who he once was a long last. After so many years of waiting, it was time now for him to shed his identity as the meek history professor and to don the weight of his destiny once more.

"I don't know, Morgana, but I have hope," was his tired but expectant reply, glad that she was with him here at the end.

Chapter End Notes

Click here to see the shot of Meghan Ory I used as inspiration for the modeling gig that got Ruby in trouble. In my head canon, Regina now has an original print she keeps hanging in her office as a flaunting reminder for everyone who enters of who she goes home to every night.

Next chapter is back to Regina, dealing with the fallout of Ruby's sudden illness. Which isn't accidental. And is, as Merlin said, the first domino to tip over in the final thrust of the story.
Ravaged

Chapter Summary

Back in Storybrooke, Ruby's condition deteriorates, her inner beast going haywire. Later, when confronted with the appearance of the vanguard of the enemy's forces, Regina's own inner beast makes an appearance.

Regina was fed up. She was fed up with the lethargic trickle of news about Ruby's condition, left to fear the worst in the very same waiting room she'd once trashed in a rage under vaguely similar circumstances. She was sick of the arrogant doctors who dared to insist she couldn't see her wife until she was stabilized and they had the toxicology reports back from the lab. And she was so, so tired of hospitals in general with their claustrophobic tension and their antiseptic smells and the never-ending despair that lingered in every corner of them, dreading that at any moment now, Victor would arrive to tell her that Ruby was dead. It was only by a hairsbreadth that she was even hanging on to her tenuous grip on her temper, and only then because Emma refused to leave her side, refused to give up hoping for the best just like her ridiculously sunshiny mother.

Emma could not contain the beast forever, though, when time was ticking by one infuriating, incessant second at a time. Marked by the clicking of the gears driving the mechanical clock on the wall, a relic of yore when Storybrooke was still a town cursed to live forever in the 1980's, the ticking and tocking went on and on for what felt like hours but was only minutes – fifteen, to be precise, since the last time she glanced up to check the time.

Just as the previous fifteen did, the next minutes passed by like a slug on wet cement until at last, just before Regina gave up what pretense of patience remained, heard a knock on the waiting room door.

"Mayor Mills? I just wanted to drop in to give you a status report," the kind nurse said as she stepped in. Regina only tempered her desire to bite the woman's head off because said nurse was in fact Belinda, the very same nurse who had seen to Regina when she was stabbed and had become a sort of casual friend. Even so, Regina listened on the edge of her seat, her hands gripping the armrest so tightly the joints of her fingers ached at the pressure. "Your wife is still in emergency care. Dr. Whale is working hard to get her temp down now. For a while there, we didn't have any luck and things were complicated when she seized a couple of times but we got her through that and finally managed to level her temp out. Getting it down now is the primary issue. Things are still serious but Ruby's a tough cookie, okay? Just hang in there."

"I will," Regina replied, managing to keep her tone free of the caustic acid gathering in her esophagus at hearing Ruby was having seizures. That one word triggered a recollection that she should have connected to hours ago. When Belinda finally left a few moments later with a promise to keep her apprised on Ruby's progress, Regina stood and held her hand to her forehead in utter disbelief. "I can't believe it," she said to no one in particular, seething with disgust at herself. "I'm such an idiot. I can't believe I didn't see it."

"What is it?" Emma asked, looking ashen herself, which wasn't all that surprising. She'd looked like a ghost when she got to the house and saw the precarious state of Ruby's health.

Pacing back and forth two steps at a time in front of the small table in the waiting room, Regina folded her arms up over her midsection, a feeble attempt to quieten her suddenly roiling stomach.
"The sudden, extreme vomiting, the dangerously high fever, the seizures...it all adds up. It's the poison, Emma. The son of a bitch actually did it. He got to her."

"What?" Emma gaped, immediately recognizing to whom Regina was referring. "It's not possible! Someone was on her every second she wasn't with one of us."

"Then someone didn't do their damn job!" Regina screamed, her temper snapping as she realized what would come next. "Because those, Miss Swan, are classic symptoms of the Lycanthrope poison."

"It can't be," Emma said, clearly in complete denial. "It just can't. You said there isn't a cure and I've had people on her every waking second and I didn't go all the way to that God forsaken place and back just to lose her now, not like this. I can't..." Stopping cold, she looked at Regina with such terror in her green eyes that Regina's entire frame chilled down to the bone. A shudder passed through her in concert with Emma's almost palpable terror. "Jesus...Jesus...Are we going to lose her, Regina?"

The way Emma's voice quaked when she asked the question and the defeat visible within her posture struck Regina in the chest. Like a hundred mile per hour fastball in the game Emma and Ruby so loved to watch and chat about, the inevitability of the situation finally sank in. She recalled her words to Emma earlier in the week when she'd visited to check on Ruby.

"She'll suffer untold agony, Emma, and then she will die and there will be nothing we can do about it," she had said, and the words began to reverberate in her mind like a warped impression of her mother's cackling voice, repeating itself over and over.

Feeling like the room was caving in all around her, Regina stumbled only for Emma to spring into action to prop her back up.

"Woah, there!" the blonde sheriff exclaimed as she steadied Regina by the shoulders. "Regina! Regina? Are you okay?"

Shaking her head in dismay, Regina backed away slowly, "No, no, I'm not, Emma." She suddenly gasped, grasping at the hair at her temples in desperation, her face contorted with torment. "Oh, God! We're out of time. We have an hour at best, at worst, minutes. I have to go to Rumple right now."

Not bothering to wait for Emma's approval of her plan, Regina strode toward the door only to be stopped short by Emma.

"Wait a second," the Savior said as she slid in between Regina and the door, hands raised in a preemptive measure of mollification.

"If you're wise, you'll step aside." Regina growled the warning, her forehead throbbing so furiously that she knew the pronounced vein there that was a tell-tale indicator of her anger level was prominently on display. Normally, the sight of it would have warned off anyone intent upon contesting her.

But Emma, as per usual, was determined to be abnormally obstinate. "I'm not the enemy here, Regina," the Savior said, her pouty mouth thinned into a hard line. "You know as well as I do how Ruby feels about that man, and about magic being used on her without her consent. So tell me what, exactly, Gold can do to help and I'll let you go."

On the verge of panic now, what little restraint Regina was maintaining snapped. "I don't know, Emma, but I do know I have to do something! Or maybe you'd prefer I just stand around and wait for Ruby to die?"
"Not what I'm saying. It's just...I'm just..." Emma gestured uselessly, brows drawn in with suspicion, "I don't get it. I know he saved your life all those years ago, but have you forgotten all the shit he pulled before that? And the questionable things he's done since?"

"Of course not, you idiot!" Regina raged, having built a full head of steam.

Deep down she knew Emma meant well, that the woman was devoted to both her and Ruby in ways Regina could never have anticipated. The Savior would rather fall on her own sword than see one hair on Ruby's head harmed, and Regina was sure that protective streak extended to her as well. If that weren't true, Emma would have refused to accompany Ruby to the Enchanted Forest out of obligation to the nearly ten thousand citizens of an increasingly bustling Storybrooke that depended on her services as both as their duly elected Sheriff and resident Savior. There was no one outside of Regina's immediate family of whose affection she was more confident than Emma's.

And yet with her wife's life literally hanging in the balance and terrible talons of dread starting to claw at her insides as if some insidious force had invaded her mind and body, all she could see was that Emma was in the way, just like she'd been all those years ago, when she first came to town. That dark part of Regina she normally kept such a tight lid on was worming its way out of containment, and if the Savior wasn't careful, it was likely their decade long détente was soon to come to an incendiary conclusion.

"Under ordinary circumstances, I wouldn't trust that conniving bastard to mow my lawn," she then said, voice nearly a growl. "But these aren't ordinary circumstances, now are they, Emma? And you are correct in at least one thing. Rumple did save my life, and in doing so, Ruby, Sophia, and Amelia's as well. Now, as far as Ruby's justified distrust of him are concerned, she's not the one making this decision, is she? I am! She is my wife, my True Love, my responsibility, and I will do whatever I must to save her life, even if that means selling my soul to Rumplestiltskin in the process. So I'm warning you one last time, Swan. Get out...of my...way."

Drawing up to her full height, Emma's muscles tensed from head to toe. "No. I won't you let you do anything to her that she wouldn't approve of, even if it is to save her life!"

"How dare you!" The pressure building behind her eyes served as a discomfiting bellows to the flame of a fury that Regina could only scarcely recognize as unnatural. "She is mine! Not yours! You get no say in what is or what is not done for her! Step aside before I force you to."

Green eyes hardening, Emma grimaced. "Do what you have to, Regina, but I won't be moving. This is not the way to help Ruby."

With a malicious glint in her eyes and an equally sinister grin on her lips, Regina held out her arm and opened her palm. "Fine. Have it your way." Igniting a fire in the palm of her hand, she drew back to toss it at the source of her irritation but was halted by a sound that caused her every hair and muscle to stiffen. It was a scream so awful that it twisted her insides until it felt as if her entire body was about to fold into itself like the crumple zones on a car during a collision. She instinctively recognized who it came from.

"Ruby!"
Regina gasped, lurching forward as a surge of molten pain simultaneously slammed into her chest and head. As she dropped to her knees, the fireball in her hands petered out, which was a good thing seeing as she immediately clawed at her hair with both hands. She felt like yanking it all out in an irrational attempt to alleviate the terrific bombardment agony assaulting her brain. As blackness clouded her vision, she heard another terrible noise, another scream from somewhere down the hallway, and this time Regina echoed them with her own until they blended together in a horrific harmony that could only have been inspired from the lowest pits of hell.

Vaguely, she felt Emma pawing at her, trying to pry her hands out of her hair, but they were clamped tight, the muscles in her fingers seized up as if fashioned of stone rather than bone and sinew. How long the searing agony went on, Regina couldn't say, only that when it finally stopped and she could at last breathe again, hear again, see again, Emma was kneeling before her, bewildered and afraid.

As her eyes slightly rolled back into their sockets, Regina groaned. Her head was pounding like a herd of ogres had marauded through it and left nothing but a path of wanton destruction in their wake. "What happened?"

Regina heard Emma sigh with relief. "I'm not sure. One second you were fixing to roast me, the next you were on the ground screaming at the top of your lungs."

Groaning again, this time in a much more prolonged manner, Regina struggled to rise up off the floor, but wound up flopping back down helplessly. Her legs were like jello. Realizing she would need a hand, she mustered up her most vicious glare and directed it at the blonde antagonist.

"Don't just stand there like a useless fish. Help me up."

After rolling her eyes and dramatically scoffing, Emma nonetheless got to her feet then crouched down to secure Regina under her arm pits. "Ready?" she asked once in position. When Regina nodded in affirmation, Emma counted to three and then hefted them both upward, Regina putting her liquified legs to as much use as she could. Once they were upright, Emma guided them both over to a chair, where she ungracefully deposited Regina.

Landing in the chair in a near heap, Regina protested being manhandled with her typical level of snark. "Next time, why don't you try tossing me instead?"

"Don't tempt me," Emma said. "After your little stunt with the fireball, I might just take you up on the offer."

Growling, Regina straightened herself in the chair and then went about smoothing her clothes. "You shouldn't have tried to interfere, Emma," she said, suddenly aware of how close she'd come to making a tragic mistake. The bizarre frenzy of anger that had overtaken her left her shaken. But so close to the error, her pride as ever prevented her from admitting any fault. "You've wasted my time...Ruby's time with your interference. Time we may never get back!"

As Emma opened her mouth to respond with a matching degree of acrimony, the door thankfully and fortuitously burst open, interrupting the battle of wills. Both women cut their eyes over to see Victor Whale standing in the doorway, red-faced and panting, beads of sweat on his brow and a vicious looking cut on his forearm.

"She escaped," he said around gasps of air. "Don't know how. Something happened...to her."

"Slow down, Whale," Emma responded, having recovered first from the intrusion. Leaving Regina in her chair, she walked over to the doctor and pointed at his bleeding forearm. "What the hell happened to you? And who escaped?"
The answer was obvious to Regina but she supposed it might not be for those who hair color indicated a predisposition to reflect ideas rather than absorb them with the same efficacy as it does sunlight. Still, she allowed Victor to respond, mostly because she was too shocked by his appearance to interrupt.

After taking a moment to collect himself, Victor answered in a much more coherent manner. "Ruby. One second we were packing cooling packs around her and the next, she just started screaming. Then her eyes shot open, they were glowing like she was the wolf. I swear to God! But the weird part was she didn't change. Or not like she should have anyway."

"What do you mean by that?" Regina asked as she forced herself to stand, pausing for a brief moment once vertical to adjust to bearing her own weight again. Once she was certain she wouldn't topple over with the first step, she carefully made her way over next to Emma. Victor had not answered her by the time she made it over so she repeated the question.

Furrowing his brows, Victor elaborated, "I mean, she shifted but she didn't, I guess. It was like she was becoming the wolf as a human. Her teeth sharpened and her fingernails turned into claws. Christ, it was like some B-list horror movie come to life." Running his hands through his short blonde locks in a nervous manner, Victor then scrubbed at his face. "When she started to get up, I tried to stop her but she swiped at me. The look in her eyes, it was almost like she didn't even know me. I didn't even have time to react before she shot out the door."

"She got away?!" Regina shouted, the spike in her blood pressure causing her to falter a bit. Thankfully Emma with her ever-sharpened reflexes moved over to secure her.

"No one could catch her," Victor replied, "and even if they could I would have told them not to. Ruby may be my friend but I won't put my staff at risk to confront her when she's out of control like that."

"He's right, Regina," Emma agreed, her tone calm and steady. "No one here can help her now but us."

Shrugging off Emma's arms, Regina straightened her shoulders and rolled them a few times, taking deep, measured breaths. Focusing her mind, she felt for her magic, sighing internally when she felt it respond, lending her its strength and energy.

Renewed, she looked at Emma. "You're right, and I'm sorry I snapped at you."

"I would say it's okay, but it's not," Emma replied, frowning slightly. "I accept anyway, though. We need to move past this for Ruby's sake."

Regina gave her a firm nod. "Agreed." Turning to Dr Whale, she said, "Thank you for the information, Victor. We'll handle it from here."

"Alright," he said, looking at them as if they were crazy but still with a measure of admiration. "Let me know if there's anything else I can do."

"There is one thing," Regina said. "If you get that tox screen back, you will find an unknown chemical substance. It is a poison. See if you can come up with an antidote."

"I was always more inclined in medicine than chemistry," he answered in a rare show of skepticism regarding his own skill. "I'll try, though. Mind you, I can make no promises."

"That's all I ask. Thank you, Victor."
"Glad to help. Good luck and be careful."

"We will, thanks Whale," Emma said, and once he had departed rounded on Regina, brow quirked dubiously. "You sure you're up to this? From what Whale just said, I'll need you on your A game if we want to stop her without hurting her."

Glaring daggers at Emma, Regina retorted, "How about this? You worry about you and I'll worry about me. Let's just go find my wife before she goes on a rampage." As Regina stepped forward to go out the door, Emma held out a hand to stop her. "What now, Swan?"

Emma's brows were drawn in contemplation. "You said earlier that we had an hour at best, at worst minutes. What did you mean by that?"

Sighing, Regina pinched her nose. She didn't have time for this conversation but since Emma seemed hellbent on talking this out before venturing to find Ruby and Regina needed the Savior's magic to corral Ruby, she had no choice but to indulge the question. Just answering hurt Regina because in doing so, she was verbally recounting the process by which her wife would die. Every single word hurt.

"I meant that the poison was designed for maximum prolonged suffering. When administered in a minimally lethal dose, it works slowly over a matter of weeks, but the way Ruby degenerated tells me that she received a massive one. It worked through her system in less than a day. If that's true, she's already at the end cycle of the poison, which will drive her mad until it fries her brain. There. Are you happy now?!"

"No, I'm not happy dammit! I want to help her but I need to know what kind of timeline we're up against."

"I can't tell you that, Emma. I don't know. I've never encountered the poison personally, only heard of it, and even if I had, I don't know how much she was given. There is no way of telling how long she has without extensive tests that we have no time for even if she wasn't on the lam. Every second we waste here talking is a second we could be out there looking for her!"

"Alright, alright. Jeez. I get it. Let's go then."

"Yes, let's."

With a huff, Regina shouldered Emma out of the way and marched out the door, then sped through the hallway to the lobby and then out the front of the hospital. Seeing a group of a people loitering just outside the door, she did not bother to wait on Emma before approaching them.

"Excuse me," she said when she reached them, and at the sound of her voice, they all turned to look at her, most with an easily decipherable amount of fear in their eyes. Good, she thought. Their fear works to my advantage. Out loud, she said, "Did any of you happen to notice a tall brunette exit the building just a few minutes ago? She would have been in a rush and was probably horribly disheveled."

"Ya mean Ruby?" a strange redhead with a thick Scottish accent at the back of the group spoke up. Regina glared at the woman, the only person thick enough to stand tall without any regard for Regina's reputation. The girl was either stupid or brave. "Aye, I saw her. 'Bout five minutes ago. Barreled plum out the door like fire was nippin' at her heels."

"Which direction did she go?"

The redhead's eyes flashed, sizing Regina up. "What's it to you where she went?"
Tensing, Regina advanced a step, noting with satisfaction that all but the bold young woman scurried out of the way. When Regina noticed, Emma exited the hospital an instant later, she did not both to stop, pressing onward until she was hovering in the girl's personal space with fire burning in her eyes. In typical fashion, Emma started to intervene to diffuse the situation but Regina stopped her with a pointed glare before turning back to the redheaded woman.

"That's my business and none of yours, copper top," she said, her teeth gritted together and jaw flexing angrily. "I won't ask again. Which...way?"

For a moment it seemed like the redhead might actually dare to stand up to Regina but then a sly grin slid over her face. "Ah, I see," she said as if realizing something she hadn't noticed before. "You must be Regina."

"I am," Regina said, eyeing the woman suspiciously now, "though who I am remains irrelevant to the conversation. I asked you a question and I expect an answer. My patience has been put to its limit already today. You don't want to find out what happens when it runs out."

"I have to say, she did not do your...intensity justice," the woman grinned and extended her hand out. Glancing up at Emma, the woman shared her humor with the Savior, who shrugged as if to say "I told you so." Considering the familiar interplay and the body language, it was clear to Regina that the two women knew one another, though at present Regina could not be bothered to care how. When Regina did not immediately take her hand, the woman withdrew it, then proceeded to introduce herself. "I'm Merida. I came here a few months back with some friends of mine. You may know them. Elsa and Anna of Arendelle?"

With the slightest tilt of her head, Regina's eyes narrowed into slits. Though she was wary of the stranger, she took the proffered hand nonetheless. If trusting the annoying young woman was what was required to get information regarding Ruby's location, it was what she would do.

"I am familiar with them, yes. That doesn't explain how you know who I am, who Ruby is, or why you won't tell me what I want to know."

"Well, let's clear that right up, then, shall we?" Merida smirked. "I know who you are because I know Ruby. Along with the illustrious Savior here, she's become one of my few friends in this...confounding world." At that, Emma smiled and Regina rolled her eyes. "She talks of you often."

Eyebrow arched in a regal manner, Regina crossed her arms over her chest. "Does she now?"

"Aye," said Merida. "I would say that of all of her many worthy attributes, her love for you is the greatest." The complement to Ruby was well deserved and because of that, Regina almost let down her guard until the girl's eyes grew hard once again. "She worships the ground you walk on, your Majesty, although I'm beginning to wonder why. If this is the way you treat her friends, perhaps she'd be better off if left alone a while."

"Watch it, girl. You're playing with fire," Regina warned, feeling Emma tense up beside her. "I'd hate for you to get burned. That said, it would be quite interesting to find out how good you'd look if the rest of you matched that vibrant shade of orange on your head."

Throwing her arm out to keep Regina from advancing on Merida once more, Emma let out an annoyed growl. "Seriously? Enough with the threats! And Merida," Emma then turned to the spiteful harpy who was just begging to be roasted, "back off of Regina. She's stressed out and overreacting. Ruby is sick and she needs our help. So lets all calm the hell down here. Okay?!"
"Fine," Regina curtly spat, shoulders still squared for confrontation.

"As you wish," agreed Merida, eyeing Regina with equal contempt.

"Great," Emma sighed, "now, can you please tell us which way Ruby went?"

After a few lingering seconds of heated glares directed at Regina, Merida gave Emma her attention. "She ran off toward the southwest," pointing in the direction Ruby had gone, she then elaborated, "toward the wolf den the Merry Men and those...talking wolves are protecting."

At that the redhead gave a shiver as if the Dire Wolves existence unnerved her, which pleased Regina. She began for a moment to consider magicking Romulus to really put the screws to this uppity stranger who had the gall to criticize her marriage.

"You know the area?" Emma asked, cutting Regina's thoughts short. The blonde had apparently picked up on something in Merida's voice.

"Aye, I've been doing a wee bit of hunting with them the past few days to keep my skills sharp. Elsa and Anna already returned back to our world through the door...portal...thing we came here through, but I wasn't ready to depart just yet. Have to say I'm regrettin' that decision at the moment."

"Well, that is such a disappointment," Regina commented with exaggerated inflection. Plastering on her most plastic Mayoral smile, she let the sarcasm continue to flow, "I just hate to hear you're leaving so soon. But please, do enjoy the rest of your stay." With that, she abruptly turned away from Merida, grabbing at Emma's sleeve to tug her along. "Now, come along, Miss Swan, time is wasting."

Ignoring Emma's plentiful expressions of annoyance at her brash behavior, Regina oriented herself in the direction of her Mercedes and set off with full steam ahead. She had no more time for games with cavalier Scottish girls who didn't know their place. Blazing a path down across the parking lot, Regina guided herself and Emma to her car. Once they were both inside, she started up the engine and pulled out of the parking spot, then turned the vehicle toward the southeastern exit of the hospital.

Upon turning on to Main Street, she laid on the gas, speeding down the relatively empty roads of Storybrooke toward the forested area of road nearby the wolf dens. Several times on the way Emma cut her eyes over, frowning with displeasure at how fast Regina was going, but Regina just ignored her. If the Sheriff wanted to write her a ticket a later, she would gladly pay it.

After about five minutes, they finally arrived at the curved section of the road where Ruby always parked while visiting the wolves of Storybrooke. Pulling her car over to the shoulder of the road in Ruby's normal spot, Regina cut the engine off and without a word to Emma, exited the vehicle. Taking only her cell phone, she decided to leave her keys in the ignition. If there happened to be occasion for a hasty escape, fumbling around with her keys was not the ideal way to meet her end, and besides, the road leaving Storybrooke was one rarely traveled except on official business out of town.

Again without waiting for Emma, Regina made her way to the small path Ruby had cut through the forest over the years and began making her way down it. As she pushed through the light underbrush that served as a sort of camouflage for the trail, she heard Emma approach, her boots making even more noise in the gravels on the shoulder of the road than Regina's pumps.

"Slow down, dammit," Emma called out as she jogged to catch up. Regina ignored her. Thankfully Emma seemed to get the hint, settling in behind Regina to trudge along in silence.
Moving onward down the path, Regina allowed her eyes to cut back and forth as she walked, sweeping the slightly darkened area for any signs of movement. Because the trees in this area of the forest were scattered, the canopy overhead was not completely closed, which allowed more than enough of low the evening light to penetrate to the forest floor so that she could there was relatively decent visibility. Seeing nothing amiss, she hunkered down and pressed on down the path.

The deeper into the forest that they moved, the quieter it got. The lack of any ambient noise whatsoever was so unnatural that the hairs on Regina's neck began to prickle and gooseflesh formed on her forearms. Normally in this area of the forest, insect and animal life would make itself known as they scurried through the underbrush or moved from limb to limb in the branches of the trees. This evening there was utter silence. The entire forest seemed dead.

After moving nearly half a mile into the forest, Regina noticed that the air had completely stilled as if the air had stopped flowing. Stopping in her tracks, she peered up into the canopy and was shocked to find that the leaves of the trees were motionless, frozen in place by some strange force or power that was beginning to permeate the forest. She could feel it reaching out for her, the pull of magic, though it was a magic so foreign that it caused a disconcerting sensation to rise along her spine, starting at the base where it slowly climbed upwards until settling in her chest.

"Get ready," she said to Emma, her voice sounding somewhat muted and muffled from cutting through the heavy air. "Something is happening."

"What is it?" Emma asked, already in a stance with her knees bent and her hands open in front of her from which she could defend herself physically and magically.

Summoning her own power, Regina closed her eyes, concentrating on the well of magic that resided inside her body, always ready and willing to respond to her command. Like an old friend, it answered the call, dancing through her veins until reaching her fingertips where faint sparks of purple began to lick between the digits like miniature bolts of lightning.

"I don't know," she answered, reopening her eyes. "But whatever it is, it is not friendly."

Suddenly, a blur of black caught her attention to the right. Swirling in place, Regina called out, "watch it! To the right!" and then lifted her hands just in time to blast the incoming attacker. Like something out of one of Henry's comic books, the black-furred beast that rolled away from her whimpering was a gigantic, grotesque aberration of wolf-kind created by such black magic that it made her stomach roll. She could both smell and taste the putrid energy in the air, typified by a cloying stench of burning magnesium and sulfur that left a bitter taste on the back of her tongue.

As the creature recovered from being hit with her magic, it shook its enormous head, sending saliva and blood flying outward. Snarling and now ravenous, it bared a row of razor sharp canines that left Regina with little doubt that they could rip her to shreds and then hunched its front shoulders. When raised hellish red eyes to cut a sharp glance over to Emma before fixating on the source of its pain, Regina felt Emma tense up. From slightly behind her right shoulder, she also heard the ever-eloquent Savior curse.

"What is it?" she asked, not daring to take her eyes off the creature.

"It's a hellbeast," Emma said, moving up to stand at Regina's side. Lifting her hands, she prepared a spell and then pointed them outward. "It's not gonna be alone. They move in packs."

"Splendid," Regina snidely commented as she flitted her eyes out over the area, searching for any sign of additional creatures. For a moment, she thought they might have gotten lucky, but then she spotted an inky figure moving in the near distance, with another behind it, and two more following.
Emma, it seemed, was correct and the creature's reinforcements had arrived.

"What's it doing?" Emma frowned, eyeing the beast directly in front of them, which was still hunched and ready to attack but not doing so.

"It's waiting," Regina replied. "Once the pack is in striking distance, it will attack again."

"Well," Emma sighed, "I guess this is where we make our stand."

Regina gave the Savior her best insufferably smug smirk. "It's as good a place as any," she said, and after returning steely eyes to the creature in front of them, made an executive decision. If she was going to die fighting, it was going to be on her terms and not on those of some creature which seemed to have been summoned from the personal collection of Hades' companions. A Queen, after all, does not pander to anyone or anything, even in the face of death.

Catching the attention of the creature in front of her, she eyed it hatefully. "When I send you back to whatever hell you came from, tell your master that the Queen sends her regards." Strangely enough, the creature cocked its head as if it at least partially understood the message, but as interesting as that was, Regina was not in the mood to study the creature. Destroying it, on the other hand…well, that sounded like a basket full of fun.

Without warning, she lifted both hands, summoned her magic and sent out of lance of roaring flame toward her target. The creature bounded to the side to evade the incoming attack, but was too slow to react. Upon impacting the creatures side, the magical bolt bored straight through its body from one side to the other, only to explode in a rain of fire against a tree in the near distance. With comically shocked red eyes, the creature fell to the ground dead immediately, a smoking hole in its side.

Regina smirked. "Ta ta, Toto."

A howl emanating from the fringes of the road alerted her to arrival of the pack and she swiveled to meet them, another fiery bolt seething upon her palm. An instant later, three creatures barreled through the underbrush to the side of the road, foaming at the mouth as they growled, madness gleaming in their eyes. The first caught a face full of fire that seared away all its fur and roasted its eyes and brain in a split second. It, like its comrade before it, fell to the ground dead.

From beside her, Regina noticed Emma blast yet another creature, her potent light magic searing its skin like a finely tuned laser beam. The smell of burning flesh wafted through the air. Taking a deep breath, she reveled in the aromatic stench of battle, which served as a pleasant reminder of the old days back when she was Queen.

Twice her lands had been invaded, the first by a marauding band of ogres that she had thoroughly enjoyed dispatching. Ogres were imbecilic brutes that only lived to eat, kill, and plunder, not much caring which order those came in. However, what they lacked in intelligence to form strategy or use tactics in battle, they more than made up for in raw strength. Seeing that ogres were nearly impossible to take down and required vast amounts of skill for a single person to escape an encounter unharmed, an ordinary conscripted soldier stood no chance against the most small, inexperienced among the enormous creatures. When armies fought against massed ogres, the statistics generally held that for every one ogre killed ten men accompanied it.

Knowing that she would be sending her soldiers out to a slaughter, she had decided to make a personal appearance despite the protests of her advisers. As the battle raged, she leant her magical aid in the form of shields and restrictive spells that bound the ogres so that they could be more easily dispatched, and took down at least two dozen personally by wielding her magic offensively. That had been a very good day.
The second incursion was by an old ally of Leopold's, a duke of great wealth and influence to the south of her kingdom who had rebelled when she ascended to the throne upon Leopold's death. The old fool had always been too clever for his own good and had figured out long ago that she was plotting Leopold's death. It had taken him nearly a full year to muster enough of a force to oppose the royal army, but by then, she had grown far too powerful.

Regina could still remember the screams of the Duke's men as she injected nearly all her energy into pouring down fire on portions of his army, wiping out a vast swath of irreplaceable soldiers. She'd felt invincible, drunk on power and high on the demonstration of her superiority. Later, rumors worked through the ranks that she hadn't even looked human as she rained death upon her enemies, but rather resembled a demon, orange flames flickering in her impossibly dark eyes and the most gruesome joy twisting her fair features.

The remnants of the decimated army were easily swept up by her knights. She could remember walking amongst the dead later, particularly among the section of the Duke's army where her magic fell most heavily. All around her the dead lay in piles, reduced to smoking husks of what once were living and breathing people. She had done that, alone, without the aid of any instrument of warfare. The hatred within had supplied the necessary energy for her annihilate a hundred highly trained knights. No sorceress in all the lands had ever achieved such a feat. Surrounded by the scores of slain enemies, she raised her hands into the air and screamed her victory for the heavens to hear, feeling in that exultant moment more than human, as if she had transcended the pedestrian limits of mortality into a kind of godhood reserved for only the most powerful of sorcerers. It was not the first time and neither was it the last in which Regina became hopelessly enthralled by her own powers.

Using magic to kill always gave her such elation. It was addictive in a way that nothing else was, creating a rush of euphoria that lasted for days and always left her wanting for more. The desire to experience it again never left her after that first taste. Never. It was always there in the background, lingering, waiting for an opportunity to arise in which battle would be necessary. Every time she had fought as a hero since the curse broke, she had struggled against the temptation to unleash that monster lurking just beneath the surface of her skin. And now at present, defenses stripped down as they were by her unsustainable anxiety over Ruby and high on both the adrenaline of combat and the seductive allure of magic, the monster was emerging from her long slumber once more.

"Shit! There's a horde of them!" Emma shouted as she blasted another hellbeast with an arc of light magic that roasted it in an instant, leaving behind the smoldering remains of a well-done doggie.

Looking out over the dimly lit path that was hedged in by trees and underbrush, Regina could feel the creatures moving, surrounding them, hemming them in to prepare for the kill. Knowing there was no other alternative, she gritted her teeth until her jaw popped and dipped her chin until it pressed against her chest.

"Forgive me, Ruby," she whispered, and just as she had years before in Joshua Woods basement, she surrendered to the darkness.
Keys Must Be Forged

Chapter Summary

Regina and Emma deal with the hellbeasts, then have an encounter with a certain nefarious realm-jumper.

In a burst of purple smoke, Regina the mother, the wife, the friend, and the Mayor became someone else. Standing her place, resplendent in a black velvet gown with a high collar that wrapped around her neck and skirts that billowed about her feet, was the Evil Queen. Her look, designed for intimidation, was highlighted by makeup that accentuated and darkened her features and which underscored the malefic gleam of her eyes.

"Now then," she said, grinning from ear to hear, "let's have some fun."

Stunned into silence, Emma gaped uselessly until a fresh wave of attackers burst through the forest line, drawing her attention back to fighting them off with her magic. Regina was too busy having fun to care. Cackling with glee, she dispatched her foes as they came, one by one, some with fire and others with bursts of energy that crushed their bodies. Wave after wave came on, and wave after wave fell to her unrelenting barrage until at last it seemed like the attacks petered out. Between Regina and Emma's efforts, the corpses of around fifty hellbeasts littered the forest floor.

Panting from exertion, Regina estimated that her energy was dangerously running low enough that if another large assault were mounted, she would surely fall and Emma with her. The respite, unfortunately, did not last long enough to provide any benefit to her lagging levels. Not more than a minute later, the sounds of growling resumed from within the nearby tree line. Baring her teeth, she squared her shoulders and reached deep inside herself, tapping her reserves much in the way Emma had to free herself of Belmordan's magic. It was a dangerous gambit, but also a necessary one if they were to survive.

When the first of the creatures shot through the underbrush onto the path, darting directly toward them, Regina reacted almost instantly to repel the attack with magic. But when the creature leapt at her, it was struck on its side by an arrow, perfectly aimed to pierce it's malevolent heart. The next four hellbeasts were dispensed of in like manner. One by one, they filtered through the hole in the underbrush and one by one, they were felled by precision shots from a skilled archer somewhere in the shadows to the opposite side. When three more creatures attacked a moment later, Regina took care of one with a deadly fireball as Emma cut down one herself. The mysterious archer dispatched the final foe.

Ringed in by a mound of bodies, both Regina and Emma braced themselves, peering out into the encroaching darkness to suss out the direction from whence the arrows had been fired.

"Show yourself!" Emma shouted, the chill of the night air creating puffs of white mist as she spoke.

The sound of footsteps against the dirt alerted them both to the stranger's movement long before they saw them. As their movements grew ever closer, their Silhouette revealed the person's identity. Their savior was a woman of slightly above average height with a mass of tightly curled hair. Regina instinctively sneered as recognition dawned. It was none other than the sarcastic, impudent redhead that had earlier stalled her pursuit of Ruby.
"You," she growled upon Merida's approach.

"Me," Merida replied with a mocking smile. "I should think ye ought to be glad to see me, yer Majesty. Considerin' I just saved yer hide."

"And we are, Merida." Emma cut in before Regina could retort. "We're both grateful."

After directing a pointed glare at Emma for speaking on her behalf, Regina narrowed her eyes at the impertinent redhead. "Were you following us?"

"What she meant by that is 'Yes, thank you, Merida,'" Emma sardonically supplied.

Regina's eye twitched with irritation. "I meant precisely what I said, Miss Swan. Now answer the question, girl."

"I did, indeed, follow you. Good thing, too," said Merida matter-of-factly. "The way ye were actin' I got the impression that Ruby was in trouble. I'm here to help, nothin' more, so don't get yer royal knickers in a wad."

When Emma snickered under her breath, Regina cut her eyes over at the blonde, who did not bother to apologize for her amusement over Merida's brazenness.

"She's right, Regina," Emma then said, wearing a crooked grin of her own. "De-bunch your panties. We're all on the same team here."

Groaning with exasperation, Regina flicked her wrist to return to her previous sartorial state and then swirled to turn her back on the sources of her annoyance. The temptation to light them both on fire was becoming a little too seductive. Starting her march down the path, she was forced to step over several charred bodies as she went.

"I'm going to find my wife," she called out over her shoulder, once she was past the mound of corpses and back onto the path that she hoped would lead to Ruby. "When you two are done discussing the state of my undergarments, you're welcome to join me."

Though she heard Emma and Merida talking and snickering conspiratorially, Regina ignored them and focused her attention back on her quest. Eventually, they fell into step behind her. For the next few minutes, they traveled along in relative silence. As the path took them ever deeper into the forest, Regina noticed a hum coming from south in the direction of Zelena's farmhouse. Turning toward the disturbingly abnormal sound, she gestured for Emma and Merida to remain quiet. The closer they got the more distinctive it became, until Regina recognized it for what it was. Only one thing made that kind of sonorous, energetic hum: an open portal.

With panic crawling up her spine, she made her way forward to investigate only to stop cold when she heard someone running in her direction. Straining her eyes, she caught sight of her sister running in her direction with Francesca in her arms. Zelena looked as terrified as Regina felt, which didn't help matters in the slightest since her sister was not one to be afraid of anything – except not being good enough, that is.

"Regina!" Zelena called out upon spotting the group of women working their way through the forest and recognizing her sibling among them.

Stopping their progress, Regina waited for Zelena to approach. Flushed from the exertion of running, the fear in her sister's blue eyes was especially alarming up close. Francesca appeared even more bewildered than her mother, clinging tightly to Zelena's neck, though some of the child's anxiety fled upon noticing her aunt Regina. Regina gave the girl a tiny smile despite the potential danger of the
"Hi, Frankie," she greeted, ignoring her sister for the moment.

Regina loved her niece to pieces. She considered Francesca to be, other than her own children, the most adorable child in the history of the world. Every bit as precocious with magic as her fiery mother, Frankie – as Regina liked to call her much to Zelena's displeasure – was thankfully much more subdued and thoughtful. A frightfully quick study even at the tender age of five, among all the Mills children, Frankie was both the most magically inclined and the most interested in studying the intricacies of sorcery. Regina was very much looking forward to teaching her niece the tricks of the trade if her control freak of a sister would allow it.

At seeing her beloved aunt, Francesca relaxed, though she was clearly still battling fright of a situation she didn't understand. Not that Regina did, either.

"Hi, aunt 'Gina," said Frankie, returning the smile.

Regina's smile widened into a full-fledged grin. No one else could get away with the cardinal sin of referring to her as Gina, not even Ruby. But there was just something precious about the way Frankie said it that made the reductive moniker tolerable.

"Listen, I wish we had time for pleasantries," Zelena injected, "but we've got to get out of here and back to town immediately. Not more than a moment ago a portal burst open in my front lawn, and I swear Regina, beasts from the depths of hell start pouring out of it. It's like nothing I've ever seen."

"I know," said Regina with a heavy sigh, giving her sister her attention at last. "We just encountered them on the path to the wolf dens."

As if just noticing that there were other people besides Regina and herself and her daughter there, Zelena glanced with confusion between Emma and Merida and then back to Regina. "What the bloody hell is going on?"

"It's Belmordan," said Emma, cutting in before Regina could respond. "He swore he would find a way to track Ruby down and he has."

Dread filled Regina at the way Emma had spoken with such absolute certainty. If Belmordan was indeed in Storybrooke, things were about to get worse. Much worse. Perhaps more so than they had ever been, particularly for Ruby, which made locating her in a timely manner critical.

"Wait, wha - ? Who the hell is this Belmordan fella?" Merida asked, confused.

"He's this super-scary dude Ruby and I ran into back in the Enchanted Forest," Emma explained in her typically colloquial manner. "He had taken over Regina's castle. The entire time we were there, he had his sights set on Ruby, though we still aren't exactly sure why. All we know is that they are related somehow."

As Regina opened her mouth to give the impertinent interloper an abbreviated and extremely terse summary of events that had lead up to that moment, she was distracted by the sight of a shadow moving to her left near a thicket of bushes nestled beneath an old and frail looking oak tree. Peering into the inky darkness, a block of frigid dread settled in her chest.

In the days of her rule over the Enchanted Forest, she had become accustomed to utilizing her subconscious instincts to detect threats to her life. With no shortage of people lined up to take her head, she could not afford to be lax with her security, so she'd not only adapted her magic to create a buffer zone of warning, but she had also learned to listen to her gut whenever it told her something
was amiss. At the present, her gut was screaming at her, alerting her to the presence of someone or something lurking nearby, fixated upon her, which created a sense of unease that in turn prompted her magic to flare to life. It danced along her fingertips as she frantically scanned the area.

"If only you knew the truth," a male voice suddenly said from the very area she'd spotted movement. As one, the entire group swiveled to face the direction the voice had emanated from, each person ready to defend themselves if necessary. Since she had Francesca with her, Zelena set her daughter down and pushed her to the rear, shielding her with her body. It was, Regina thought, the same thing she would have done.

Swirling on the shrouded spot in which the shadowy prowler was concealed, Regina strained her eyes, hoping to catch sight of whoever was out there. "Show yourself," she called out as her eyes roved around the tree for any additional movement. For a long space, nothing happened; no reply was given and no movement could be detected. But then she noticed a figure emerge to the left side of the tree and from behind a scraggly bush.

"Who the hell is this little bugger?" Merida asked, eyeing the man, still concealed by shadow, as if prepared to put a volley of arrows in him at a moment's notice.

When Emma stepped immediately forward, her eyes hardening into stone, Regina knew who it was without needing to hear Emma's subsequent usage of his name. "Thomas!" she shouted, raising her hands and drawing on her magic, which began swirling in golden pools within her palms. At the audible mention of his, Regina physically started. Thomas Hatter. Could it be? "Come out now and surrender yourself or I'll have no choice but to force you." Regina noticed with some appreciation that Emma was fully prepared to make good on her threat.

"Come now. There's no need for threats, Sheriff." And with that, Thomas Hatter at last revealed himself.

"It's him," Emma said, glancing at Regina out of the corner of her eye. "That's Thomas Hatter."

Faced with the man who was responsible for what Ruby was currently going through, Regina's veins flooded with liquid fire. Incited to violence at the sight of the elusive assassin, Regina had to utilize every ounce of restraint she had available to keep from roasting him outright.

"You," she snarled hatefully.

Thomas grinned mockingly. "Me."

That specific taunt being leveled at her for the second time in nearly as many minutes only exacerbated Regina's foul mood. As her heartbeat began to throb in her head, a thread of her control slipped and she advanced to stand within a foot of the lowlife scum who had poisoned her wife. Her entire body was taught with rage.

"I see by your reaction the poison has done its job," he continued, more haughty and confident than he should be considering how much Regina wanted to murder him. "Thankfully, you don't have to worry. It won't kill her."

That statement caught Regina completely by surprise. "What? In every book I've read the Lycanthrope poison is always fatal."

Smiling as if privy to a secret he was thrilled to lord over her, Thomas replied, "For every other Lycanthrope, yes. For your little wolf? Agonizingly painful it may be, but rest assured, it will not be the poison that kills her."
Regina immediately picked up on the implication, as did Emma it seemed, for the Savior then stepped forward to stand next to Regina, unified in purpose. "So something else will, then? And what might that be?"

"Well, the Master, of course," Hatter said, as if they should already be aware of that fact.

"And who, precisely, is your master?" Regina asked, thinking of Spencer, but not seeing what possible motive he could have to see Ruby dead now that he believed she was his daughter. And Emma had informed her that Thomas was made aware Spencer called the hit off, so she was, much to her frustration, at a complete loss.

In response, Thomas turned to Emma and inclined his head at her. "You ought to know, Savior," he said. "I'm surprised that you haven't put it together yet. After all, how else could I know how to craft a poison that would kill any werewolf save one of a very, very specific bloodline."

"Oh, God," Emma gasped when she realized who Thomas was speaking of.

Regina looked at her imploringly. "Emma?"

"It's Belmordan," the Savior said, her demeanor tensed and facial expression laden with self-admonishment. "I should have known. I should have realized. It was Belmordan who set you up with Spencer wasn't it? He knows, doesn't he? He's known all along."

"Known what?" Regina asked, still not completely following and aggravated that Emma seemed able to make connections that she could not.

Turning to Regina, Emma said, "That Ruby is a werewolf, that she's Spencer's daughter, that she's married to you, that she's...special." Pausing for a moment, Emma's eyes widened. "Oh, my God! He orchestrated the whole thing with Joshua Woods, didn't he? Drove him mad somehow and planted the idea in his head that everything that happened to him was Ruby's fault. I bet he was even responsible for Joshua's family being killed!"

"Guilty as charged," Thomas replied, happy as a lark to rub their faces in the fact that the unseen hand of his master had been moving pieces in their lives for so many years without them even suspecting.

Regina felt sick. It was nearly too much for her to comprehend that everything that had happened in her and Ruby's lives since the moment she was stabbed by Joshua Woods was all per a wide-ranging, incredibly patient, and highly intricate plan. The puppet master behind it all was this Belmordan character, the sorcerer who claimed to be the first werewolf to ever live, and the ancient ancestor of her wife.

With her head swimming, Regina faltered a step, her skin turning pallid as she brought her hand up to her mouth.

"Regina, are you okay?" Emma asked, turning to place a hand on Regina's shoulder, though she never once lost sight of Thomas Hatter.

"No," Regina answered, feeling as if everything was closing in on her, as if the very air were choking her. "No, I'm not okay." Looking up at Thomas, she saw him grinning like a maniac, arrogantly satisfied with himself. "Why?" she asked, needing to know why someone would put her, put Ruby, through so much torture.

Tilting his head, Thomas' smile slipped from his face and he regarded her seriously. "My master requires her for his plans to come to fruition. It was thus necessary to prepare her before he could
"And what plan is that?" Zelena asked, having grown cold with rage as she listened to Thomas Hatter explain that what Regina and Ruby had gone through was not the act of a lone, crazed individual, but a conspiracy with a complexity the likes of which she had never encountered. It did not lessen Regina's anxiety for Ruby to have her sister so ready to put her hat in the ring on her behalf, so to speak, but it did make her feel a bit more confident that they could deal with whatever was about to happen.

"Why, to conquer the entirety of the Nine Realms of course," Thomas replied. "All but three have fallen to his power. Only Midgard – that is, Earth – Olympus and Asgard remain."

Zelena's eyes narrowed with distrust. "Why are you being so chatty? Shouldn't this so-called 'grand plan' be kept under tight wraps?"

Thomas shrugged. "There is no longer any need for subterfuge. Once the Master has completed his objective on Earth, the rest will fall quickly enough."

"And what," Regina joined the inquisition, "is this mysterious objective?"

"To free his beloved from her eternal prison," was Hatter's vaguely succinct answer.

"And how might he accomplish that?" piped up Merida, her stance aggressive with her bow in hand and an arrow nocked and ready to fire. "What's the purpose of him tormenting Ruby, eh? What's she done to deserve what you've done to her?!"

Shrugging, Thomas eyed Merida as if bored by her threatening posture and angry questions. "She is the key, and all useful keys must be forged in flame. As for what she's done to earn her special treatment, well, my little fiery vixen, she was born. It's as simple as that."

The blasé way he responded to Merida and his casual dismissal of what was done to Ruby was the last straw for Regina. Striding forward, she prepared to unleash her magic at the man responsible for tormenting Ruby, willing and able to make him suffer untold agonies.

"I ought to rip your flesh from your body one layer at a time," she growled as she marched, and the second the words left her mouth, she stumbled back a step, hit with a torrential rush of memories that were suddenly freed from where they had been locked away all these years.

With crystal clear detail, she could at last remember the events that had transpired that terrible day in the God forsaken basement after she had revived Ruby by giving up half of her own heart. It was as if it all was playing through her mind, causing her to relive it, and after watching herself succumb to an influx of raw power she had never imagined she could tap into, she was horrified by what followed.

Never in her life had she heard of a person being executed in such a way as she had Joshua Woods. Not only had she levitated them both several feet into the air, but she had also summoned a magic so potent and precise that she utilized it to peel him apart one layer at a time until he was reduced to nothing but organs and bones. Somehow, though all of his flesh and muscle had been stripped away, he remained alive, held together by the incredibly concentrated yet supremely elegant magic she had inexplicably accessed. And then, when she was finished with him, she simply snuffed him out of existence with a wave of her hands as if he were an insignificant gnat.

Remembering all of this could not have come at a worse time, either. Engulfed as she was by molten hot anger at Thomas Hatter had rendered her especially susceptible to the influence of her own
personal supply of darkness. Clamping down on the growing desire to tap into that primal source of chaotic energy, she lifted her eyes to Thomas, quite satisfied to see him blanch at the unveiled hatred he saw there.

"It would be very easy for me to do just that, you know," she then said after recovering from the onslaught of memories, tipping her head down just a fraction so that she was looking up at him through pools of black animus. "I have done it before. The last person who dared lay a hand my wife discovered just how far I am prepared to go to punish those who harm what's mine." Seeing Thomas gulp and put one of his feet backward as if to ready himself to flee, Regina grinned wickedly and wagged her finger in a taunting manner. "Tsk-tsk, don't even think about running."

"Wait, Regina," Emma begged, seeing the murder written in Regina's eyes. "Don't. We might need him."

Hatefully glaring at Emma, Regina retorted, "What possible need could we have for such a worthless piece of refuse such as this?"

"For one, he might have more information about Belmordan's plans. Vital information that might help us save Ruby..."

After taking a moment to consider what Emma had said, Regina came to understand how much sense it made. Sighing, she deflated somewhat, though her edge never completely left.

"Ah, well, that may very well be true," she conceded, noting that Hatter was visibly relieved Emma had intervened on his behalf. The bastard. One way or another, she would see him pay, no matter what Emma thought about his potential usefulness. But at least for now she was willing to play along. "In that case, I am inclined to agree. It is your lucky day, Mr. Hatter. So long as you prove useful you may live. But if I for even one second sense that you are toying with us or feeding us lies, I will kill you. Slowly and painfully."

Thomas did not flinch even so much as an eyelash. "You won't get the chance. My master will come for me." He was confident, Regina had to give him that.

She regarded him with a grim smile that spoke volumes about the amount of pain she was just dying to inflict upon him. "We'll see about that, won't we?" As he slightly blanched once again, just enough that Regina barely caught hint of it, she turned away with satisfaction. Finding Emma staring at her, she raised a sable brow.

Emma sighed. "C'mon," she said, gesturing for everyone to gather around her, "let's just pool our energy together and poof everyone to the Station. I can gather everyone there to prepare for the storm that's about to hit town."

Regina acceded to the request, moving over to stand next to Emma on her right side. "Agreed." She then turned to her sister who was still holding on her daughter. "Zelena, after you help us would you be so kind as to teleport to my home and gather Sophia and Amelia. Tell Snow and David to meet us here, and then take all the children somewhere safe."

Looking put off, Zelena huffed. "Fine." She clearly wanted to protest being sidelined but refrained because she recognized that the children would someone very powerful to watch over them. Not for the first time, Regina was glad that she had taken a chance on her sister. "I will take the children to Walsh's home," Zelena then informed her, "but don't be a fool tonight, Regina. Should you need my assistance, call for me and I'll come."

Regina nodded, grateful. It was a bit strange to consider that at one time she had wanted nothing
more than to destroy her elder sibling. Now, she couldn't imagine a life without Zelena in it. As it turned out, Zelena was the kind of older sister Regina had always dreamed about having, interesting enough to challenge her, stubborn enough to infuriate her, but loyal enough to kill for her without a second thought.

"I will. Thank you, Zelena."

Zelena winked as she approached the group, Merida drawing along beside her. "Any time, Sis."

"Now, then, let's do this," Regina said, thrusting her hand out into the center of the circle of women and then gathering her magic. And as Emma slid her hand onto Regina's, she too gathered her own power and Zelena did the same. Only once Merida placed her hand atop the others did they all surge their magic into producing a portal spell, and moments later, they were all in the Sheriff's station.

As they dispersed to their objective, Emma making phone calls, Zelena teleporting to Regina's home, and Merida pacing the bullpen like a caged animal, Regina was seized by a feeling of trepidation, the kind which she only ever felt before the dawning of a great battle. War was coming to Storybrooke. She only prayed everyone was ready.
Two Cousins, Two Speeches, One Purpose

Chapter Summary

Esperanza joins her very first Storybrooke war council.

Standing in the middle of the half-crowded diner, Esperanza shifted her legs to relieve the pressure from her aching feet while rubbing her hand tenderly along the small of her back where a persistent ache had been throbbing for nearly an hour. Accustomed to a life of hard work in the family flour mill, she found nonetheless that being a waitress was much more difficult than she had anticipated. Ruby had been right after all. Endless flitting back and forth between tables, taking orders, turning them in, keeping track of said orders, keeping track of customers who needed refills, keeping track of her tips, and finally ensuring that her invoices were properly accounted for at the end of her shift left little time for even brief reprieves during rush hours. During off-peak times, there was opportunity to decompress, but not enough to prevent fatigue, sore muscles, and quite a bit of mental stress from accruing. Still, though it could be tough work, she was thankful for the steady supply of income.

For the first week after she arrived in Storybrooke, Esperanza had been far too concerned with Ruby’s welfare to question the kindness she was being extended from Granny, who had offered her a room at the Bed and Breakfast portion of her business, free of charge. But within two weeks' time, Ruby was back to work at the Sheriff's Station and Esperanza was feeling guilty about taking advantage of the kind old lady who had so graciously taken her in. Seeing as Granny was in need of a waitress, Esperanza decided to apply for the position. She was hired on the spot. Wicked gleam in her clear blue eyes, Granny then roped Ruby into training the new hire those first few nights, when she was off duty from the Station of course.

It was a bit strange interacting with people about whom Esperanza knew next to nothing, but most of the citizens of Storybrooke seemed like good people, with kind and courteous manners. Adapting to the new job was relatively painless, and in no time, she began to make connections with the people she waited on. In particular, she’d grown fond of the regulars who, for whatever reason, seemed to share the sentiment. The warm welcome made her feel like she was more than just an interloper who had taken advantage of family connections, but that she was actually becoming a member of the community. This acceptance, in turn, gave her a much needed injection of bravery to venture out of her comfort zone when she was not on the clock.

The first time Esperanza visited the Rabbit Hole was an experience to remember. When she’d walked in, dressed casually in some clothing Ruby had commandeered from Regina, since they shared similar builds, the entire bar turned to stare at her as one. For a long moment, she had stood there like a deer facing down a deadly arrow, blushing so deeply she was sure her cheeks were aflame. And that was the moment Victor Whale came to her rescue.

"Stop gawking at the pretty new lady and go back to your beers," he'd announced loudly enough for everyone to hear. When some of the braver men around the bar continued leering, he stepped up to Esperanza, threw his arms around her shoulder and then beamed a smug smile out at the crowd. "Haven't you all heard yet that she's the mayor's cousin?"

Apparently mentioning Regina in Storybrooke was an unwritten code for people to mind their own damn business, as in no time flat, all eyes were off Esperanza and back on their drinks or their dates.
Shrugging out of the arm slung round her shoulders, Esperanza looked up at Victor with a grateful smile.

"Thank you, kind sir," she had said.

Victor had laughed at that, his eyes crinkling at the edges. "You're welcome, though I'm far from kind. What I am, however, is good company. Care to join me for a drink?"

Nodding bashfully, Esperanza allowed her dashing rescuer to lead her over to the bar, where she perched on the stool next to him. In no time at all they were chatting like old friends. Doctor Whale was, Esperanza had deduced, a complex man, but not in a bad way at all. He was handsome, unashamedly ambitious, and highly intelligent. What's more, he was very good friends with Ruby, so Esperanza had felt as if she could relax around him. During their adventures in the Enchanted Forest, she had come to appreciate Ruby's judgment. So if her friend deemed Victor a trustworthy person, who was she to doubt that assessment?

That night, hours went by as Esperanza conversed with Victor, though during that time they had moved from the bar to a more private booth. Intrigued by his job, Esperanza spent a great deal of time questioning Victor about the impressive knowledge of science and medicine that existed in this world. On his part, Victor seemed keenly interested in hearing about her travels, so she regaled him many stories that had him on the edge of his seat with fascination, some of which even had them both in peals of laughter. By the time the clock rounded midnight, head a bit light from the alcohol she'd consumed, Esperanza felt as if she had made her first true friend in Storybrooke.

As usual, her gut proved to be very accurate. Over the next several weeks, she met Victor regularly for either drinks after work or lunch during their respective breaks. Each time, she grew more and more comfortable around him, more reluctant to part from their engaging conversations, and more eager in anticipation for the next time she could be in his presence. If she was correct in where things were going, she didn't believe it would be long before Victor was asking her out on a date, and much to her pleasant surprise, she found herself most willing to accept the invitation.

But while things were personally looking up for her, she knew Ruby, Regina, and Emma's lives were still exceedingly complicated and stressful.

"Esperanza!" Granny called out from behind the counter, and Esperanza turned to find the elder Lucas waving her over.

After giving the customers she had been waiting on their check and wishing them farewell, she made her way over to the counter where Granny was standing, looking worriedly out the front window.

"What is wrong?" she asked, crossing behind the counter to stand behind the kind older woman she had come to love as her own grandmother.

"Something happened to Ruby," Granny said, her face drawn and haggard as if age were finally catching up to her. "Apparently, she got so sick that Regina had to take her to the hospital, but now she's up and bolted from the E.R. Regina and Emma went out looking for her but they can't find her. While they were searching, they ran into Zelena. Something's going on out at her farm, and it's bad enough that Emma has called an emergency meeting at the Sheriff's Station. Said we need to close up the Diner now and meet them there."

The news startled Esperanza, though not as much as it would have had she not been looking over her shoulder since the moment she left Belmordan's castle. It was clear to her without needing to gather any evidence that this was the foul sorcerer's handiwork. Since the moment he laid eyes on Ruby he had coveted her, and now at last, he had returned to collect her, just as Esperanza and Emma had
feared. It was impossible to predict how Belmordan's would play things from here on out, but one thing Esperanza was sure of was that he would neither be so patient nor so seemingly benevolent as he had first been back in Misthaven. All pretense was over now.

Things were about to get interesting, and by interesting she meant dangerous, and not only for Ruby but for every citizen of Storybrooke. In his parting words before magicking away after being wounded by Emma at the bean portal, Belmordan had sworn to return, and having failed once in wresting from Ruby what he desired, he would not leave things to chance again. It was likely that this time he would have the backing of steel and shield to complement his fiendish bestial servants.

The size of his army, she figured, would only be dictated by the method of travel he had concocted to reach this realm. If he utilized the same portal method as he had to reach Misthaven, his forces would be inadequate for the task of defeating a town full of heroes and villains alike that would be equally hellbent on protecting their homes. But if, by chance, he had come across some other method of crossing realms, well...then the possibilities were both endless and chilling.

It was entirely plausible that an army a thousand strong was entering this world at that very moment, and because of that, there was no time to waste.

"Shall I alert the others?" she asked Granny, who nodded grimly in response.

"Go tell everyone not able to fight to go home and take shelter," the werewolf matriarch commanded. "The rest are to gather at the Sheriff's Station with whatever weapons they have at their disposal. We don't have a lot of time, so move quickly, girl."

There had been no need for Granny to tell Esperanza about their lack of time, but nonetheless, she heeded the wise old woman's words. "Right away, Granny." And with that, Granny departed into the back to gather her things while Esperanza went about doing as the elder Lucas had instructed by making a general announcement to the entire diner.

From where she stood behind the counter, she brought her fingers up to her lips just as her father taught her to emit a booming whistle.

"Attention!" she shouted as every customer and employee currently inside the diner turned toward her. "I have an announcement. There has been a possible unfriendly incursion into Storybrooke. As such, the Sheriff and Mayor are putting the town on high alert. In five minutes, the diner will be closing, so finish your meals quickly. Those who are unable to wield weapons are to return to their homes and take shelter. Those with experience in battle or those who do not but are nonetheless willing to stand and fight, please make your way to the Sheriff's Station within the hour. If you have access to weapons, retrieve them. Thank you for your attention."

A general cacophony full of disbelieving and frightened voices filled the diner as people stood from their seats to gather in the center of the restaurant. As they mingled to discuss her announcement, she heard some of them questioning whether the situation was indeed as dire as she had said it was while some others wondered whether or not it was some kind of preparatory drill.

"I assure you, this is not a drill," Esperanza spoke up again, raising her voice so all could hear over the chattering, which thankfully quietened down at the sound of her voice booming over the restaurant. "This is real. This is happening. A great evil has come to this world and he will stop at nothing to claim what he believes belongs to him. Please, if you care for this town and for the good people who live here, do as you have been asked."

When she heard, a few disgruntled voices mention that she had no right to invoke love for the town, she stepped out from behind the counter into the midst of the crowd. "I know I am new to this
place," she said, her voice reflecting her deep feelings of appreciation for Storybrooke and the people who inhabited it. "But I have come to love Storybrooke, and even more so, to care for all of you." A hush fell over the crowd as they listened intently to her words. "When I first arrived, I was among friends but, being so far away from my home and family, often lonely. I was out of sorts in this new world full of wonders that I still am adapting to. I did not belong, yet none of you made me feel like an outsider. You welcomed me, helped me feel comfortable when you might have distrusted me or shunned me. I will never forget that kindness.

"I deeply admire what you all have built here, and I want to be a part of it for as long as I am able. I believe in this town and I am willing to fight for it, to die for it...for each of you if necessary. But the choice now remains to you as to whether you are willing to do the same. Decide. If not, no one here will shame you. But if so, the time to act is right now."

Striding toward the door, Esperanza turned back just in time to see Granny coming round the counter with a quiver of bolts slung round her shoulder, her crossbow in one hand and Esperanza's rapier in the other. Her eyes were gleaming with pride as she stepped up beside Esperanza, lending silent support and approval for what had been said as she held out the rapier in the space between them. After smiling gratefully at her employer, her adopted grandmother, Esperanza gripped the sheathed weapon and raised it high, turning blazing eyes back to the people still watching her, half of whom were torn by indecision.

"If you feel as I do, then come with me," she began, feeling a burning of emotions in her chest along with a surge of energy at the prospect of battle. She was, quite unexpectedly, itching for a fight. "I know that you feel afraid, and so do I, but there will time later to submit to those fears, to look back and question whether we made the right decision to risk our lives for something greater than ourselves. But now is not that time! Now is the time to act, for the evil coming to destroy everything you love, everything you hold dear, will not hesitate, nor will he show mercy. So come my brothers and sisters! Come fight for this town and for the people you love! For tomorrow may well be too late."

And with that, she turned once more and pushed out the door. To her amazement, when she glanced back over her shoulder, she saw a steady stream of citizens with determined faces following in her wake, a sternly resolute Granny at the fore. Glancing down the street, she saw lines of citizens doing the same, marching in unified purpose toward the Sheriff's station, weapons in hand if they had them, armed with steely determination if they didn't. It was a sight that made Esperanza's heart soar.

Storybrooke was mobilizing and if the people of this town fought as they loved, Belmordan was in for one hell of a surprise.

Ten minutes later, Esperanza, Granny, and their group of volunteers from the diner arrived at the Sheriff's station. Among those with them were individuals of various trades and professions, most of whom had not seen combat while back in the Enchanted Forest, and of those who had, three of five had been impaired in some way during their experiences. Yet even as unprepared and ill-equipped as they were, Esperanza was extraordinarily proud to be among them. Such unsung courage only reaffirmed the wisdom of her decision to seek out her long-lost kinswoman.

Speaking of Regina, the moment Esperanza entered the Sheriff's station, her cousin spotted her from Emma's office and waved her over to where she was standing with the Savior, Killian Jones, David, Belle, and Snow. With Granny at her side, Esperanza made her way there. Upon arriving in Emma's office, both women greeted the occupants of the room, voices laden with the gravity of the situation. The responses they received carried similar tones. It was clear that everyone was in knots about what might soon happen to their town. To their loved ones.
After greeting Granny and Esperanza, the implicit leaders of Storybrooke returned to the business at hand, which consisted of pouring over a map of the area surrounding Zelena's home and trying to ascertain the most likely direction an attack would come from to organize proper defenses. All around them, people were milling in and out of the station, some delivering reports of increasing volunteer numbers and others updates on the status of their armaments. It was quite a hectic scene, though having worked rush hours at the diner for over a month, Esperanza was long since used to such an environment.

"What can I do to help?" she asked, circling around the desk to stand beside Regina who was positioned beside Emma.

"Of everyone here, you have the most experience with Belmordan," Emma said, folding her arms across her chest, blonde hair mostly hidden beneath a gray beanie. "We were hoping you might have some insight as to what his strategy will be."

"My knowledge of him is limited," Esperanza began, leaning over the map to study the lay out of the land around Zelena's farm and the various approaches to Storybrooke that could be taken from it. "And I cannot speak for the terrain around town as I am unfamiliar with it. However, I am aware of the pattern of patrols he instituted back at the Dark Palace, though I cannot say for certain what he will do based on that information. The best I can do is to speculate."

"Anything is better than nothing," said Regina, imploring Esperanza with her eyes.

Regina's relative desperation said much. The war council, as it were, had clearly been unproductive in coming up with a strategy to defend the town. Likely the cause was having to face an enemy none of them even knew existed until Ruby and Emma journeyed to the Enchanted Forest, where fate conspired to introduce them. As someone who had lived in the area, scouted it thoroughly, it was understandable that they would seek her opinion. She just wished she had more to tell them.

Looking up from the map, she met Regina's eyes, projecting her genuine desire to help in any way she could. "Well, from what I was able to learn in the few short days I was in the area, he prefers to be active at night. This is no great surprise now that we know him to be a werewolf. Patrols during the day were tripled, so at the time I assumed that was an indication the inhabitant of the castle utilized the day time to rest. I was fairly certain this was the case because I was made aware during my travels that the dark sorcerer never left his castle except for very rare occasions when something of great import was happening, such as when Ruby and Emma used the bean to return home."

While Regina flinched slightly at the mention of Ruby's name, her obvious worry about her wife did not affect her voice, remaining strong and clear though her expression indicated a great deal of worry.

"That means," she said, glancing up at the clock, and when Esperanza followed her gaze she saw that it read 11 pm, "he will attack before dawn. We have less than seven hours with which to prepare."

"Much less I would say," Esperanza replied, falling back on her many talks of great battles and military strategies with the old hermit she had befriended back in her village.

Though the people of her village referred to the enigmatic man as 'the wanderer', Esperanza had known him by the equally mysterious name by which he introduced himself to her: Ambrosio. During her conversations with old Ambrosio, she had learned much of the way men order battles and had also learned that there was great value in intelligence, thus her inquiries to the folk remaining in Misthaven of the activities of the inhabitant of the Dark Palace. From what she had learned of Belmordan, she could wager an educated guess as to his time tables, but not much beyond that.
"Again, from what I could glean, Belmordan seems to be a patient man," she explained. "After all, per his own admission, he has waited a very long time for this day to arrive. But the incident at the bean portal proved that when he has an objective in sight, he is quick to strike and ruthless in execution."

Her facial expression slipped then, revealing the painful nature of the information she was about to relay. She had not shared with this with anyone, mostly because she was still raw over it.

"When I arrived in Misthaven," she went on, "I ventured far to the western regions of the realm in search of someone before I turned back toward the Dark Palace. On my journeys, I met a man who was coming north from the border Misthaven shares with a great kingdom to the south. He told me that the dark sorcerer had recently learned of a kingdom to the south, rich in produce and textiles, and famous for boasting a library which contained ancient volumes and manuscripts that do not exist elsewhere."

"My father's kingdom," Regina supplied for everyone else, already aware that Esperanza hailed from the very same realm. Looking somewhat affected at hearing the news, she turned worried eyes to her cousin. "He used to tell me stories of the Great Library of King Salazar where scholars and magicians the world over came to learn."

Esperanza nodded sadly. "It was, indeed, a sight to behold."

"Was?" Hook prompted from next to Emma, in tact hand absently clutching his eponymous one.

Ducking her head, Esperanza's eyes slid shut as she grappled with a reality she had yet to come to terms with. "It is gone now. The price of resistance against the Dark Sorcerer is a terrible one."

"Wait," said Emma, features scrunched in confusion. "Is this why you were acting so weird when we met him? You already knew he was dangerous? And you said nothing?"

"To be fair, I didn't know for certain Belmordan was this Dark Sorcerer," she replied, partially feeling defense, but also just as ashamed at having kept quiet. That she was reluctant to speak of it for reason of her personal anguish was no excuse. Not now. Unfortunately, as then, her pride won out. "Nor could I assume if he was said sorcerer what his intentions would be toward us. Angering him would have been foolish, and I dared not speak of the matter after I learned what he is. He might easily have overheard and then decided to kill us."

Drawing up to her full height, Emma's visage turned thunderous. "That wasn't for you to decide!"

"I couldn't take that chance!" Esperanza cried, tears pricking at her eyelids. "Not when he'd already destroyed my entire realm! I lost my whole family. I couldn't lose you and Ruby as well. I simply couldn't bear the thought. So long as Belmordan remained cordial, I was content to stay silent to keep us all alive. Hate me if you must, but I did what I had to do. To keep you both safe, I'd do it again."

"What?" Regina interrupted, paled upon latching on to a particular bit of news that had been inadvertently dropped. Emma's indignation fled upon catching on to Regina's dismay, affording Esperanza a reprieve she wasn't exactly glad of considering the cause. "The entire kingdom was destroyed? How?"

Though she hadn't been raised in the kingdom in which she was considered royalty, Esperanza knew of the affection Regina held for the land and its people. Her father, she had told Esperanza once when they had time to speak of it, often told her stories about the land of his birth, and of his noble father, King Xavier, who had ruled wisely and fairly, and who Regina had wrapped around her little finger when she was a toddler. Having moved from there at the tender age of five, Regina expressed
she'd desired to return there when she was young, though her wistful expression turned sad as she confessed her mother had forbidden it.

Now, she would never get the chance, nor would her children. For all intents and purposes, that land was gone. Reduced to ash and dust by one man's madness. An entire culture and history lost to the sands of time. A heritage forever quenched, but for two women upon whose shoulders and an entire people's continued existence rested. In Sophia and Amelia, Regina had done her part to ensure their race's survival, but Esperanza had yet to fulfill her own obligation. And now, with Belmordan arrived, the prospects of ever doing so looked ever so bleak.

"It is a long story, though I will keep it brief," Esperanza explained, trying to stay strong and not let her emotions run rampant. She needed to remain clear and calm for what was ahead. "A month before I arrived in the cottage I resided in near the Dark Palace, Belmordan sent a contingent of troops into the kingdom to fetch an important scroll housed within the library. They, of course, met resistance, driving them back toward Misthaven, but then as victory seemed assured, Belmordan himself arrived.

"The man I mentioned earlier told me that he was there that day, that the skies turned black when the dark sorcerer appeared and the ground began to quake with each step he took. With his robes swirling in a vortex of shadowy magic and his eyes burning the pale red of a blood moon, he began snuffing out entire regiments at time, crushing them with a clench of his fists or burning them in an unquenchable flame that rained down from above summoned by a mere motion of his hands. It was, the man said, as if he were a god.

"That day, the kingdom to the south fell, and once Belmordan had procured the scroll, he ordered the entire realm burnt to the ground, down to the tiniest village. My kingdom. My people. Gone forever due to the insanity of one man. This is what we are facing. He will not stop. He will not show mercy. Either we win this battle tonight or we will all die. To the last woman and child."

"On that happy note," injected Hook, a false grin in place as he hoisted his flask in the air, "anyone some rum?" When everyone at once turned to glare daggers at him, he shrugged. "Suit yourself, then. More for me."

"Killian..." Emma gave a longsuffering sigh.

"What, love?" he replied, eyes narrowing. "The lass has just told us that we are facing a power the like of which we've never encountered. That's reason enough for a drink as it is. But you forget, I am a pirate, and pirates do their best fighting when properly sloshed."

When Emma prepared to chastise him again, Regina intervened. "Leave him alone, Swan. He's right. We each need to prepare ourselves in whatever way we can."

"And do so quickly," said Esperanza immediately after, "for I fear he will not wait for long. As soon as his forces are marshaled, they will march on the town." Having said that, Esperanza felt someone's eyes on her. Her eyes flitting about the room to see who it was, she noticed Regina staring at her with a sable brow raised. Her own brow furrowed. "What?"

Regina gestured with her hand up and down the length of Esperanza's body, prompting her to study herself. "You expect to fight a battle in that, dear?" she smirked, referring to Esperanza's work uniform, a slightly more modest version of the get-up she'd heard Ruby once made famous.

Esperanza frowned, eyeing Regina critically in the same way she had been just seconds earlier seeing as she was still in her own work attire. "I could ask the same of you, your Majesty," she sassed back, knowing Regina appreciated a little attitude, which was proven correct when Regina
chuckled.

"Touché."

A month ago, Esperanza would not have felt comfortable enough around her cousin to take such a tone. Having spent quite a bit of time around the woman, she had come to realize that Regina was more bark than bite – not that she was so naive as to believe her elder cousin absent whatsoever. Esperanza was was neither ignorant of Regina's history as the Evil Queen, nor of Regina's willingness to wrap herself in the persona of the Queen if necessary to protect her family, even if it meant slaughtering the enemy en masse. Normally, Esperanza would disapprove of such tactics, but after Belmordan had destroyed her homeland, she was much more willing to adapt to more extreme measures. Belmordan was not the sort of enemy to show quarter. To defeat him would require similar callousness. Fight fire with fire, as the people of this world might say.

"If you don't mind, I can rectify that promptly," Regina then said, a tacit offer to magically re-clothe the both in more proper attire.

Esperanza nodded her assent without second thought. "By all means..."

With a flick of her wrist, Regina summoned her impressive powers, directing her magic first to address her own need, a command which it promptly obeyed, drawing a thick curtain of purple smoke around her which swirled upward until she was completely engulfed. As the cloud thickened, Esperanza felt a tingling sensation wrap around her own ankles. Glancing down, she found a ribbon of smoke twirling around her feet, currently stuffed into a pair of high heels, which in a split-second burst into a tempest of magic just as it had around Regina.

When she emerged out of the cloud moments later, Esperanza was no longer in her work clothes, but dressed in a set of fine black leathers, her hair gathered into a functional ponytail. The tunic provided was formfitting and sleeveless, leaving enough of her bronze skin exposed to be striking but not at all risque, and the leggings were tight yet supple so as not to be restrictive. Finishing off the look was a pair of black calf-high boots with three straps held tight by silver buckles and a studded belt slung low around her waist onto which her rapier was attached. All in all, she cut a sleek figure that rather impressed her.

"Thank you, mi prima," she said, smiling at Regina, whose own attire more closely resembled the fearsome tyrant she was most widely recognized as.

In all black herself, Regina chose a velvet waistcoat trimmed in silver filigree and glittering diamonds, and accented by a high decorative collar as well as a train that nearly dragged the ground. Hair piled high on her head in an elegant bun, a silver chain adorned her brow, the ends of which disappeared into midnight tresses. As Esperanza's were, her legs were wrapped in leather and she wore boots, though rather than being calf-high, the high-heeled version she chose rose to just above her knee and had a more distinctive sharpness, tapering off more acutely toward the toes as if a hybrid between boots and modern pumps. Her dress combined with her dark, shadowy makeup made for an intimidating appearance that was certain to give Belmordan's soldiers pause.

"You are most welcome," said Regina, her voice warm but laced with a hint of danger. "In these perilous times, family must take care of one another. Don't you agree?"

"Absolutely," replied Esperanza, and after shared a moment of silent conversation with Regina during which they both promised to look after one another and their friends as well. It made her feel more prepared to brave the battle to come knowing that there was such a strong mutual affection present between the occupants of Emma's office. Each of them, Esperanza knew, were willing to die for one another, and that kind of kinship was difficult to find even among blood bonds.
Bolstered by her confidence, she observed the rest of the group, beginning with Prince Charming. David seemed at peace, his features set into a determination borne of the many battles he had fought and struggles he had overcome to build his family and protect it. Next to him was Snow White, who, like her husband, wore the expression of a veteran soldier, ready to face the next in a long line of battles with the same courage and unyielding belief that made her a beacon of hope to all who knew her.

Also still in the room was Granny, standing stoically with her arms folded over her chest, her trademark glasses low on her nose as she met Esperanza's eyes with a twinkle in her own. Always unflappable, Granny was the true rock of Storybrooke, never wavering, always the same, always dependable. Sometimes Esperanza thought that the town might implode if Granny were not around to keep everyone fed and motivated with her sharp wit and biting sense of humor.

Beside Granny stood Belle, her nose buried in an old tome which Esperanza did not recognize. Bound in deep black leather, it was unadorned of any distinctive markings save the name of the author on the spine: *Athanatos the Wanderer*. The name struck a chord that piqued her curiosity.

"The wanderer," she said aloud, her eyes widening.

At the mention of the man's title, Regina stiffened in concert with Belle looking up from her book.

"You've heard of him?" Belle inquired.

"Yes," Esperanza replied. "When I was very young, an old man came through my village, white of hair with a beard that reached his chest. Because he had a reputation as a hermit, he was given the nickname: the wanderer, though I knew him by a different name. Ambrosio, he told me to call him. He is the source of the knowledge I imparted to Emma and Ruby back in Misthaven."

"That is very interesting," Belle said, blue eyes shining with curiosity. "I would wager that the old man you met and the author of this book are one and the same. Did he tell you anything specific about Belmordan that can be useful in defeating him?"

Esperanza shook her head sadly. "As I told Emma and Ruby, the legend I heard was very general in nature."

"That's unfortunate," said Belle, her spirits a bit dampened, "but at least we still have the prophecy."

"Wait," spoke Emma from beside an even more tense Regina. "What prophecy?"

For a moment, no one replied as Belle and Regina engaged in a staring contest which neither was likely to back down from. But as if to prove Esperanza wrong, Regina soon sighed and then gestured to Belle, looking a bit affronted but resigned to revealing whatever information they held between them.

"You may as well tell them," she said. "They're going to find out anyway."

With what might pass as a look of apology, slight as it was, Belle flipped the pages of her book until she found what she was looking for. "A while back, before Ruby and Emma left for the Enchanted Forest, Regina asked me to do some research. Unfortunately because the collection of tomes from which I recovered this one were locked away in a strange cellar in the basement, I was not able to scrounge anything up until after they had already left. Anyway, the day you guys came back," she glanced at Emma and then Esperanza, both of whom were listening intently, "I discussed what I found with Regina."

Stopping in her tale, Belle turned the book to where Emma could read it and then laid it on her desk.
She then pointed at a passage that was clearly intended to be a poem or verse of some kind.

"I believe this to be a prophecy," Belle continued. "In the text, it is credited as being given by a goddess or demigoddess named Diana. As you can see, it reads:

When Kingdoms fall and packs be scattered,

When darkness sweeps the land asunder

A King of darkened soul will come,

His conquest being all but done.

When his triumph is at hand,

And hope seems lost to beast and man,

The moon shall rise in color red

With she who lives yet once was dead.

Of kin are we in blood and name,

With spirit that no man can tame;

Adjoined she is to sovereign's soul,

Whose shadowed heart she shall make whole.

From greatest shame she bears my mark

To lands of birth she shall embark,

Encount'ring there an ancient past

That seeks to end all light at last.

What once was meant for Master's sake

A touch of hand to stone awakes

An ancient power hidden deep,

Unleashed, the darkness it shall reap.

Chosen, beloved, tried and true,

One heart that beats though torn in two;

When rings the dawning of the morn':

Artorius soon shall be reborn.'

"At first, I had no earthly idea what this meant," Belle then said, "but when I read a certain line for what must have been the hundredth time, it hit me all of the sudden that it is talking about Ruby."

"How did you arrive at that conclusion?" Hook asked, though next to him, Esperanza saw Emma
"It's the scar isn't it?" the Savior said sorrowfully, clearly affected by something.

Glancing at Regina, Esperanza saw her cousin looking stricken, as if reliving something terrible in her mind from which she was unable to escape. It was likely the event that those closest to Ruby and Regina referred only obliquely, and ever refused to describe in any detail. Whatever had happened, it had left indelible mental and emotional scars as well as physical ones which seemed to resonate even to the present.

"Yes," Regina affirmed with a pained wince, to which Belle nodded her own melancholy agreement.

"I've only seen it rarely when with Ruby at the beach or something of that sort and she's neglected her pendant," commented Belle. "But it's the kind of thing you don't forget. She has a scar the shape of a crescent moon right above her heart. Now, let me read this line once more." Picking up the book, her eyes swept the page for the passage she wanted to highlight and when she found it, she read: "'From greatest shame she bears my mark.' The mark of Diana is obviously a crescent moon. See the crown?" She pointed at the top of the page to a semi-crude depiction of the goddess, clothed in linen with a crown upon her head. Upon the crown was a crescent moon. "It's the same exact shape and orientation as Ruby's scar.

"And while that may be dismissed as coincidence, listen to this next one: 'Adjoined she is to sovereign's soul, Whose shadowed heart she shall make whole.'

"Speaking of me, obviously," said Regina, clearly having ascribed to Belle's theory, which made Esperanza tend to believe it as well. Recent as their acquaintance was, she didn't think Regina to be the kind of person who would give credence to a prophecy without good reason, particularly one as old as she and Belle said this one was. Furthermore, what Belle had revealed thus far actually made a lot of sense.

"I believe so, yes," chirped Belle, having picked up a bit of energy doing what she did best, using that enormous brain of hers.

To be such a delicate and beautiful woman, Belle was not shy about her wits, a trait that would not have been possible where Esperanza hailed from. That women could freely express themselves as they were, not as society demanded them to be, was one of the best things about this new world. So while Belle could be quirky and a bit absent minded at times, she was a great asset to the town, and thus far a great friend to Esperanza.

"And just before that," Belle continued, raising a slim finger to point at yet another passage, "the prophecy says this: 'Of kin are we in blood and name,' and thanks to what Emma and Esperanza have told us, along with information that Granny here clued me into recently, I now know that passage to be true as well."

When Esperanza turned to Granny, the elder woman shrugged as if what Belle had said was not strange at all. But it was. It was very strange because Belle had said the prophecy was delivered by a goddess named Diana and claimed it to be speaking of Ruby. When she glanced around the room to ascertain the reactions of the others in the room, she found that Emma, Hook, and David all appeared as confused as she was. Yet Snow and Regina remained as calm and passive as Granny had been.

"But how is that possible?" asked Emma, speaking what Esperanza was thinking. "I thought you said the chick who spouted that nonsense was named Diana."

"That's right. Her name is Diana," Belle replied, prompting Granny with her eyes to fill in the rest.
Sighing, the Lucas matriarch pushed her glasses a bit up her nose and then glared at the four faces looking at her, eager for an answer. "She'll kill me for sure for telling this to so many of you, so whatever happens to me later is on all of you." When no one dared speak, her expression lightened and she chuckled, indicating that she was joking. Esperanza did not find the jest very funny at all. The very thought of Granny dying in any way filled her with an indescribable dread that made her want to incessantly hover at the elder woman's side until she was chased away at the point of a crossbow. "Anyway," Granny then went on, "Red is not Ruby's given name."

"What?!” Emma screeched, obviously unhappy that her best friend had not told her of that fact. Esperanza was surprised herself, but not in such a way as Emma was, and truth be told, had every right to be. "How do I not know this?"

"Because she hates her real name," Granny explained. "It was the only thing Anita left her when she gave Ruby away, and because I did not lie to her to spare her feelings about that subject, by the time she started school she had grown to resent her mother. That's why she didn't say anything."

"How did she come by her name then?" asked David, also a bit hurt by Ruby's excluding him. He then glanced at Snow, who was biting her lip anxiously. His eyes narrowed at his wife. "And why does it seem like you know this when I don't?"

"Don't get upset, honey," Snow assuaged. "I only found out at the same time Regina did."

"It's true," Regina confirmed, appearing as though she was still wounded at her wife having kept such an important piece of information from her.

"As to how she came by her name," Granny then picked up her explanation, "she chose it herself. It's a shortening of her given name."

"Which is?" prompted Emma, hands on her hips.

Sighing once more, Granny shifted her stance. "Now remember, I am telling this under duress should she get bent out of shape."

"We know, Granny," said Emma, not unkindly so much as she was flustered by being kept out of the loop by her best friend. "Don't worry, I'll protect you from the Big Bad Wolf."

"Alright, smart ass," Granny griped. Emma grinned facetiously. "Ruby was born Redelle Diana Lucas."

"Jesus, it's true," Emma gasped at the same time Hook snickered, "Redelle?!" He yelped when he received an ungentle elbow in the ribs from his spouse.

"So, as you can see, Belle's theory is not just a theory," Regina said, her brow furrowed with worry. "This prophecy is about Ruby, but how it all pans out in the end, I have no idea."

"Prophecies are generally vague for that very reason," Belle offered in clarification. "Easy to see in hindsight but shrouded in shadows beforehand."

Regina's lips formed into a thin line. "Well, let's hope we get to look back in wonder rather than in horror at what is about to happen."

Running a hand over her ponytail, Esperanza turned away from the desk and stepped over to the window in the Sheriff's office. Outside, a small group of people were gathered, faces firm and weapons in hand as they awaited orders.
"While I share your hope," she said, "I get the feeling that if things go wrong, no one here will live to
tell the tale."

After moving over to stand next to her, Emma laid an encouraging hand on Esperanza's shoulder.
"More reason to get a jump on this bastard. We kicked his ass once, we can do it again."

Looking up at her friend, Esperanza mustered up a smile that she knew did not quite reach her eyes. She wanted to believe Emma, but something in her gut was gnawing at her. Something terrible was going to happen.

As she made to turn back to the group, a loud noise blared out from Regina's direction. It was a song from this world by the handsome fellow Ruby enjoyed raving about. If her memory served, it was entitled, "Living On A Prayer."

Scrambling for something in her purse on the desk, Regina pulled out her cellular phone and glanced at the screen. "It's Ruby," she said, eyes wide with hesitant hope as she pressed a button to connect the call. "Ruby?"

Watching with bated breath, Esperanza prayed that her friend was alright. The entire trip to the station she had fretted over Ruby's illness and subsequent disappearance. From what little Granny had said in the diner, the situation was serious, and with Ruby missing, there was nothing Regina could do to help her, which had to be putting even more strain on her already overwrought cousin.

But instead of any kind of relief or joy, Regina's hopeful expression crumbled. "Oh," she breathed into the phone. "Where did you find it? And there was no sign of her at all? Dammit!" Pinching her nose, she took a deep breath. Obviously whoever was calling was not Ruby but had stumbled across her phone. When Regina regathered herself a moment later, she spoke again to the person on the phone, "Okay, what about the situation at the farm?" Ah, Esperanza thought, it had to be Robin Hood, as Zelena's farm was in an area of the forest he and his men heavily patrolled. After listening for a few moments longer, Regina suddenly stiffened, her expression growing hard. "You're sure?" A tense pause. "Alright. Hold for one second, please."

Drawing the phone away from her ear, she turned her eyes onto the occupants of the room. "It's Robin," she said, and then proceeded to place the phone on the desk. After pressing a button on the device, she spoke once more, "Robin, you're on speaker. Repeat what you just said."

"The forces that marshaled at Zelena's farm are already on the move," he told them, his voice strained from either tension or exertion, Esperanza could not tell which. "It's too late now to mount a proper defense, so you'll have to gather in the town square to stand a fighting chance, and quickly at that. Whoever they are and wherever they are from, these blokes are well armed and well trained. Get everyone ready. They'll be there within a half hour."

"Very well, Robin," Regina replied, her face stony and unreadable. "Thank you for all you've done. If you and the Merry Men are able, join us in the square. If not, make for their flanks once they enter town to harass them as you can. They'll have to funnel into tight lines in the streets."

A shuffling came over the speaker as if Robin was moving. "It will be our pleasure," he said, once the shuffling stopped. "See you soon, Regina. Do me a favor, though: stay safe."

A grim looked passed over Regina's face but still she nodded as if Robin could see her. "I will try my best. See you soon." And then the call was cut off.

"I guess this little pow-wow was for nothing then," Emma said in response to Robin's report.
Rather than replying to Emma, Regina left her place at the Savior's side and joined Esperanza at the window. "Are you ready for this?" she asked, brown eyes lit with a fire that Esperanza rarely got to see. It was, she knew, the Evil Queen making herself known.

With a firm nod, Esperanza held her arm out. "I am." When Regina clasped Esperanza's forearm, she returned the gesture and offered her kinswoman a silent promise that she was prepared to fight and die if that was what was required.

To the Esperanza's surprise, Regina's eyes softened somewhat and she allowed a muted smile to form on her lips. "I'm glad you're here, dear," she said, the words laden with genuine affection.

It was the most earnest declaration Regina had given to Esperanza, and it made her feel a sense of belonging she hadn't felt since she left home all those months ago. And while it haunted her nights to consider that her home no longer existed, if for no other reason than to have met the woman who turned out to exceed her every expectation, Esperanza was glad to have made that decision.

"As am I, mi prima, as am I."

And with that, Regina nodded and strode toward the door. When she stopped in the doorway, she looked back over her shoulder. "I don't know what's going to happen next," she said to the group, "but what I do know is that everything we love is in danger. Our town, our homes, our neighbors, our friends, our families," pausing, she took a shaky breath, moisture gathering in her eyes, "our children." But then her expression hardened once more. "Fight for them. Kill for them. The time for holding back is past. Both Emma and Esperanza have told you who we are dealing with. Remember their warnings and heed them. For us, this is not a battle for land or wealth or power, but a battle for our right to live, and I don't know about you, but I intend to give it everything I've got."

With that, Regina turned once more and swept out of the room, the train of her waistcoat rustling about her legs. Esperanza had already been ready to fight a bloody battle, but at Regina's speech, she felt as if she were ready to wage war in hell itself.

Falling in behind the woman she silently pledged her loyalty to, Esperanza stepped out into the station proper, among the twenty or so individuals trusted enough to be included in preparations. Among them were a few Esperanza recognized, including Flynn and his wife Rapunzel, as well Aladdin and Jasmine, and Hercules and Megara. Finally, lingering near the exit of the station was Rumplestiltskin, waiting for his beloved wife with his hands folded at his waist wearing a dreadful expression that sent shivers down Esperanza's spine. It was good, she thought, that he was on their side in this fight because a man of such knowledge with access to the magic of the Dark One was a danger in and of himself.

Turning her eyes up as she moved with Regina toward the exit of the station, Esperanza caught sight of the lone prisoner in the cells spring up from his cot to grasp the bars of his cage.

"You'll never win," the man taunted smugly. "It's too late. The master is too powerful now. And even if you do defeat him, you'll never save your precious little wolf."

"You'd better hope that's not the case," Regina replied, turning baleful eyes on the man. "If she dies, so do you, and as much torment as you have condemned her to suffer, I will return to you a hundred-fold."

"Oh, your Majesty," the man grinned, "I do so look forward to gloating over your bloated corpse."

Returning a dark smile, Regina waved her hand. Almost immediately the man began to choke, gasping for air as he stumbled backward, tripping over the cot and landing on the cement floor with a
thud. Writhing on the ground, he gasped and gagged and spluttered.

"And I yours, Mr. Hatter," she then said, her smile turning gleefully malicious.

Having had her fun, she released him and turned away then marched out the door, leaving the man she'd called Mr. Hatter scrambling over the back wall, his face red as he gulped for air. Following in her cousin's wake, Esperanza departed the station and did not give the horrible man a second thought. If he was correct, she would soon be dead, and if he was proven wrong, she would return with her cousin to extract vengeance for the life he had taken. For now, her focus was on the task at hand: winning the battle to come, no matter the cost, no matter how many soldiers she had to put to the sword.

For her family, Esperanza was willing to go as far as necessary, she simply hoped that it was enough.
A Sinister Stone

Chapter Summary

The Dire Wolf alpha, Romulus, finds the source corrupting Storybrooke's wolves, and has a terrifying encounter with someone he never imagined he'd face as an enemy.

Feeling an exhilarating sense of excitement, Romulus dug his claws into the dirt, lifted his muzzle to the moon and howled. In the month since he and his pack had arrived in this new world, they had been working diligently to restore the local wolves to a normal cycle of birth, life, and death.

It had come as quite a shock to him upon arriving at the only active wolf den in this world to find a degenerated and decaying pack of wolves. Laying lethargically about as if unable to summon even enough energy to arise, they paid little attention to their newly arrived kin. It was hurtful and frustrating to see the noble animals suffering so, but without knowing what was driving their behavior, he was unable to help them.

For weeks, he struggled to make heads or tails of the problem. It was perplexing, to say the least, that the wolves could reproduce yet were unable to sustain any level of growth that would replenish their failing numbers. The creatures he encountered were otherwise healthy, showing no signs of malformations or genetic defects, and their pack behavior was mostly in line with that of every non-magical wolf breed he had encountered.

Despite laboring night and day, and having spread out his pack to expedite the process, diagnosing the problem wound up taking far more time than he had anticipated. Upon his initial inspection of both the animals the den, he had detected no hint of magic or disease which could be causing such a reaction in a wolf pack. It was a discouraging development, though not enough to deter him from achieving his objective. He had made a promise to the Great One to lend his aid, after all, and he fully intended to keep it.

For a period of weeks after that, he scoured the forests around the quaint little town called Storybrooke, searching endlessly for some sign of what might be afflicting the local wolves. By the time a month had passed without progress, he began to grow dismayed, but finally after checking and rechecking the primary den in the area, he thought he caught a whiff of something out of place, something unnatural. Circling the den, he wound up sniffing his way through every nook and cranny until he finally narrowed down the target. Apparently, whatever it was he was smelling was buried underground at a depth where it would have remained undetectable to all but the unparalleled olfactory senses of a Dire Wolf, and even then he only detected the faint aroma because he spent three hours circling that particular den, mindset stubbornly determined to pinpoint the precise location of the source.

Since it was nearly midnight when he made the discovery and he hadn't enjoyed a full night's sleep in days, Romulus decided to unearth whatever it was he had smelled the next morning. That was yesterday. After a night of fitful sleep, he arose before dawn to begin the dig. In the end, he was forced to uncover much more earth than he had hoped due to how deep he had to delve, but finally after going down nearly two feet he uncovered an item that made his blood run cold.

There at the bottom of the hole he had made was a small, blood red and crescent shaped gem which pulsed with an inky, sludge-like energy which seeped out into the air around it. When Romulus
stuck his nose close to the gem to get a better smell of it, he immediately jerked back in revulsion. He felt his nose begin to dry and crack at a frighteningly fast pace, and terror took hold as he realized what foul magicks he was dealing with.

Staring down in disgust at the loathsome gem, he strategized as to how best test his theory. After several minutes, he finally decided to try poking at it with a stick to see if the same thing would happen to it as it did to his nose. Making sure to snap off a branch of living organism, he cleaned it with his mouth and paws of all offshoots and leaves before gathering the end between his front teeth in order to lower it toward the gem. The second the stick neared the gem, it began to wither as if being sucked dry of its essence, beginning first at the tip and then rising rapidly toward the end held in his mouth. Dropping the stick before the decay could reach him, he nearly faltered for dismay at having his suspicions confirmed.

There was an ancient art long forgotten in Misthaven, one that originated on the tropical shores of Olympus. The Olympians were pioneers of spirit magic, and had perfected many uses for it, such as severing their spirits from their bodies to traverse the very planes of reality in order to cross vast distances of space. Doing this eliminated the necessity of portals to travel from world to world. One of the more secretive uses of this highly advanced and controversial school of magic was the phylactery.

The last time Romulus had seen a phylactery was when the great Emrys, better known to to most worlds by his given name Merlin, visited in the years of his adolescence. Romulus could still remember the strange star-shaped blue gem the immortal Sorcerer bore about his neck, and the only reason Romulus knew what the purpose of them gem was because in his youthful impertinence, he had boldly inquired about it to Merlin himself. To his delight, the kind but incredibly powerful man had explained what a phylactery was, and even though the example before him was of a different color and shape, Romulus recognized ambient energy radiating from within the jewel. It was the kind of energy only spirit magic could produce, and the foul yet familiar wolfen essence steeped within told him the vessel belonged to Belmordan himself.

Yet there was something abnormal about the phylactery which concerned him beyond the fact that a part of Belmordan's soul was poisoning his lesser kin. Normally such items were inert, merely serving as containers for a portion of a spirit belonging to a sorcerer of great power. Not only did they provide a font of massive energies upon which to draw in time of need, but they were also a tether upon which his or her disembodied soul could be anchored even over incredible distances and could be utilized as an unbreakable shield to prevent the sorcerer's soul from being corrupted or destroyed in totality. This phylactery, however, was actively leeching energy from its surroundings, as if imbued with a nefarious purpose that went far beyond the ordinary.

Suddenly it all made sense to Romulus. The prevailing sickness in the wolf packs, their inability to adequately reproduce, the lethargy—they were all symptoms of the modified phylactery being in such proximity. This, he realized, was a carefully calculated strategy to lure the Great One back to Misthaven by pulling on a string that would inexorably draw her: the welfare of her wolven kin. The devil had used Ruby's compassion against her.

Even in a matter light years away, Belmordan was the master of the strings, playing his puppets with effortless skill, maneuvering pieces into place directly underneath the noses of those who were renowned for their caution, paranoia in some cases, and acute senses. Even the Great One had been ignorant of Belmordan's interference in affairs far removed from the present. The depth of the Dark Sorcerer's involvement spoke to his far-reaching power and his eerie ability to accurately predict the outcomes of every plan he instituted. Were Romulus not a naturally hopeful individual, he would have despaired of how hopeless the forecast for near future looked.
His thoughts were suddenly interrupted when he heard a gentle loping of four legs approach. Tilting his muzzle upward, he sniffed at the air and instantly recognized the sweet scent of his beloved mate.

"You've found something!" Octavia said when she drew along beside him and sighted the glowing phylactery. Her lips curled in similar disgust to his. "What is this wretched object? It smells of rot and death."

"Because that is its purpose," Romulus told her. "This gem may look harmless, but it is meant to sap energy from living things, to wither them slowly rather than kill them outright. It was placed here deliberately to whittle down the local population of wolves."

Octavia growled angrily and bared her teeth, a reaction Romulus echoed internally. "Who would do such a thing?"

He knew it was mostly a rhetorical question. Octavia was not unaware of the existence of their ancient enemy. As his mate, he been diligent to inform her, along with his most trusted advisers, of the sacred mission entrusted to his care by his father: to guard over the line from which the Great One would arise, and then to aid her in the fight against the Dark Sorcerer. Some of his advisers had not believed the tale – the old ways had in large part been reduced to myth and legend by the time he assumed his position as Prime from his father – but Octavia and Julius had sensed the truth in his words. Thus, when Belmordan arrived in Misthaven some years back, they had understood the gravity of the situation, that Romulus' warnings of dark days ahead were coming to pass. Octavia knew who had done this, what she needed was to hear him say it, to make it real, to give her permission to affix her hatred on the greatest source of evil in the Nine Realms. That, he could give her.

"It was Belmordan," he said. "Though he assuredly acted by proxy, he is responsible for the pitiable state of the wolves of this area."

"But why?" Octavia then inquired, hurt evident in her words. "What did these poor creatures to do deserve such suffering?"

Romulus looked upon his mate with tender eyes. Octavia always did possess a unique sympathy for even the most insignificant of creatures that crept or crawled upon the earth. That their brethren of this world were in such a maligned state was an especially cruel blow to her tender heart. Her ability to feel so deeply was one of the many things he loved about her. She was the kindest wolf he had ever known, and the most noble, though that often lead her to profound heartache he wished he could spare her.

Turning his eyes back onto the red gem, he explained, "Unfortunately they were collateral damage, part of a plan meant to draw the Great One to him – one that was tragically successful. Because she could no longer abide idly watching their plight, she came back to our world to seek a solution. She played right into his hands. And now he has seen her. Now he knows that she is the one he requires to achieve his ultimate objective. Once he has found a way to this world, he will not delay to come for her. I am afraid that day will soon be upon us."

Octavia sat upon her haunches, back erect and with a proud tilt of her head. "If he is coming for her, what can we do to help? I have given my life to the service of this cause, pledged it to her long before I ever even met her. In the short time I've known her, her mate, and their pups, my resolve has only strengthened. She is worthy of my service, and I intend to give it. To the last breath."

"As do I, my heart," he replied, not liking the taste of the words he was about to say. "For thousands of years, our kind have served as silent sentinels, protectors, and guardians. We have observed and not interfered. But the time of our passivity is over. We are few in number now, but we must fight
nonetheless. We must stain our fur with the blood of our ancient enemies, for the Fallen will surely accompany Belmordan along with a contingent of his army. How many I can't say, but enough to overwhelm whatever defenses might be mustered. He will not take any chances."

The fact that his brother would likely be leading the charge of the Fallen pained Romulus endlessly. For as long as he could remember, he had dreamed of freeing his brother from the curse Belmordan had put upon him. But now that the final conflict was upon him, he had to concede that Remus was beyond his reach. Maybe he always had been. Part of Romulus railed against his brother's aptitude for darkness that had seduced him to surrender his honor and morality, but there was another part understood that Remus was merely fulfilling his oath to the boy he was destined to protect. Gryffyn was long gone, having been swallowed up by the evil he enshrouded himself with as Belmordan, but to Remus, there was no differentiating the two. After over a thousand years at Belmordan's side, there was nothing that could tear them apart now, save death, and even that may not succeed at sundering so profound a connection, twisted and gnarled as it was.

Romulus knew the hour was coming in which he would have to stand before his brother and fight to the death. They had scrummed many times over the years, battered each other to submission with neither willing to take the final blow, but the time for mercy was expired. Should it come to it, Romulus would kill his brother, and he knew that Remus would not hesitate to return the favor. The thought of his brother's blood staining his muzzle and dripping from his jowls grieved him to the depths of his soul, but he would do it, if not for his pack, then for Ruby.

He had not known Ruby in a personal sense for very long, but as with Octavia, in that short time she had earned his undying loyalty. Romulus had known many werewolves during his day, but of them, Ruby was the most benevolent and noble. In that way, she reminded him of Octavia, with her extraordinary ability to forgive people when they hurt her, to have compassion on those others so easily dismissed as inconsequential, and for her uncanny sense of people which made her capable of seeing them for who they really were and yet love them anyway. The woman Ruby had chosen as her mate was a grand example of this.

Romulus knew of no other who could claim to know Queen Regina in the way Ruby did: that is, without the willful ignorance most employed to make themselves comfortable with Regina's past, so equally full of tragedy and atrocity. Once, he had considered the Evil Queen to be the most appalling human he'd ever encountered outside of the Dark Sorcerer, and had thought her then to be far beyond redemption. That Regina could prove him wrong not only spoke to the admirably resilient nature of her character, but also of Ruby's immense capacity for love, acceptance, and compassion. Being privy to every sordid detail of Regina's life as the Queen, including the most secretly depraved acts of violence Regina had committed, did not prevent Ruby from seeing past those sins to the real woman beneath the façade, flawed as she was. That Ruby loved Regina despite her past was testament to her strength and purity of heart, a miracle in and of itself considering what the werewolf was forced to endure in her own life.

If people could really see Ruby the way Romulus did, the way Regina did, they would be amazed. From the beginning, he had sensed that Ruby was special. On the day she was born, he had been listening intently to the travail of her mother's labor, how Anita had screamed into the night as she delivered a child she would all too soon abandon without a care. The noise of the woman's agony had lanced Romulus' heart, for he still remembered Anita as a young girl full of spirit and tenacity, fearless in the face of danger and as reckless with her body as she was with her words. By the time she fell pregnant with Ruby, she had fallen so far that Romulus no longer recognized her. But then the night was pierced by the proud wails of a life entering the world afresh, and they echoed through the forest as if on borne upon the wind for the sole benefit of his receptive ears. And as he sat motionless underneath the pale light of the full moon, proud upon his perch, an aged stump of an enormous old oak tree, Romulus closed his eyes in recognition of the child born in the midnight hour
upon the first night of the year's first full moon: a child destined for greatness.

When Ruby touched the Lunar Stone and survived, he was only proven right in that initial assessment, and now that he knew her as a person, as Octavia had so well stated, he was doubly resolved. Come whatever may, he would fight for Ruby. Die, even, if it came down to it.

"We must stand with the Great One and share in her fate, whatever that may be," he then said, his voice laden with the weight of what was to come. "From the moment she was born, I swore an oath beyond that of my charge, an oath not to be her watcher but her guardian. I have failed in that, and though I recognize the hand of fate in her sufferings, I won't allow it to happen again. I will be by her side in victory or join her in the grave."

"And I with you," added Octavia, who shifted to nuzzle the side of her head against his jowls. Romulus blew out a gentle breath from his nostrils. "I have loved you from the moment you stole my prize buck outside of Rivensford. Since then I have learned to respect you as Prime, just as you also respect me. Have heart, my love. Together we will fulfill Diana's purpose for our kind."

Turning, Romulus ducked his head so that his forehead was touching Octavia's, their eyes locked onto one another. "Together."

All around them, the forest fell into silence, and at first Romulus thought that perhaps nature had recognized the tender moment and was paying homage. But then he heard a torturous howl in the near distance. Straining his ears, he picked up the origin as coming from the northeast. Another howl sounded not ten seconds later, and as Romulus began to stride carefully toward the direction it came from, he began to make out the steady thump of paws pounding against the underbrush and the heaving of ragged breath.

Positioning himself defensively on instinct, he felt Octavia respond to his lead. Together they faced the oncoming threat. Closer and closer grew the sounds of heavy paws on the earth and soon the snapping of branches and rustling of bushes began to accompany it. Romulus braced himself for an attack. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed the red gem begin to flash brilliantly as if some surge of latent power had been activated. He peered down at it in wonder and nearly went to inspect it more closely, but then he heard a menacing growl and turned back just in time to watch a familiar figure burst through the tree line. An enormous black-furred wolf skidded to an abrupt halt not ten feet away.

Immediately recognizing the wolf the Great One, he started to call out to her, but stopped cold at seeing an unfamiliar haze in her eyes. It reminded him of a rabid animal ravaged by the blight. Frigid fear coiled in his chest. In all his years, he had never seen a werewolf so unhinged.

When she caught sight of them, Ruby tilted her head slightly downward. Ears pinned back, foam gathered about her mouth, and her eyes gleaming an evil red, she reminded him more of one of the Fallen than the noble and beautiful creature she was. Seeing Ruby in such an alarming state set Romulus' teeth on edge.

"Greetings, Great One," he called out carefully, not wanting to provoke her needlessly.

She made no movement or reply, just stood there staring balefully as if she did not hear him. Or if she did, she had chosen to ignore him, which was even worse. Something, he knew, was horribly wrong. Feeling panic crawl up the column of his spine, he decided to try a different tact.

"Ruby," he then called out, and was satisfied to see a flicker of yellow flood her eyes and her posture relax just slightly before whatever insanity had taken hold of her returned. She took a deliberate and threatening step forward. "Ruby, it is I, Romulus, and Octavia, your humble servants. We mean you
no harm." The words had no effect. On Ruby came, heedless of Romulus' subsequent warning growl. "Stop this, Ruby," he called out in desperation. "Some evil has come over you. You must fight it. We are your friends."

A sinister grin came over Ruby's lips at that. "I no longer have need of friends." Her voice was similar in timbre to her human one, only lower and rougher and of a malevolent authority that turned Romulus' stomach.

So startled by the first words Ruby had spoken in her wolf form was he, that he almost did not react in time when she pounced without warning. As it was, he barely missed a mighty bite from her jaws that would have surely torn a chunk out of his hide. The snapping together of her teeth spurred him into action. Sprinting away a few yards, he turned back toward her.

"Ruby, please! I beg of you! Stop this insanity!"

"Insanity?" she countered, eyes pulsing crimson. "I'm feeling better than I ever have. I am," she advanced another step, "perfectly," and another step, "in," yet another, "control." And then she leapt at him once more, her speed and dexterity incomprehensible considering her size. Romulus immediately deduced that he was no match for her.

"Octavia, run!" he shouted as he dodged the attack and butted Ruby away with his head. When she careened past him and dug her paws into the earth to stop her progress from hurtling her into a tree, her claws left enormous ruts in the earth. "Now, Octavia!"

But Octavia didn't listen. Instead, she was staring dumbly at the hole in the ground he had dug in which the phylactery rested.

Again Ruby charged. "Octavia!" This time, Romulus did not completely evade her attack, and her teeth caught the left side of his neck, piercing the skin and causing him to yelp in pain. To keep Ruby from securing her jaws around his neck, thus signaling his end, he raked at her with his claws and then bit at her face. She avoided the desperate rejoinder with ease, but it bought him some much needed distance. Utilizing the moment, he sprinted away from the maddened werewolf and toward Octavia, who had whirled around upon hearing his cry of pain. Her eyes were wide and her jaw hanging open.

"It's the gem!" she shouted as he drew near. "It's the same as her eyes."

At once, Romulus realized the implication. Whatever was happening to Ruby, the gem was playing a role in it. Perhaps it was even fueling her madness.

"You have to destroy it," he commanded, without stopping his flight. He made a circuitous route around the den, having to avoid several of Ruby's nips at his heels.

"But how?" Octavia shouted forlornly, looking torn between springing to Romulus' aid and obeying his instructions.

"You must..." he panted with his exertions, "crush it. Use...a stone to...smash it!"

Since Belmordan was literally a world away, Romulus knew he would be unable to sustain wards on the phylactery, thus the need to bury it for protection. As such, Romulus was certain the tactic would work, but prayed to Diana nonetheless that Octavia would be successful. If she failed to destroy the gem, Ruby would slaughter every living thing in the forest, and perhaps go on to do the same in town. He could not let that happen. Not only did the innocent people there deserve protection, but if Ruby were to recover her wits, she would never recover from the murderous rampage.
As he sprinted to maintain a safe distance from a pursuing Ruby, Romulus saw Octavia moving out of the corner of his eye. After retrieving the glowing gem from the hole, she sat it upon a nearby rock and then turned to fetch something to batter it with. He knew it was critical that he hold Ruby's attention lest she discover what Octavia was doing, so he made a sharp left turn and then used the momentum to swing himself back around to get in behind the huge werewolf. Because he caught her by surprise, he was able to land a strike to her hind leg that, while insignificant and little more than enraging annoyance, served its purpose.

Growling, Ruby shook her hind leg before turning on Romulus. "I'm going to enjoy ripping you apart."

Romulus, feeling the thrill of the chase on him, grinned, showing her all of this teeth. "You'll have to catch me first." And off he sprung, out toward the forest.

As he reached the threshold of the trees, Romulus heard a banging as of a stone upon glass, the product of Octavia's efforts to destroy the phylactery. Ever deeper into the forest he lead them, swerving around trees and plowing through bushes, doubling back on himself every now and then to keep Ruby guessing.

After about five minutes of straining his body to outmaneuver the much stronger and admittedly terrifying werewolf, he began to tire. Twice as he slowed a fraction, she bit at him, coming within a hairsbreadth of clipping the tendon that ran along the back of his leg and which connected to his heel. Had either blow landed, he would have been disabled and at her mercy.

Knowing the chase was almost up, he ran towards a nearby tree and flew around it, pushing his limits of speed and control to swing around before Ruby could approach. Heedless of his own safety, he propelled himself toward the behemoth werewolf and plowed into her head first, sending them both careening across the forest floor.

When he came to an extraordinarily rough stop, Romulus whined in protest of his aching ribs. Still, he pushed himself upright through the wooziness. However, upon regaining his footing, he was greeted by two glowing red eyes in dangerous proximity.

"I've had my fun chasing you about," Ruby growled, so close he could smell her breath, "but playtime is over."

When she opened her maw to deliver the coup de grâce, Romulus clenched his eyes shut, preparing for the inevitable. It never came. Instead, he heard a high-pitched yip and snapped his eyes open just Ruby's eyes rolled into her skull. With a plaintive whine, she fell heavily upon her side. The very instant she contacted the ground, her body began to convulse violently.

Knowing there was nothing he could do for her, Romulus watched, stricken with anxiety as Ruby endured a seizure so violent her hefty frame and head battered sickeningly against the unforgiving earth. When finally the spell passed, she began to morph back into her human shape, groaning throughout the abnormally long process. Once fully transformed, Ruby gave a pained gasp and then fell frighteningly still.

Romulus' heart gave a dreadful lurch. He couldn't hear her heartbeat.
Of Romulus and Remus

Chapter Summary

The Dire Wolves face their toughest challenge yet.

Time stood still as Romulus strained his ears to pick even the tiniest flutter of Ruby's heart. To his dismay, he heard nothing but the light wind rustling the canopy of leaves overhead along with a faint thudding of paws against the forest floor that likely belonged to Octavia. What was he going to tell her? He'd thought destroying the stone would free Ruby of Belmordan's influence. Instead, she lay seemingly dead, and it was all his fault. Had it really come down to this? For him to have journeyed so far from his home to fulfill his destiny aiding the Great One in defeating Belmordan just to fail spectacularly at the critical hour?

With a sorrowful howl building in his chest, he lifted his muzzle to the heavens. But just before he unleashed his grief to the mother moon, a thump captured his attention. There was no mistaking the source. Hardly able to believe such a miracle might be occurring right before his eyes, he returned his full attention to Ruby's prone form and prayed to Diana as he listened intently for further indication that she was not dead as he'd thought. It came a moment later. Another solitary thump of her heart. He gasped aloud, and then again when Ruby's heart gave another lurch before springing back to life. This time, his howl was not interrupted, and rather was fueled by joy instead of anguish.

Moments later, Octavia arrived, panting from her wild sprint to catch up with Romulus and his magically manipulated pursuer. Upon seeing Ruby now human again, she barked in satisfaction. "It worked!"

"That remains...to be seen," Romulus replied, wincing from the effort of talking. Now that the adrenaline was fading from his system, his beleaguered ribs were making themselves known by protesting every breath. But he was too relieved to care about the pain. Ruby's heart had restarted all on it's own. She was alive, as was Octavia. Nothing else mattered.

A worried Octavia was at his side in an instant. "You're hurt!"

"It is nothing," he assuaged, all his attention on the woman who was beginning to stir, moaning as her arms and legs twitched with the stirrings of consciousness. "Be ready to act, just in case she is still unwell. She will not be so strong outside of her fur. We can subdue her if necessary."

Octavia nodded and took her place watching Ruby with cautious, yet optimistic eyes.

"Wha' happ'nd?" Ruby slurred a moment later as her eyes cracked open. Though half-delirious, she still managed to work herself upright. It took several seconds for her eyes to finally clear of the haze she'd been under, but when her faculties returned, she studied her surroundings then turned confused eyes upon Romulus and Octavia. Frowning, she heaved a shaky breath.

"I cannot be absolutely certain," Romulus answered only after knowing Ruby would understand him. "However, I believe it had something to do with a discovery I made not long ago. Can you walk?"
Ruby rolled her shoulders to test her body's preparedness. "I think so," she said, seeming satisfied that she was not injured. After cautiously maneuvering herself vertical, she swayed slightly in place a bit, though managed to remain on her feet. "I feel like I'm drunk off my ass right now."

Romulus chuckled. "It is the aftereffects of the magic contained within the phylactery. Come, follow us." And with that, he leads Ruby back to the den where he had discovered the unholy item. After approaching the rock upon which it lay, shattered in pieces, he pointed at the remnants with his nose. "I discovered it buried beneath this den. I believe it to be responsible for all that has happened to the wolves of this world, and was what influenced you to attack us."

Ruby's eyes widened dramatically and in no small amount of terror. "I attacked you guys? I didn't hurt either of you did I?"

"No," Romulus answered, lying only to protect his charge. The last thing Ruby needed was guilt for something out of her control heaped upon her already overburdened shoulders. "Not for want of trying, but I was able to evade you long enough for Octavia to dispose of the phylactery."

The explanation appeared to satisfy Ruby, who gave a relieved sigh, then sifted a shaky hand through her hair. "You said that phylacta...whatever is what was responsible for the wolves dying. How?"

"I have seen such an item before," he replied honestly. "In my youth, the immortal sorcerer Merlin visited our sacred valley. He bore a gem like this about his neck, though it was blue rather than red. He explained to me that it was a phylactery, a container for a portion of his soul through which he channeled spells of immense power."

"And this particular...phylactery was sent by someone else," Ruby supplies, her eyes growing more enlightened with each word. "Someone who wanted to harm the wolves of this world. Someone who wanted me to journey back to the Enchanted Forest...Belmordan."

"I'm afraid so," Romulus said. "The phylactery was slowly sapping the vitality of the pack along with their ability to procreate. As to how it controlled you, I cannot say aside from conjecture. My guess is that he ensorcelled it to activate upon some occurrence which just transpired. Did something strange happen to you recently?"

Ruby nodded, skin losing color as she blanched. "I was helping Regina get ready for dinner and I got sick all of the sudden. She had to take me to the hospital. I...I think I remember her shouting at the nurses and then some screams blaring in my skull that had to be from me. I don't remember much else, though."

"I believe the phylactery activated then and somehow conspired with the sickness to take control of your faculties," Romulus then explained. "Why it influenced you to journey to this place is a mystery, however."

"Is it, though?" A voice rang out from the shadows of the trees nearby. "She is here because it is her fate as deemed by the Master."

Hair standing on edge, every muscle in Romulus's body constricted, and he noticed that Ruby and Octavia tensed as well. Fear and dread heavy in his chest, he sniffed at the air, not a little panicked by the fact that this individual had snuck up on them all. Upon sniffing, again, this time more deeply, he faintly recognized the scent, though it was one he had not encountered in nearly a century. His heart plummeted at the realization.

"Remus?" he called out, eyes searching the tree line for any sign of movement. There was none for
several breathless moments before the snapping of a twig sounded from his left. "Remus, if that is
you, come out and show yourself!"

"As you wish...brother," the voice replied, and out stepped Romulus' twin brother, form twisted by
Belmordan's evil but still recognizable. "I would say it is good to see you again, but that would be a
lie. I wish you were not here, Romulus, that I might spare you as I did the last time we met."

Romulus flinched at the mention of that encounter. He had been alone and out on an extended patrol
a league away from the Valley of the Moon. His brother unexpectedly intercepted him near the
mountain pass between the realm ruled by Snow White's great-grandfather Friedrich and that of the
grand-sire of King George, Alfred. Remus had come to him then with what he called a "final offer"
from his master, which turned out to be a demand for Romulus to surrender the Valley to Belmordan
and join his cause. Romulus' outright refusal had infuriated Remus, who attacked and easily defeated
his older twin due to being empowered by his Dark Master. But to Romulus' surprise, he was spared
death.

"Count this my final favor to you, Romulus," Remus had said as he loomed over Romulus' subdued
form. "The next time I see you, I will not be so merciful."

"You should not have been this time," Romulus had said in his bitter anger, to which Remus only
narrowed his eyes and bared his teeth in a frightening smile.

"We shall see," Remus growled, and then tore off for the pass not to be seen again.

Now the circle had at long last closed. After all these years wondering what had become of his
brother, after entertaining futile fantasies concerning the possibility of redeeming his wayward
sibling, and after contemplating the various scenarios in which they might meet again, it had to come
in the most pivotal moment of both their lives. Remus was right, this encounter would be their last.
One of the two, if not both, would not be walking away alive.

Romulus now knew for certain that the fate of the Nine Realms was at stake, and at that very
moment. For if Remus was present, so too was his master, as they were never far from one another.
The time for the prophesied conflict was at hand. His fur stood on end in dreadful anticipation.

"Sparing me will not be necessary," Romulus replied after a moment's thought, resolve hardened
with his realizations. "This is one cause for which I am prepared to lay down my life."

"And all for a girl you barely know," taunted Remus, foam-lined lips snarling in a feral grin as he
paced forward. His baleful red eyes casting to and fro from Ruby to Romulus and back again.

Next to Romulus, Ruby tensed as if about to shift back into her fur but said and did nothing except to
grind her teeth together. Meanwhile, Remus approached to within a stone's throw during his
monologue, after which he sat upon his haunches, proudly erect and arrogant as ever.

"I wonder," Remus continued, "have you considered the worthiness of this pathetic mongrel you are
so eager to die for? Her kind have strayed so far from their glorious inception. And while it is certain
that she fights well – of that I learned firsthand in the land of her birth – she is susceptible to
sentimentality and compassion. Weaknesses her more enlightened mother knew to avoid."

At the mention of her mother, Ruby growled a warning, and Romulus caught her frame coiling up
out of the corner of his eye. He recognized that Remus was trying to bait her into doing something
rash, and having just been through an ordeal he could not truly sympathize with, he feared she might
fall into it.
Remus, for his part, only seemed to take pleasure in Ruby's reaction, and he pressed on, "The one known as Anita understood the imperative incumbent upon the wolf to take what it wants without regard for the plight of lesser species. She lived and died in a manner befitting the memory of her ancestors. But this one..." Eyeing Ruby, he sneers in disdain, "This one spent half of her life terrified of her true self. Even after she learned control, she willingly subjected herself to the whims of others. This one is not worthy to be called an Alpha." With one last derisive glare at Ruby, he turned back to Romulus, "Brother, you are mistaken to invest your honor and your life on so feeble a champion. Her failure shall be your epitaph."

"Or her triumph yours," Romulus countered, shoulders straight, jaw set with determination. "Your pride blinds you Remus, as does your fidelity to your master. Do not be so quick to underestimate a heart that is twice as strong as even she knows or a soul that has communed with our ancient benefactor herself."

Remus started at that, eyes widening with surprise much the same as Ruby's. Since Remus was his current concern, Romulus avoided addressing his charge for a moment to latch onto the opening in his brother's defenses to exploit it.

"Oh, your beloved master did not inform you of this auspicious side effect of her temporary demise all those years ago?" Romulus punctuated the taunt with a mirthful ruff. "I suppose he did not deem such information important for you to know, even though it pertains directly to the prophecy."

"What prophecy?" Ruby interjected, turning toward Romulus, hands over her chest and her brow furrowed.

"Seems I'm not the only one left purposefully in the dark, youngling," Remus snorted, masterfully concealing his disquiet to all except for Romulus, who knew his brother too well to miss the signs.

"I withheld this from you only because it was too much, too soon," Romulus explained to Ruby, purposefully avoiding Remus' baiting. "Do you remember what I said to you back in the Valley of the Moon? That you were not yet ready to assume the mantle that has been thrust upon you, nor should it be expected of you? While true then, I now believe you are ready. It is time for you to become the Great One I already know you are."

"If you are so certain as to her foreordained destiny," Remus interrupted before Ruby could voice her thoughts, "perhaps we ought to properly initiate her into it. A trial by fire, as it were." And with that, Remus raised his great head and howled balefully into the night.

Within seconds, the sound of a hundred paws upon the underbrush filled Romulus' ears. The time for battle was night. Baying his own call, he tensed his muscles for the attack to come and felt Octavia and Ruby follow suit.

"Last chance, brother," Remus then said, eyes turning cruel with anticipation. "Soon two dozen of my finest kin will descend upon this place. The odds are not promising, even should your quaint little pack arrive on time."

Chancing one last glance at Ruby, Romulus gave her an encouraging smile that she returned somewhat weakly at first. "This is the hour of our great struggle," he told her, eyeing her intently as her resolve wavered, "and the hour for which you were born." The pounding of paws against the loamy earth grew ever nearer. Romulus ignored them, focused on his charge, "All of your life you have questioned your purpose in life. You have searched for meaning in the seemingly senseless tragedies that have befallen you." In the periphery, he saw Remus stand to all fours, head tilting down and ears pinning back as his devilish pack rapidly approached, but Romulus pressed on, "This night all of your questions will be forever answered, and it is my treasured honor to be at your
side to witness your ascension."

When a malefic orchestra of baying began sounding into the night, Ruby started, eyes widened with apprehension. But then an answering call rang from behind, and a thundering of answering paws upon the earth. Romulus smiled but did not turn as his pack arrived, the entirety of Storybrooke's native wolf population in tow, scant as it was.

"Do not doubt," Romulus then said to Ruby, who was staring in awe at the procession of wolves filtering into the den at their rear. She turned to him, eyes shimmering in the canopy-filtered moonlight. "Believe in yourself as I believe in you."

"And as I do," said Octavia, who stepped between Ruby and Romulus.

"And I, Great One," Julius said, head bowing in respect.

"I, too, believe," added Marcus, wolfish smile forming upon his lips as the rest of the pack asserted their faith in Ruby. As if in faithful agreement, the wolves of Storybrooke raised their muzzles to the air and let out a howl of solidarity that for a moment drowned out the foreboding sound of the bestial enemy reaching the clearing.

As Romulus watched Ruby take all of this in, he marveled at her ability to persevere. Ruby's long relationship with pain and loss began at birth when she was abandoned by her mother. The death of her first love at her own unwitting hand only compounded her miseries, which were even further intensified upon being forced to kill her own mother to save the life of her friend. And then there was her struggle to bear an unending loneliness she couldn't explain during a three decade long curse only to later realize it was because she was the only werewolf in a town populated by thousands. But as if those experiences were not horrific enough, she was abducted, brutally tortured and then murdered to pay the price for one of the most profound acts of True Love possible.

Now she was being asked to carry a burden she had never asked for but which was nonetheless thrust upon her, and the fate of not only this world but all others within the Nine Realms hung in the balance upon her decisions. It was supremely unfair and yet at the same time the decree of destiny, and who was he to argue with so ancient, infinite, and inexplicable a force?

Heart aching for Ruby all the same, his sorrow was briefly lived, for upon spotting the rows of Remus' kin entering the den, Ruby drew a shuddering breath then straightened to her full height. Shoulders squared, her jaw flexed as determination settled in upon her like a mantle that she was finally prepared to accept. And as her eyes settled upon Remus in the near distance, they flashed yellow with raw, unbridled power, a warning as to whom Remus had just provoked. Romulus could only grin.

Pride for Ruby filling his chest and buoyed as he was by the arrival by of his pack and the other wolves, he too turned to look upon his menacing twin.

"You are right, brother," he replied to Remus, grin widening as he heard and felt the magic of Ruby's transformation. "Long these odds may be, and yet I am strangely comfortable with them."

Remus growled, teeth bared as saliva dripped from his jowls. His reddened eyes glazed over with madness. "Then you are a fool! I will bathe this primitive den with your blood and litter it with your bones."

"Not if I have to say anything about it," Ruby ground out her reply, wolfen voice a rumbling, chesty approximation of her human one. And with that, she sprung forward.
The ground shook when Ruby's enormous frame leapt toward Remus, and with the thrill of battle setting in, Romulus threw his head back and howled, sounding the attack. All at once both sides charged, and the noise of their paws pounding the ground drowned out the ambiance of the night.

"Thin their lines, Ruby!" Romulus shouted as he made a line for his brother who was fending off Ruby's attack by dodging her as best he could. "I will take care of my brother!"

To show that she'd heard and acknowledged him, Ruby gave one last charge at Remus, throwing her hefty head into his shoulder to knock him off balance. With Remus reeling, she swerved in place and took off toward the seemingly countless oncoming Fallen Ones, and as Romulus sped toward his brother, he saw Ruby plow into their lines, bodies flung in every direction in her wake. A dozen of the beasts at once, Romulus knew, could not take her down.

As Ruby began dispatching the Fallen with terrible efficiency, Romulus focused his attention back on his brother, who had recovered and was awaiting him. He launched himself into the air as he neared. Remus only barely moved out of the way before Romulus landed. With a snarl, he lashed out at Remus with his teeth and managed to catch a tuft of hair and a portion of shoulder, which elicited a shriek from Remus, who battered Romulus' ribs with his head in retaliation. The blow was glancing, but knocked Romulus off course enough that he skidded away from Remus.

The din of battle all around him, Romulus dug his claws into the earth and pivoted, then sprung back in his brother's direction. This time, Remus easily sidestepped the attack, returning a bite of his own, which Romulus evaded by stiffening his limbs and ducking his shoulders and head to slide beneath the strike.

"I'm going to enjoy tearing you apart," Remus taunted as he circled around Romulus' flank while he was regaining his footing.

After straightening, Romulus eyed his brother, meeting baleful red eyes with his own amber ones. A latent sympathy and love for his sibling unexpectedly flooded him, paralyzing him for a brief moment.

"And I will mourn you for the rest of my life," Romulus countered as he struggled to come to grips with what he had to do.

Putting down his own flesh and blood was something he had never anticipated being asked to do, was something his father had not prepared him for. And yet it was necessary, because as much as Romulus still loved Remus, he knew that his brother was too far gone to save. Too many years under the influence of his master had allowed the rot to spread into his heart. It was a mercy now to end Remus' miserable existence, or at least that was what Romulus told himself in the breath before his brother charged forward with lightning dexterity.

Romulus had little time to react before Remus was upon him, and although he evaded his brother's first attack, Remus recovered so quickly that Romulus was unable to brace himself when a massive shoulder barreled into his ribs. The blow snapped a number of Romulus' ribs and sent him sprawling onto his side. A flare of white-hot coiled in his side due to the severity of his injury, and he whined against it, blood trickling into his mouth as he tried to right himself. But before he could scramble to his feet, Remus was upon him again, forelegs pressing him back down into the dirt. Romulus struggled against the hold to no avail, only going still when he heard his brother laugh.

Hovering menacingly over Romulus, Remus bared his teeth in a feral grin. "How pathetic. All of your efforts in vain. Look around you, Romulus, see the futility of your beliefs."

On reflex, Romulus surveyed his surroundings, looking on in horror as his packmates found
themselves surrounded by a ring of Fallen Ones two deep while the wolves of Storybrooke fell in alarming numbers. Even the Great One herself, though still standing and fighting, was being overwhelmed, as dozens of the warped beasts bit and swiped at her while taking turns leaping on her to get at her neck.

For an interminable span of seconds, he watched her fling off every attacker that attempted to gain purchase on her back while managing to kill several others. But then a single Fallen One rammed into her foreleg, knocking it out from under her, and when she pitched forward, two others leapt on her back and clamped powerful jaws down upon her neck. A great howl of pain echoed through the night as the swarm of malevolent creatures closed in and battered her down to the ground. The sound of their subsequent frenzy cut Romulus to the quick, and he let out a mournful whine.

"There is no winning this battle, my brother," Remus taunted as the ghastly sounds of agony and death overwhelmed him. "There is no hope. Only death awaits you and your compatriots. For you see, my Master is already here. By now, his armies will be marching upon the pitiful little town below, reducing it to rubble, slaying the so-called heroes who so valiantly and pointlessly defend it. Soon enough, the Master will appear and bathe this world and all who live in it in imperishable flames. I ask, who will remain to put them out?

"Surely the words of Ambrosious are not what you cling to in these final moments. Prophecy is the hope of the ignorant, Romulus, and faith the feeble foundation of the weak, as surely you can now see. Tell me then, how will your precious Great One fare against the might of my Master when even his underlings so easily overwhelm her? And where is your beloved goddess to be found in this greatest time of crisis? Will you pray to her now for salvation only for your pleas to fall on deaf ears? I confess, it would amuse me to hear you grovel to the pitiless moon before you die."

"I will not beg, Remus," Romulus gritted out, eyes clamping shut. "Even now, I still believe. Neither will pray to Diana, for she is already here in a manner of speaking. You are too quick to assume the victory, brother, and it will be your undoing."

"Hah!" Remus barked. "Not only are you a fool, but you are delusional. There is no…"

A great shout interrupted Remus' sentence, so fierce and booming that upon hearing it the entire surrounding forest fell still, including those participating in the battle. Romulus' heart swelled with hope.

His eyes shot open just as Remus stiffened in disbelief, and both could only watch in awe as the pile of writhing beasts atop Ruby were suddenly tossed several feet into the air as if feather-lite, landing in a series of bone-shattering thuds. And then Ruby stood inside the whimpering circle of broken bodies, ears pinned back in fury with her fur standing on end and matted from her many wounds. Power radiated from her imposing frame, and in the low-light of the night, her glowing eyes were more radiant than ever, no longer their typical yellow, but white and luminous as if projecting raw moonlight into the darkness.

After recovering from the shock of her arising, a second wave of Fallen Ones – those who had been assailing Romulus' pack – rushed her all at once, jaws snapping, claws slashing, but the blows did her no harm. In response, she lashed out with tooth and claw, and whereas one mighty snap of her jaws was a crushed skull, one swipe of her paw severed a limb or caved in a ribcage. In a show of might the like of which Romulus had never witnessed, Ruby proceeded to annihilate wave after wave of attackers. When she was finished, carnage was all that remained.

"You were wrong, Remus," Romulus gritted out, bracing himself for action. "I am not the fool. You are."
Still stunned, Remus was sluggish in responding as Romulus kicked out with his legs, dislodging his brother and allowing him space to regain his footing. Now upright, he swerved to avoid a reckless bite, ducked his head beneath his brother's jaw and raised up to clamp his own around Remus' throat.

As Romulus applied pressure, Remus struggled against the hold. Panicked jerks and whines tore at Romulus' heart, and although he could smell Remus' fear he held tight, knowing he had no other choice. With one final vicious clench of his jaws he felt blood vessels giving way along with a grotesque squelch, and as blood flowed into his mouth from where his fangs penetrated Remus' thick skin, the coppery taste of his own mingled with the acid bitterness of Remus'.

A second passed by or perhaps two, before Remus slumped over on his side, jaw hanging open, eyes wide and sightless as one final exhale escaped the grip Romulus had upon his throat. It was over.

Spent from the fight and in agony over being forced to end the life of his only living blood relative, Romulus collapsed beside his fallen twin, closed his eyes, and surrendered to the ignorant bliss of the darkness.
The Battle of Storybrooke, Pt. 1

Chapter Summary

Belmordan's forces have arrived. War has come to Storybrooke. Regina faces all of this without Ruby by her side.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was an especially chilly night in Storybrooke as the pall of impending battle settled over the town. Regina breathed deeply, roving her eyes over the organized lines of people gathered in the town square. Under the pale illumination the street lamps, she could barely make out their faces, but was sure each of them were as tense with anticipation as her own was. None of them were sufficiently prepared for the fight ahead. Most were laymen whose combat experience in the Enchanted Forest was long dulled by the comfortable lifestyle Storybrooke had afforded them. Those who actually kept up with their training had no armor or shields for protection, just guns with limited ammunition, knives, baseball bats, axes, and small number of swords people had collected since regaining their memories of the Old World.

The impetus for the victory in this battle, she knew, would rest upon what few practitioners of magic were available. Zelena was otherwise occupied protecting the children, whereas Ursula had again returned to the sea nearly six months previous; Xayide was back in Fantastica, Maleficent was touring Europe with her daughter, Lilly, and Rumplestiltskin had made himself scarce after a rather heated discussion with Belle. Thus the burden of magical assistance was thrust primarily upon herself and Emma.

If they were to survive the night, the Evil Queen and the Savior were going to have to be at the top of their game, and while Regina was certain of her ability to dirty her hands if needs be, she doubted whether Emma had the resolve to sully her pristine reputation with the sort of savagery required to overcome such long odds. It remained to be seen whether she was right in her assessment. If the Savior proved reluctant to step up to the plate, she would have to be convinced otherwise. Since maturing in her role as the Savior and having plentifully experienced the cruel realities of life, Emma was past the point of being coddled. Not that Regina was the coddling type in the first place. To win, she'd do whatever she had to in the end. Like always.

Sighing, Regina turned her eyes out toward the south, peering up the road Belmordan's troops would soon be visibly marching down. In the near distance, she could already hear their boots, scores of them, thudding in perfect synchronization against the pavement in a steady, measured pace that underscored the thrilling terror awakening in her heart. Belmordan's army would enter the square within minutes, and with them, hell on earth would ignite in Storybrooke.

Drawing in a deep breath, Regina closed her eyes and refocused her mind, anchoring her thoughts toward only one goal: protecting what she loved. This was her town and she was not about to let anyone take possession of it without a fight. What's more, Storybrooke was no longer just a town to her, no longer just a place she had created with her own power and maintained with her own efforts; those were the feelings of another lifetime. It was so much more than a town now, so much more than paved roads and streetlights and municipal utilities and modern conveniences. It was her home.
Beyond that and most importantly, it was the home of the people she loved the most.

At present she was surrounded by family. Some she had chosen, such as Emma Swan the Savior, who was busying herself by speaking with her parents, Snow White and Prince Charming, both armed and ready to fight – Snow with her bow and arrows and sabre slung from her hip, and David with his gun and broadsword. One was her blood kinswoman, Esperanza, who was calmly sharpening her rapier as if the prospect of battle did not concern her. These people were precious to her, indispensable and irreplaceable, and she was willing to do whatever it took to save them. She just hoped she’d done enough to show them how much she cared, and she prayed that if the worst came to pass and she was required to act drastically, that they would understand she had no other choice. No more than a mile away, her children were under her sister's protection, and somewhere out there her wife was fighting for her life under the influence of an insidious poison, so Regina was not in the mindset for fair conduct should the battle not go their way. All that mattered her at that point was protecting what belonged to her, which meant winning at all costs, no matter how low she had to sink to achieve that, and she would do so without qualms or regrets.

Twice in the past decade she had slipped back into being the Queen, both times in defense of Ruby, and it was becoming more and more obvious that she was going to have be that woman once more if there was to be any hope of defeating Belmordan. From what little Regina learned of the man from Emma, Esperanza, and Ruby, she was quite certain that he would be unlike any adversary the heroes of Storybrooke had ever contended with.

The threats from villains such as Peter Pan and Zelena and the Snow Queen had involved intricate, nefarious conspiracies that simmered long enough before the boil to allow an appropriate response to be formulated. With Belmordan things were different. His plotting had been undertaken with such masterful subtlety that it was over before anyone even knew who he was, so now that he was quite literally at the doorstep, his plans already in motion, leaving no time for researching his methods or for discerning his strategy so that a tactical counter could be devised. As it was, they were flying by the seat of their pants, hoping that the ragtag army they’d assembled – and Regina was hesitant to even call it an army, limited in numbers and weaponry as they were – would be enough to fend off whatever force was to be thrown at them.

As a veteran of many battles in her lifetime and having overseen a war or two, Regina was painfully aware the likelihood of success here was frighteningly low. But then again, impossible odds were nothing unusual in Storybrooke. At this point it was a minor miracle that she, Emma, Snow, David, and all of the other heroes who now called the town home were even alive. Chance had never been in their favor when facing the threats that popped up from time to time, for it always seemed that the enemy possessed more power, more purpose, and more will to do what was necessary to bring their plans to fruition, while the heroes were left scrambling, disorganized and never in agreement, to come up with a solution to defeat whatever new foe had cropped up out of the woodwork. And while that was true to a certain degree with Belmordan, circumstances had never been so dire.

As she’d said to the leadership gathered in Emma's office, the coming battle was one that would determine their very right to existence. If they lost, she did not doubt that Belmordan would leave no survivors. If the stories Esperanza had told her were true, and Regina was inclined to believe they were, the dark sorcerer was clearly capable of callous slaughter that she once would have participated in herself.

Sighing, Regina checked her thoughts. She could afford to go down that path just yet, not until it was absolutely necessary.

Lifting her eyes, she beheld the moon, full and bright, which with the rapid encroaching of darkness shone down to bathe her in its soothing light. The sight made her long for her wife. How she wished
Ruby were there, if only so that they could die together.

Driven by the mystical power of moon at its peak, Ruby would present a foe that even a sorcerer as powerful as Belmordan would fear, an assumption evidenced by his efforts to sway her to his side. If Belmordan was as intelligent as Regina believed him to be, he would have known that it was far better to have Ruby on his side than standing against him, thus his efforts back in the Enchanted Forest to convince her that she had purpose to fulfill only he could unveil. Thankfully, as powerful as Ruby was, her goodness was far greater.

Ruby's absence had never felt so glaring. Her strength would be sorely missed, no matter how well the people of Storybrooke fought. Even back in the Enchanted Forest, the presence of a single werewolf in a battle could turn the tide. Case in point was Regina's own experience when she'd cornered Snow on that mountain pass, thinking to have finally achieved her ultimate objective in life only to find her best troops slaughtered at the feet of a gorgeous black wolf. Besides being beguiled by the beauty of both the wolf and the woman in whom it lived, it was at that moment Regina had realized how foolish she had been to never recruit such incredible creatures into her employ. Had she, for instance, found Red before Snow, things might have turned out so very differently. But they hadn't and she was glad of it.

Somewhere deep in the forest, Ruby was conducting her own hellish battle against the poison trying to destroy her, and Regina wished with all of her might that she would win it. And not only because Regina couldn't stomach the thought of her True Love dying – again – but because they needed Ruby. Without her beloved wolf, there was little hope of victory, but with her, they just might stand a chance.

Over the past seven years, the wolf had grown enormous and practically radiated power whenever she emerged. Her astounding growth had reached the point that were things different and Regina required to oppose her, the wolf would frankly terrify her. Not only were werewolves naturally resistant to magic, but aside from silver weapons, they were practically indestructible, and that was when they were not supercharged by whatever force was currently nourishing Ruby's wolf.

"Where are you, Ruby?" Regina asked into the cold air of the night, her chest constricting as she turned her focus back to the south once more. Though she knew it was foolish, her eyes searched for any sign of Ruby, finding nothing but an empty street lined with a scattering of parked vehicles.

Upon hearing Emma call her name, Regina began to turn away from the road when she heard a sharp command in a deep male voice. Stiffening in place, she caught a glimpse of movement just beyond the shadows far down the dimly lit road. The thrumming of her heart picked up pace. After several seconds passed, the first line of soldiers became visible.

The troops marching under Belmordan's orders were in perfect formation, line after line of them, in lockstep as their heavy boots pounded into the pavement. Under the brilliant moon and the hazy light of the street lamps, their silver armor shimmered, revealing them to be clad in plate and mail from head to toe. Swords and shields in hand at their chests, they projected an aura of strength and readiness that sent a frisson of dread down Regina's spine. These were not conscripts or even some kind of regular standing military force, but a company of elite troopers assembled just for this incursion. Belmordan, it seemed, was pulling out all the stops, throwing his very best soldiers at them. It was a measure of respect for what the people of Storybrooke were capable of. The complement was not very comforting.

Turning quickly, Regina eyed Emma, who had also noticed the oncoming wave of troops. "Get everyone ready!" she shouted, waving her hand out at the far less intimidating force they were able to muster.
With a sharp nod, Emma spoke to her father and mother before beginning to bark orders. As she did so, Regina maneuvered around the square to the flanks of the massed defenders, using the cover of a car to be in defilade so she could wield her magic more freely. Still, she listened closely to Emma’s speech.

"Listen up! Ready yourselves! They're coming," the Savior shouted, drawing immediate attention. "In minutes, we'll be faced with an enemy vastly superior in number. They're armed with sword and shield, well trained and highly skilled in the art of warfare. This is not the first world their boots have trodden upon. Let us make it their last! Our odds aren't great, I know, but this is not an impossible task! Remember the story of David and Goliath, how there is no battle that begins with a scripted end, nor is there a living man or woman, however powerful, who cannot be made to bleed. I believe we can win this because I believe in what we've built here: this town, our lives, and our families. And I believe in each and every one of you."

She paused for a moment, and Regina glanced over from her new position to find Emma's chin tilted down. But then it raised back up, eyes gleaming with determination and raw honesty. With her blonde ponytail fluttering in the wind, she appeared every bit the Nordic Queen, raised a shieldmaiden and born of battle yet wise beyond her years, a leader fit to serve in peace and war alike. Regina was never more proud of the woman Emma had become.

"But I can't lie to you," the grave looking Savior then said. "Some of you will not live to see tomorrow. I may not live to see tomorrow. None of us are promised more than the moment we are living in right now, and even that is a blessing most of us take for granted. Yet...our futures are not written in stone. There once was a man who attempted to control fate, who tried to rewrite all of our stories for his own benefit, but he failed in the end because destiny is free of its own accord. Well, so are we!

"There is no author of fate save ourselves. I may very well die here today, but if I do, it will be of my own volition in defending the people and the town that I love. Because I love this place and all of you more than my own life. That is my choice, made freely and without reservation. It remains to each of you now to do the same. Will you flee to perhaps extend your life another hour or another day or another week or month or year? Or will you stand and fight for all you hold dear in this world?"

The green eyes of Storybrooke's most beloved citizen swept over the crowd, searching them, piercing them. "If I should fall," she asked them all in concert, "will you choose to carry on? Will you press forward in remembrance of me and win this battle for your town and your loved ones?"

Peering out into the stern faces of the men and women who had committed their lives to following Emma in fighting for their homes, Regina watched as each of them came to grips with the indisputable fact that their deaths may soon come, only for it to be followed by a keen awareness that Emma was just as willing put her life on the line for them. She was appealing to their love for her to motivate them not to give up, even should she be struck down. And the most amazing part of the gambit was that it was working.

As Emma spoke, the assembled townsfolk were transfixed in awe, and when she stepped toward them, proud and poised and beautiful, she began to glow as if some inextinguishable light that burned inside of her was suddenly and at once being released. Regina watched, spellbound, as Emma's indefatigable courage transmitted to the townsfolk as if a magic all its own. Sullen faces became hard as steel when bathed in the Savior's glory, bent backs straightened, resolve reawakened, and hopeless despair transformed into bolstering faith. Witnessing this profound effect over a group of nearly two hundred men and women created a strange, mystical atmosphere of a type that generally preceded some momentous event that history books would gush over for centuries to come.
This was, Regina thought, the moment Emma was born for, to be the leader the people need most, reluctant to take up arms, but so inspiring when she did that even Regina did not find it distasteful to subordinate herself to the Savior on the battlefield.

"I will, Savior," a man near the front said, raising his sword, one of the two dozen similarly armed individuals. "I will remember you."

"And I," added a woman nearby, her brown hair waving in the gentle breeze.

"I also," said another man, and then another, and on and on until a raised crescendo of voices were pledging their remembrance should Emma die.

Standing straight, Regina locked eyes with Emma, who was gazing at her with glassy eyes, awed at the rousing response to her challenge. The show of respect, loyalty, and devotion was more than she had expected. It shouldn't have been. To Regina, Emma had more than earned all of it and more.

"I will remember you, Emma," she then said, voice booming out across the square as the sounding of the enemy's approach grew imminent. "And I will see to it that our enemies remember you as well." Raising her hand into the air, Regina summoned a fireball. It was time.

Having taken the prompt, Emma drew her sidearm. "Then the time has come to fight!" she cried as she leveled it at the oncoming attackers. "Fight for our homes, for our friends, and for our families! Fight for what you love! Fight for our future! Let's send these bastards to hell where they belong."

And at the end of Emma's rousing words, she nodded in Regina's direction in a silent command for her to unleash her magic. Regina did not need to be told twice. Grin spreading across her cheeks, she bared her teeth, swirled, and then hurled a giant bolt of molten flame toward the first line of soldiers who were just entering the square. With a sonorous bass whoosh, the magical missile entered the enemy ranks and exploded, setting at least a dozen men on fire, melting their armor with supernatural heat. Their screams pierced the night air – music to Regina's itching ears.

"If you have a gun or bow, use it now! Fire at will!" Emma shouted once more, raising her pistol to fire off her four magazines into the forward ranks of troopers. As she did so, the rest of the defenders armed with ranged weapons began to fire, raining down bullets and arrows, and in Regina's case fireballs, upon the invaders. In moments, three whole ranks of soldiers were felled, their comrades being forced to step over the wounded and dead as they came on and on and on.

Eventually, ammunition ran out, and as Regina ducked down behind the car to for cover as she summoned up more energy, she saw Emma unsheathe the magnificent weapon she had retrieved in the Enchanted Forest. Excalibur. The legendary blade of King Arthur of Camelot. Why the weapon had chosen Emma remained a mystery that Regina hadn't yet worked out. Had she the time to spare, perhaps she could have gotten at the root of the bond between Emma and the blade, but too many other, more important concerns demanded her attention, not the least of which was keeping her wife alive from yet another maniac bent on homicide.

Oh well. I'll figure it out when all of this is over, she thought as Emma withdrew the sword and lifted her arm high. Her thoughts faded into wonder as the sword began to glow and the air around it started to ripple much like off the surface of asphalt in an intense heat wave.

Dressed for the first time in sleeveless combat leathers – Emma had taken a queue from Regina and magicked herself into the garb traditional of the swordsmen from her grandfather's kingdom – and with her blonde hair pulled into a low pony tail, Emma looked more like the Savior than ever before. Her face was a picture of grave concentration, and the sword she had drawn from the stone only added to the portrait of her magnificence.
When Regina heard tale of the sword after Ruby, Emma, and Esperanza returned to Storybrooke, she paid Emma a visit to inspect the weapon. She'd been instantly awestruck of its beauty and radiant power. So imbued was Excalibur with magic that it felt more like a living being than an inanimate object, and when Emma revealed where and how she had come by the weapon, Regina was even more mystified.

Though she had personally inspected every square inch of the Dark Palace after "inheriting" it from Leopold, she was unaware of the existence of the chamber Emma had found Excalibur in. It made her wonder how it had got there in the first place. Yet, with the way things were unfolding now, with Excalibur shining with a golden glow in the hands of the Savior, Regina began to realize that a power much greater than she had ever known was at work, a power which had placed the sword there specifically for Emma to retrieve. It was in that moment she became convinced that victory was not so far-fetched as she had once believed.

And then Emma twirled her sword, looking so much like her father in that moment that she was sure the unique tic was the sole reason Charming was wearing a prideful grin whilst copying the move at his daughter's right. With Snow on Emma's other side, the royal family advanced as one, swords drawn as they began in a measured walk and then sped into a loping run. In concert, the entire force of Storybrooke’s defense moved with them, rushing headlong into the enemy, battle shouts reverberating through the square. It was a bold, unexpected move that caught the enemy unprepared.

Feeling a spike of adrenaline, Regina reveled in the sounds of battle. Summoning her own weapon, she revealed herself and strode forward with them. As she neared the line of advancing invaders, three of them broke free from the small line of citizens in front of them and made a direct line for her. Her eyes darkening into black pools of ill-intent, she grinned and entered a battle stance.

When the first man reached her, he swung his sword wildly, putting all his might behind the attack. She easily sidestepped it, batting his blade away, and then twirled as the next man arrived. She parried his blow as well, then knocked him away by striking his helmed head with the pommel of her sword. The soldier staggered back, shocked by the concussion of the blow. When the third man came at her, Regina did not allow him to make the first move. Feinting toward his left, she saw him brace himself for an attack and swirled around to slash at the opening on his other side. The blow landed on a segment of mail, and though it did no damage to his flesh, the impact caused elicited a pained grunt. Because of his slight injury, Regina recovered more quickly and wasted no time running her blade through the portion of his neck exposed between the flared base of his helm and his armored breastplate. After withdrawing her crimson-stained blade, the man gurgled and fell to the ground where he quickly bled out.

Before she could even enjoy the high of her triumph, the first attacker sprung at her again, this time thrusting toward her abdomen. Regina barely managed to sidestep his blade, though it nicked her coat, tearing the expensively tailored garment. Infuriated at the damage to her prized garment, Regina grabbed the man by the collar of his breastplate and then slammed her pointed heel into his knee. Screaming, he went down, and as she continued to hold him up, she slid her sword in a downward motion between his clavicles, piercing his heart in one clean stroke. Releasing hold of her slain enemy, she lifted her booted feet to his chest and pushed him backward. He flopped limply to the pavement, dead.

"This coat is my favorite," she said, sneering down at the slain enemy. "Asshole."

Hearing a whoosh just behind her ear, Regina ducked just time to feel the movement of air over the top of her head where yet another blade passed over it. Reacting on instinct, she smoothly readjusted her grip her sword so that she could thrust it backward. She heard rather than saw it strike true when the third attacker fell.
Raising herself up, she looked out over the battlefield. Everywhere, men and women were locked in mortal combat with the invading force. The bodies of armored soldiers mingled with those whose dress was more casual and modern, creating a juxtaposition that was almost surreal, like a scene out of some science fiction movie Henry and Ruby would devour in which a group of modern people got transported into the midst of a pitched battle with armored knights from ages past. The din of the battle rose to unprecedented levels as the invaders began to be pushed back until turning to retreat. Some of the defenders began to give chase, but with a shout to hold from Emma, they halted their advance. A cheer went up and then another as the townsfolk realized they’d prevailed.

But it was much too soon to celebrate, for a moment later, another wave of soldiers came into sight just down the road, and as line after line filtered into the low-lit areas of the street, Regina’s heart sank. The troops they had beaten were merely the vanguard of a much larger force. The main body of the army Belmordan had brought over with him was now bearing down upon the pathetically smaller group of defenders, now even further reduced in number by the two-dozen dead and nearly twice that wounded they could not afford to lose.

A rolling, dispirited groan went out from along the line of defense.

"Stay strong," said Emma, her voice still commanding and sure as she clutched Excalibur at her side. The sword pulsed a brilliant gold in spite of it dripping wet with the blood of its slain enemies. "They will come again, but we can hold them."

Her words, while not inspiring a gleeful charge to the death, did the trick, buffeting the weary and crestfallen men and women around her. As they began to gathering back in formation, the Savior bent down and fetched a shield from a fallen enemy. "If you don't have a weapon, take one," she instructed, and then banged Excalibur against the unflinching metal of the shield she had picked up. "Use their own weapons against them. Let them die upon their own steel!"

Upon hearing a wave of acknowledgment sweep through the friendly force of defenders, Regina gave a grunt of approval. Exhibiting such quick thinking in the stress of battle while maintaining easy control of the fighters under her command was an impressive feat. Emma was proving herself worthy of her title. This, Regina thought, was the person Henry's storybook had predicted would arrive to break the Curse, not the uncertain woman who had fumbled her way through rescuing the town time and again. That Emma was still half in the world of her birth and half in the world of her raising. But the Emma present in that moment was entirely immersed in her destiny, had accepted the calling on her life without the insecurities that once held her back from realizing her full potential. She had at last long become the Savior.

With her features stern and her blonde hair bathed in the pale moonlight, Emma's magic radiated all around her like an aura of translucent amber, and as she tightly clenched her sword in her hand with her shield raised for battle, she appeared less like the woman Regina knew and more like a demigoddess from some untold or undiscovered mythology. To say Regina was impressed would be a gross understatement. This was a woman of whom she would be unapologetically frightened were they not the dearest of friends and most trusted compatriots.

"Get ready." Emma then directed, her eyes blazing at the next wave of attackers who were rapidly drawing within range. With another twirl of her sword, she assumed a battle stance, shield held high and forward with her sword resting along its side. "Wait for my command."

And the people listened. Those who had picked up shields and swords pressed their way to the front of the lines, forming a cohesive wall of steel four lines deep that would be much more capable of repelling the next wave of attackers.

Feeling her own energy was replenished enough for a few more meteoric conflagrations, Regina
sheathed her sword and drew along the right flank of the first line where she began to channel her magic. As the familiar tingle began to spread to her fingertips, she felt someone slide beside her.

"Take out as many as you can," a smooth, feminine voice said. "I will remain at your side to protect you."

Regina turned her eyes up to see Esperanza at her side, shoulder to shoulder almost, her face bathed in a fine sheen of sweat, though still as impassive as it was before the battle. Were it not for the fact that her blade and her leathers were stained red, Regina might have mistaken the woman for a coward, but with Esperanza, such a grievous mistake could never be made. Her cousin was born for warfare, for according to both Ruby and Emma she was the most detached and clinical person they had ever seen in a fight. Emma confessed once that while in the forests near the Dark Palace they had scrummed with a pack of the hellish creatures that had recently invaded Storybrooke, and that as they battled, she noticed that Esperanza looked almost bored while slaughtering her fair share of the beasts. Having personally lead armies and overseen the recruitment of each of her Black Knights, Regina knew the label most in this world would put on such a person: sociopath.

It was strange to think that someone so gentle in her normal everyday life could be such a cold-blooded killer, but the evidence was literally staring Regina in the face.

"You're disturbed by my coldness," Esperanza then said, shifting just enough that Regina could fully see her expression. "I don't blame you. Most are."

A little caught off-guard, Regina cleared her throat. She hadn't been aware she was staring so obviously. "I'm sorry," she sighed, "I don't want you to think I'm judging you." She noticed that the attackers were nearing the front line of defense, so Regina began to funnel her magic into ball of flame in her palm before glancing back at her cousin. "I'm not. We need you tonight."

"Yes," nodded Esperanza, her brown eyes dark as coal, "and you have me. But I don't enjoy this. I do it because I must."

"I know, and that's what's different between us," Regina replied, turning her eyes back on her targets. Lines of them were now visible, at least twenty deep – she couldn't judge precisely because they kept on and kept on coming. With ten men to the line, it made for odds that were as far from unfavorable as she had ever faced. Lips thin with grim determination, she added, "Because unlike you, I do enjoy it." And as the first line came within twenty feet of the defensive line, Emma barked out her order to advance. Raising her hand with a fireball at the ready, Regina glanced at her cousin one last time. "But tonight, I need you to enjoy it as well. That monster that you keep on such a tight leash...let her out. Bathe your blade in blood, revel in the deaths of your foes, for if ever there was one, tonight is a night for the darkness, a night for slaughter, a night for the beast within to have its fill of the screams of the dying."

Snarling now with rising hatred for these invaders, Regina zeroed in on a section of the enemy lines three rows deep and let loose her fireball. As it traversed the distance to its target, it illuminated the initial clash of the second stage of battle, casting a temporary orange glow over the scene of Emma, her parents, and many of Storybrooke's most famed heroes and bravest civilians crashing into the front line of Belmordan's forces. Under the assault, the enemy line buckled, bending inward just as the fireball exploded into the center of the third and forth rows, instantly vaporizing a dozen soldiers and setting twice as many on fire. Their wailing screams made the blood in her veins sing.

For a moment it looked like Belmordan's troops would be pushed back into their own staggered lines, but as if gaining a second wind, the soldiers on the front recovered, pushing their line back together as fresh troops stepped in to fill the voids left by their fallen comrades. A stalemate ensued in which a back and forth seesawing motion was repeated between the opposing lines, pushing and
pulling back time and again as one side gained the upper hand only to lose it seconds later. Tossing fireball after fireball, Regina did not even bother with her personal defenses, for as each soldier filtered into her vicinity, Esperanza would quickly engage them and dispatch them with an efficiency and skill that rivaled if not surpassed that of Charming, Emma, Killian, and Mulan, who the best swordsmen and women Regina had ever met.

Eventually, however, Regina's energy levels waned and she began to grow tired. After what seemed like ten minutes of hurling her magic at the enemy during which she eliminated at least a hundred men, perhaps as many as twice that number, her reserves were dangerously low, to the point that it would be foolhardy to continue attacking with magic lest she totally lost access to her magic for the duration of the contest. For the time being, she would have to do things the old fashioned way.

Drawing her sword, she glanced over at her cousin, tilted her head and smirked devilishly. Esperanza, who was slightly panting due to having just cut down another half-dozen attackers, returned the expression. Together they advanced along the flank and dove headlong into the melee.

It seemed as if Esperanza was more ballerina than warrior as she battled, performing one of the most agile and graceful dances of death that Regina had ever witnessed, leaving a trail of bodies behind her as she sashayed through the enemy ranks. With the joyous lust of war on her now, Regina grinned as she focused in on a small group of soldiers who had been split off from their comrades by Esperanza's attack. Without wasting a moment, she sprung on them. After quickly dispatching two opponents, she traded parries with the last and then evaded a well-timed thrust at her chest by pitching forward and rolling head over foot. Once her progress stopped, she sprang up from her haunches, whirled on her enemy, and then drove her blade into his back right through his heart. When he fell over dead, she heard Emma yell once more.

"Fall back!"

It was a command that shocked Regina, because it seemed as if the enemy was on the verge of being routed. But when she surveyed the situation, she found to her horror that her side of the line had progressed much further than the center and left, leaving the entire line exposed to the danger of collapsing if one small hole were to form. Relaying the command to the fighters around her, Regina drew back with Esperanza covering her retreat.

Upon forming back up with the rest of the line, she looked out over the street, seeing still more soldiers pouring out of the darkness beyond sight. Panic rising, she glanced down the line. Friendly numbers were diminished, and while not critically, the losses were enough that a pointed attack might break through. More than ever before, things seemed nigh on hopeless.

But then she heard a loud, high-pitched whistle down the flanks of the enemy lines. It seemed to have emanated from an alleyway near the library. Peering into the darkness, Regina searched for the source of the noise, finding nothing but inky blackness vomiting out hundreds of invaders who marched inexorably forward.

"Here they come!" Emma again yelled, and Regina turned just in time to see the enemy surge forward toward their line, the momentum having completely shifted. Where once before the people of Storybrooke were taking the fight to the enemy, they were now well and truly on the defensive.

Raising her sword, Regina easily swiped away a slice intended to take her head off and then neatly slid her blade into the small gap down the center of her attackers armor just below his chest. He fell, liver pierced – a mortal wound. Bracing herself for another onslaught when five attackers took his place, she bared her teeth. But before they could reach her, each of them were cut down by pin-point accurate arrows in their necks.
Glancing up at the flat roof of small store, Regina caught sight of Robin standing alongside Will Scarlet, Little John, Mulan, Merida, and three more Merry Men. He gave her grin and a salute which she eagerly returned.

Raising his bow, he yelled out, "Alright lads and lasses, fire at will!"

In concert, thirty other archers arose from perches on rooftops and balconies on both sides of the street, and as one rained down deadly darts into the enemy. Scores of attackers fell in swathes as the Merry Men plied their weapon of choice to deadly effectiveness. As another volley was unleashed, yet another mass of soldiers fell, and the surging force that had once threatened to overwhelm the rag tag group of defenders broke and began to retreat once more. And while it did not signal a full on rout, the tides had for the moment turned.

A whoop of joy went up from the people of Storybrooke as Emma strode forward, brandishing Excalibur as if she were Arthur himself reincarnated. "Keep them on the defense!" she yelled, and then pointed her sword forward, "advance!"

Following the progress of the line, Regina pressed forward, and as the retreating lines of the enemy were replenished and battle was once again joined, she lost herself in the instinctual motions of sword fighting and in the heady rush of combat. Time slowed down to a crawl as she killed ten soldiers in quick succession, followed by another group of a dozen men that required silent communication between herself and Esperanza to put down. After that, yet another line appeared.

By the time Regina had slaughtered her way through three successive lines, she was nearly spent. Her comrades were faring no better. Most were worse off in fact. The dead numbered more than she could count, their corpses strewn amongst the slain invaders, while scores of others lay wounded or were limping or crawling back toward the rear of the square for aid. A few had drifted back to rest, hands on knees, while their fellow townsfolk plugged the gaps. Positive momentum was being sapped with startling speed.

As if seeming to sense the turning of the tide, Belmordan's troops began to chant in a low rumbling rhythm. "O òثنάτος έρχεται. O òثنάτος έρχεται. O òثنάτος έρχεται." When the line of defenders stumbled back at the menacing sound, the enemy began a slow, methodical advance, still chanting as they came onward, clanging swords against their shields with each step.

"Hold steady!" Emma shouted, raising her own kite shield in preparation. Blood ran in rivulets down Excalibur's blade, dripping from the pommel onto the darkly stained pavement. Her teeth were bared. She looked every bit as menacing as Belmordan's troops sounded.

"O òثنάτος éρχεται," the soldiers continued to chant, and within seconds, they were upon the front line. The clanging of swords together and upon shields filled the street as combat resumed in earnest.

Again Regina joined the fray, Esperanza at her side. Together they downed scores, but with each soldier that fell, another took his place.

Is there no end to them? she thought after relieving a female warrior of an arm and then mercilessly forever extinguishing the stunned woman's light with a sharpened blade through the eye.

"We can't keep this up," Esperanza shouted over the din of battle.

"We must!" Regina shouted back, gritting her teeth in exertion as she held back the blade of a particularly brutish looking soldier who came on after his comrade's demise. Realizing she was not going to win a battle of strength, she resorted to wit instead. She would use the man's physical prowess against him. The next time he gave a push to his blade, she relaxed her entire body, shifting
out of the way as she released her sword from his. Having not expected the move, the man lurched forward and past her, allowing Regina to spin on him and neatly deprive him of his sword hand forevermore. He fell to the ground clutching a bloody stump and groaning. With a flick of her wrist, she drove her blade through his heart.

Turning back to the line of incoming attackers, she prepared herself for another exhausting wave of combat, but then a groan went out from her left. She spun to see an entire section of the front-line defense had collapsed when fifteen people were killed in rapid succession. Their vacancy opened a hole in the lines that could threaten the entire force. Regina scrambled back, preparing to launch herself into the gap.

But then a great explosion rocked the area, and to her great surprise it was accompanied by a cloud of green smoke and a gleeful, manic laughter that was too familiar for her to mistake as anyone else but her sister.

"What a delightful scene!" Zelena barked happily as she materialized in the gap, arrayed in a splendid black dress that glimmered in the moonlight. Her pointed hat rested daintily askew atop artfully arranged orange hair. The Wicked Witch had arrived to the party, and just in the nick of time.

"Zelena!" Regina shouted, initially incensed that her sister had abandoned her post protecting the children. "What the hell are you doing here?!

Zelena frowned deeply at the negative response. "I couldn't let you go and have all the fun, Sis. It's been far too long since I've had a good tussle. My magic is simply chomping at the bit to be let loose."

A stray attacker lunged at Regina as she marched toward her older sibling. After efficiently evading his attack, she cut his throat open with a single clean slice of her blade without missing a step.

"You're supposed to be with the children!" she yelled upon reaching her grinning sister. "You swore you would protect them!"

"And I shall," Zelena nodded, then lifted her hands up to her chest, palms out toward the invading army. She continued to talk as her magic gathered in her palms. "I set wards about the property to alert Walsh of intruders. He has been instructed to take the children across the border should the worst happen."

Walsh's property edged the town line, so Regina relaxed a bit knowing that the girls and Frankie were safe. That said, she did not share Zelena's apparent confidence in her baby daddy.

"And besides, you sat me on the sidelines when Ruby was abducted," Zelena continued, her magic now swirling outward from her extended hands, a vortex of violent energies practically whining to be unleashed upon its unsuspecting victims. "I love you, Regina, but I won't allow it this time. Whether you like it or not, I am part of this town. I care about it. We've both fought too hard and come too far to see it destroyed now. So whatever is required, whatever the cost we have to incur to save it, I'm with you."

Regina could not argue with that logic. Or not right now, anyway. "Fine. But don't hog all the glory. Leave some for me."

"Oh, Sis, there is plenty to go around," Zelena laughed, her blue eyes dancing with a bloodlust that could be easily misconstrued for madness. "I'm sure some of these poor unfortunate souls will survive my little gift."
With a wink, Zelena then turned, bared her teeth in a vicious snarl and pushed her arms outward. The vortex streamed forth, spinning and whirling as it began to take shape vertically rather than horizontally. Regina's lips spread into a malefic grin.

Upon releasing her hold on the magical vortex, Zelena spoke one word, "forward," and the tornado she had summoned dutifully obeyed. It tore straight through the center of the enemy lines from front to back. A great wail of screams and cries went up as scores of soldiers were sucked up into the funnel and then tossed like rag dolls over distances too great to survive. Regina cackled in macabre amusement as she watched what had to be a hundred human beings be erased from existence in mere moments. It really was such a lovely sight.

The blow of Zelena's full might being brought to bear was one that even the vastly superior numbers of Belmordan's army could not overcome. Now broken, they began to reel back, some retreating in formation while others tucked tail and ran. The rout was on.

But the plight of the invaders was not yet ended, for as they fled up main street the way they had came, a booming howl rang out over the town. The retreating soldiers stilled. From the east, a strange shape began to emerge from the darkness. As it passed under the lights, it broke up into individual outlines that Regina could easily make out. With their four legs and pointed ears and tapered muzzles, the Dire Wolves had arrived, and at their head was Romulus and his mate, Octavia. As the Dires fought their way into the first line of fleeing invaders, Regina heard yet another howl, this one a glorious trumpeting that reverberated through the square where it settled into her bones.

Moments later, the most magnificent creature Regina had ever seen burst from the shadows. Her heart stammered in her chest. It was Ruby, eyes alight with the ancient power of the wolf, healthy and in her right mind and on the hunt. Howling once more as she broke into a sprint, Ruby tore a path through the dumbstruck soldiers, pausing only to rip out throats or bite off limbs as she steadily progressed her way toward Regina.

Upon reaching her location, Ruby transformed, no longer flushed from an uncontrollable fever or wearing the maddened expression of torment she had as she rushed out of the hospital. A smile graced her features that was positively beatific, a stark contrast to the grim circumstance, but welcome nonetheless.

"Hey, babe," she greeted as if nothing strange or troublesome had happened that night.

The absurdity of the situation hit Regina square in the chest. Laughing and sobbing at the same time, she launched herself into Ruby's arms. "You're late," she cried as she tucked her face into her wife's neck.

Ruby wound her arms around Regina's waist and pulled her close. "Sorry. Got a little sidetracked. Better late than never, though. Right?"

Regina could hear the crooked grin in Ruby's voice. Unable to help herself, she kissed her wife right there in the middle of the ruckus, and when a cheer rose up from the recovering defenders, she hardly even noticed. They had won. Ruby was alive. And nothing else mattered.

If only she'd known the exultation would be so short-lived.
So, did it suck? Not sure how good I am at doing battle scenes, but I tried for a heroic fantasy type feel to it.

Sad to say, next week's chapter is probably going to upset some readers. Brace yourselves accordingly.
A Costly Defiance

Chapter Summary

The townfolk of Storybrooke get a reprieve from battle. Sadly it's a short one.

Chapter Notes

The section about Granny and her husband was largely inspired by dialogue between myself and a reader in the preceding work to this piece, "The Price of Destiny" Also, if anyone has forgotten, when writing this I pictured Belmordan as a sinister, wizardly version of Michael Shannon's General Zod in Man of Steel. Finally, I'm sorry in advance for what's about to happen...

In the near distance Belmordan's forces were in full retreat, and after regretfully parting from Regina's lips, Ruby could only marvel at the scene left in their wake. A sizable portion of the town had shown up for the battle, including many of her friends. Among them were Mulan, Merida, and Robin, who were just stepping into the square along with the Merry Men after abandoning their sniper perches along the roofs of nearby buildings. Belle was also present, though Rumplestiltskin was strangely absent from his wife's side. In the back of her mind, she wondered what the trickster was up to for him to have missed so crucial a moment.

In the center of the square alongside Snow and David, Emma was busy checking on the citizens and helping tend to the wounded as best she could with her magic. Ruby watched fondly as Emma healed a particularly gruesome wound to a man's shoulder. Her closest friend was dressed in chain mail, her blonde hair braided upon her head like a warrior-princess of lore, a modern day Eowyn only out and proud about her gender. The fiercely noble look took Ruby's mind back to the Enchanted Forest when Emma had miraculously broken free of Belmordan's restraints and rescued her by wounding the frightfully powerful sorcerer. This was the Savior in her element.

Pride filled her chest at Emma's impressive display of leadership considering the circumstances. Somehow "the Savior" seemed almost lacking as a description while hero was far too simple a designation for the woman who had become as vital to the town's survival, if not more so, than the two-people responsible for its creation. Rumplestiltskin cared nothing for leadership beyond how it benefited him, though he helped from time to time with magical conundrums, and while Regina was comfortable with her prominent political role as mayor, Emma filled a variety of roles, from Sheriff to Commander and from the community's main source of hope to its cultural and emotional touchstone. Emma was, in Ruby's opinion, at the center of Storybrooke's beating heart.

But then when Ruby quickly scanned the area where most of the fighting occurred, her throat seized up almost painfully. Corpses were littered the square, piled three deep in places, and the streets ran slick with blood. Most of the dead numbered among the enemy, but Ruby also recognized many adorned in clothing of this world. Some of them she recognized as patrons of the diner from her many years serving them there, knowing them to be people with families they had left behind. The
stomach swirling now, she concentrated all her senses on Regina, who was still firmly ensconced in her arms. As she took a long drag of air into her lungs, Ruby pressed a lingering kiss to her wife’s damp temple and then shuttered her eyes closed against the compulsion to cry. Blocking out the smell of death, she focused instead upon the hints expensive coconut-scented boutique shampoo Regina favored of late, and as it flooded her senses over the salty tang of sweat, she felt more grounded both from the carnage surrounding her on every side and from the hair-raising experience she’d just lived through.

Being out of control again for even a matter of minutes had shaken Ruby to the core, dredging up all kinds of old feelings that she long since put to bed – or so she had thought anyway. Back in her right mind, she was stricken by how easily the panic and the doubt flared back to life over being deprived agency within her own mind. That she’d almost killed Romulus in her mania only added to the cresting waves of self-recrimination threatening to overwhelm her.

But holding Regina in her arms, being surrounded by the many pleasant scents of her mate and being able to trace her fingertips over the memorized planes of a body well-mapped over eleven years together, brought comfort that Ruby desperately needed even as she felt guilty to accept it.

"On this occasion, late is perfectly fine with me," Regina said in reply to Ruby's wry greeting, then pulled away to kiss Ruby on the lips. The intimate contact broke the negative turn of Ruby's thoughts, though it ended far too soon for Ruby's liking. After separating a moment later, Regina added, "I'm just glad you're okay. I'm a proud woman, Ruby, but not too proud to admit how scared I was."

"I'm sorry for that, but I'm glad to be back to normal, too," Ruby replied, hanging on to Regina's forearms as her new pack ambled up to assume a position near her side. Seeing them reminded her of the battle they'd waged and emerged from victorious. Pride in them welled up in her heart, but she tamped it down in favor of elucidating her vague opening statement, which had left Regina looking concerned. She gave her wife's arms a squeeze before saying, "That said, and in the interest of honesty, I think you should know that while I was in the woods with the Dire Wolves, we were attacked."

"You were attacked in the woods?" Esperanza spoke up, sounding concerned and equally confused. "That is a strange place to send a detachment of troops."

Ruby gave her marital relation a brief nod of acknowledgment before grimacing. "They weren't soldiers. Remember those hellbeasts we ran into back in the Enchanted Forest?" When Esperanza gave an affirmative hum, Ruby added, "Well, they came back. Turns out their leader is...was Romulus' twin brother." When Romulus flinched at the mention of his slain twin, Ruby gave him an apologetic glance.

"Do not fret for me. My grief will pass in time." Romulus' reassurance would have been convincing if she couldn't hear the tremble in his voice imperceptible to human ears.

Wanting to further offer her sympathies, she was stopped short when she caught sight of Emma meandering over from where she'd been tending to the wounded.

"Am I mistaken or did I just hear you say that you were attacked by hellbeasts?" asked the Savior.

Ruby cut her eyes over to find her blonde friend tightly gripping a blood-drenched Excalibur in her hand as she approached. Sweat was dripping from Emma's brow, and her armor was splattered with
drops of crimson gore. She was a mess, but a beautiful one, and that was about as good a summary of Emma Swan as Ruby could come up with.

"Is that what the Fallen Ones are called in this world?" Romulus injected, slight amusement at the designation coloring his tone. Ruby was glad to hear it.

Since regaining consciousness after killing Remus, Romulus had been withdrawn and unusually sullen, which was understandable considering the moral quandary he'd been put in. Being responsible for the death of a family member was a pain with which Ruby was well acquainted.

After Anita's untimely death, Ruby had departed the recently abandoned den with Snow, downtrodden and broken in a way she didn't know was possible considering how low she'd already felt with Peter's horrifying demise on her conscience. To Snow's credit, not a word was said as they trudged fifteen miles in the bitter cold to a tiny village nearby with shoddy but available accommodations in which they could crash. All she'd thought about the entire journey and long into the night was her mother's face, the betrayal and hatred written upon it when Ruby had chosen Snow over her. But as awful as she'd felt about her mother dying, it had ultimately been an accident.

Romulus, on the other hand, made a conscious choice to end his brother's life. The hellbeasts had all been defeated, slain by either Ruby or the Dires or the dozen or so normal wolves that survived the battle. Remus had been isolated and posed no danger, and even if he had been able to threaten a last gasp attack, Ruby could have easily subdued him. As strong as Remus was, he was no match for her, not when she was hopped up on whatever steroidal magic that had been pumping through her veins and which made her more powerful than she'd ever felt. But rather than spare Remus' life, Romulus chose to end it, and although Ruby was intensely curious as to the noble Dire Wolf's reasoning for such unwarranted violence, she gave him space out of respect for his suffering, as did the rest of his pack. Octavia did hover a little more closely than usual to her mate, but she too remained subdued as the pack made their way into town to help repel the attack from Belmordan's forces as best they could.

"It's what Ruby calls them," Emma corrected Romulus, peering at Ruby with exasperated affection that swiftly morphed into worry. "What happened to you back at the hospital by the way? You tore out of there like a bat out of hell. Had Regina and me both scared out of our minds."

Ruby sighed, releasing one of Regina's forearms to scratch at her head. "Yeah, she told me. Sorry about that. I wasn't exactly in control of my faculties at the time."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Regina posed, one sable brow arched.

"She was being influenced by a phylactery placed in the primary wolf den," Romulus supplied, granting Ruby a temporary reprieve from her wife's dagger-like stare. Ruby smiled at him, further grateful for his taking up the tale as she didn't quite understand what had happened to her – reason being that few memories of that portion of the night remained in tact. "It was what affected the wolves here, sapping their vitality and their virility. Somehow the pernicious magic it contained was activated, and upon doing so dampened Ruby's ability to reason. In essence, it made her feral until Octavia destroyed it."

Both Regina and Emma gasped then turned to one another in almost perfect concert. "The poison."

Now confused, Ruby glanced between them. "Wait a minute...what? What poison?"

"Don't you remember me telling you that Thomas Hatter threatened to kill you?" Emma asked. When Ruby nodded, she continued, "Well, he dosed you with a poison that specifically targets werewolves."
"A poison that is supposed to be fatal in all cases," Regina added, her free hand trembling so slightly that only Ruby could have picked up on it, which she did. Grasping the quaking hand, Ruby rubbed her thumb along the back in a gesture of comfort.

"I have heard of this substance," Romulus interjected wearing a grim expression on his features that upset Ruby's stomach again. "While it assuredly worked in tandem with the phylactery to weaken Ruby's control over her wolfen half, I do not believe it was ever intended to kill her."

Regina groaned and then rubbed her brow as if silently berating herself. "That's right," she then said. "How could I have forgotten? Hatter told us in the woods earlier that this...Belmorden fellow has plans for Ruby and that he needs her alive."

"Yeah," injected Emma, gesturing with her sword inadvertently, "he said she was the key, whatever that means."

Whether it was Emma's phrasing or something else, Ruby could not tell, but Romulus' posture immediately stiffened in concert with an almost comical widening of his eyes.

"Oh, no," he gasped. "It is so obvious now. How could I not have realized? How blind I've been to the events unfolding before me!"

"Care to enlighten us as to what the hell you're going on about?" Regina barked, becoming agitated at Romulus' dramatic reaction.

To try and calm her down, Ruby threaded their fingers together and stepped in close to Regina's side. She could feel her wife tensing by the second as if human band pulled so taut she was about to snap until she was practically vibrating with disquiet.

"He means to open the prison," Romulus replied, looking genuinely frightened, which caused the fine hairs on Ruby's arms and neck to raise. When his entire pack began to murmur in disbelief, he went on, "Everything makes sense now. She is his last remaining descendant, and per legend the seal was made secure with blood magic."

"Despite claims to the contrary, you are making no sense at all you damnable furball!" Regina spat, vein in her forehead popping as her face reddened.

"Regina..."

"Don't you dare patronize me, Ruby! Not right now!" Regina bit out, whirling on Ruby, her finger drilling angrily into Ruby's upper chest. "My town has just come under attack, my citizens are laying dead in the streets, and my children are in danger, all because my wife is the object of some unheard-of megalomaniac's sick obsession. I'm done with the obfuscation!" Whirling back on Romulus, she shouted, "Out with it plainly!"

Rather than reply immediately, Romulus ducked his head in a show of submission. While many had repeated the gesture in the face of Regina's withering fury, Ruby knew it was not so much for Regina's sake as it was for her. As her mate, Regina was afforded all respect the pack owed to its alpha. Of course, Ruby also knew that Romulus respected Regina for her own merits. He had told her as much on their early outings inspecting the wolves of Storybrooke. Regina, it seemed in retrospect, was the only one who hadn't recognized her own potential for goodness back then.

In the heat of the moment, Ruby was thankful for Romulus' tact. It would not have been prudent for him to confront an incensed Regina considering his own stubborn temper. That, Ruby knew, was a fine way to get roasted over a spit, either metaphorically or literally depending on the severity of
Regina's mood.

"Forgive the vagaries, your Majesty. I meant no offense," he apologized a second later after daring to raise his gaze. Though Regina was still glowering down at him, her anger had abated a teeny-tiny bit. When Regina nodded curtly, he explained, "The prison I was referring to houses an Olympian goddess named Artemis, sister of Diana, who is the benefactor of my kind. In ancient days, Artemis was the lover of Belmordan and bore him a daughter named Eleni, from whom Ruby is directly descended. Artemis' prison is said to be sealed by blood magic, thus Ruby is the only individual in existence capable of freeing her."

As Regina's expression darkened further, Emma shifted her stance, eyes worried as she asked, "If that's true, why wait until now when she is the only one left?"

"It has taken much time for Belmordan to accrue sufficient power to wage war on Olympus directly. These thousand years he has ventured from realm to realm, from world to world, consuming magics and enslaving populations into his armies, all to the end of isolating Olympus as the last remaining bastion of freedom. Only Asgard and Midgard remain besides Olympus, and with Artemis at his side, there will be no stopping him from conquering all that remains of the system we all inhabit."

"Wise words from a fool who chose strangers over his own brother. I should slaughter you where you stand for committing fratricide against my soul-companion."

The resonant voice that responded to Romulus was eerily familiar to Ruby. Latent with unspeakable power, it reverberated through the town square, alerting every soul to the malefic presence of its speaker. Her mind did not have to search long to place the person's identity. It wasn't all that long ago that she'd first met its owner, an encounter that she would never forget.

Belmordan had arrived.

Trembling with terrible anticipation, Ruby wondered at what kind of game the dark sorcerer was playing by refusing to reveal himself. Not only had he arranged for her to be poisoned to control her for some mysterious reason. He had also sent his hellbeasts to destroy the Dires at the same time as his army marched toward Storybrooke, bent on destroying a peaceful town that had done nothing to provoke such violence. It appeared some larger plot was at work, though Ruby could not figure out what, exactly, his aims were.

From what little time she had spent interacting with Belmordan back in the Enchanted Forest, she did not get the impression that he was an impotent showman such as the Wizard of Oz. She'd immediately sensed his immense power, but he had been polite if not straightforward at the Dark Palace, clearly working an angle, just never in a way that involved such theatrics. And when he'd appeared to stop them from returning home to Storybrooke, it was with little fanfare.

Why then this formless projection of his voice? Was it a tactic meant to intimidate or inspire fear? If so, the gambit was working judging by the quaking limbs and the terror-twisted visages of the citizen soldiers still gathered in the square.

"Remus left me no choice," Romulus argued as his ears perked up to better listen and his eyes cast about for any sign of movement. "To save this town and these people, to save the prophesied Great One and her kin, I had to end his life. But even though he strayed from the path of good, he was my brother. I will mourn for him the rest of my life."

"Your empty explanations have no sway with me," Belmordan's projected voice returned, soaked in loathing for Romulus. "Nor do accept your sorrow as sincere. You are a false brother and a betrayer of your own kin! Remus walked by my side for a thousand years. I will not permit his death to go
unavenged. So mourn him, Romulus, mourn him while you can, for the time of reckoning is nigh! Oh, you blind sycophant of gods that care for naught but themselves! Weep for being forever sundered from your twin, for soon enough it shall be you in the grave and Remus who lives."

Before Romulus or anyone else could muster up a single word in response to the disembodied threat, the sky thundered and lightning began streaking through the suddenly inky night sky. Perhaps fifty feet down the road heading out of town, a wisp of spinning light formed in the air, suspended off the ground chest high. Miniature bolts of lightning jolted across its surface in a living wave of electricity that swirled and undulated as it grew. With every revolution, the rotational speed increased until it was moving so fast that the air began to shimmer and whistle around its edges.

On and on it spun, louder and louder it screamed, so that within seconds Ruby was wincing and the wolves were howling from the way the noise pierced their sensitive ears. But then when the discomfort seemed almost insufferable, the orb abruptly stopped spinning to simply hang in the air.

A long period of silence ensued in which all eyes were focused upon the strange object. Fear was heavy in the air. Ruby could smell the tang with every breath as her eyes scoured the area for any sign of movement. She spotted nothing, heard nothing but the shallow breaths of those around her, and smelt nothing aside from sweat and blood and anxiety.

"I am Architoutelus, the beginning of the end," the voice once more rang out, this time from in the center of the orb, and the force of it shook the ground. "I am the Master of a thousand races and the destroyer of worlds. All shall bow before me, whether by choice or force, including the paltry gods to whom you bow the knee. For I have transcended their power and shall soon enough ascend to the heights of Mount Olympus itself as the new potentate of all that is and ever shall be. Choose wisely and you may yet be spared, save for the betrayer, whose life is forfeit this night."

A rush of adrenaline-fueled fear pulsed through Ruby's veins at the ominous speech as well as the direct threat to the Dire Wolf who had quickly become not only a part of her pack but her friend. Out of an instinct to protect both her family and her pack, she readied herself to fight. Consequently, as she caught Romulus' eyes to silently promise him that she would protect him, her grip tightened on Regina's hand. She had to be careful to harness her strength lest she break her spouse's relatively weaker bones. After a nod from Romulus indicated he understood and appreciated her intent, she felt Regina's stress levels rocket into the stratosphere and could both sense and smell her wife's magic gathering within a deceptively petite frame. With a sidelong glance, she caught sight of Regina's lips curled up in a snarl more reminiscent of her days as an authoritarian potentate in her own right.

But just as Ruby was about to risk an intervention to assuage her wife's rapidly elevating fury, Emma stepped forward out of the group. Excalibur was gleaming in her hand as she stood isolated and vulnerable yet proud and stern as if her spine were made of steel rather than bone. The wind whipped in from the east, and the moonlight made her blonde hair shimmer as if it were made of golden diamonds. This was not Emma the Sheriff or Emma the Mom or Emma the best buddy. This was Emma Swan the Savior in all her glory.

"Never!" the Savior shouted, green eyes blazing with menacing threat. "We will never bow to you or to anyone else! Whether we live or die, we do so as free people! Do you remember that I showed no fear of you the last time we met? I have no fear of you now! Show yourself, you coward! Do you hear me, Belmordan?"

The purposeful use of his name had the intended effect. Within seconds, the orb of lightning began pulsing once again, but this time rather than growing it collapsed in upon itself, leaving only a black mass of globular plasma behind that warped all light that approached it. For perhaps ten seconds the plasma hovered above the ground, the distortion around its edges making it seem as if it were eating
the air itself. But then it began to stretch vertically, slowly at first, and then more rapidly as it began to take form into a torso, arms, legs, and a head. Once the figure was fully formed, a figure Ruby remembered with high detail, the plasma dissipated with a great whoosh, leaving only a man behind.

Standing over six feet in height, Belmordan was arrayed in a knee-length tunic as black as night over-top an ornate set of plate mail. A hooded cloak of similar ebony covered his head, enshrouding all his chiseled face in darkness save his mouth and jaw. In his hand was a great staff of ebon wood, topped by a silver death rune adorned with skulls of various shapes and sizes and from which a wicked looking blade projected. As he had the first-time Ruby met him, his posture radiated an indescribable power that both terrified and fascinated her. He looked the epitome of an evil wizard, almost resembling a villain from one Henry's favorite comic book runs, and yet she also knew him to be a man of logic and high manners that seemed contradictory to the tyrannical warmonger threatening to destroy her entire world.

Beneath the shadow of his hood, Belmordan's lips twisted smugly just before he spoke the words of a spell in some language Ruby did not understand. In an instant a sphere much like the one protecting the Dark Palace formed over the portion of the square populated by the rest of the townsfolk, including Mary Margaret, David, Belle, Robin, and Mulan. From within, the heroes immediately attempted to break out, bashing the magical barrier with swords and axes, but their efforts were to no avail.

On edge from the aggressive opening gambit, Ruby readied herself to transform as she watched Belmordan begin to stride toward the square. By some type of wizardry, his armor made no sound as he moved; only the clanging of his plated boots against the pavement echoed down the street.

In response to Belmordan's advance, Emma brought her sword up to the ready, and Ruby heard Esperanza unsheathing her own thin but deadly rapiers as Regina readied a fireball. But just before reaching the square, the dark sorcerer stopped abruptly right in line with Emma's position.

"I see your hand is back where it belongs," Emma said with a smirk. "I'd be glad to relieve you of it a second time."

Belmordan flexed the hand that Emma had cut off, a pleased smile visible beneath his hood. "Magic is a wonderful thing," he said, his sonorous voice booming as his eyes turned threatening. "And bravery is more oft than not an impetus of destruction, Savior. Though I commend you for your courage when I can smell the terror of the plebeians present with you."

"Those 'plebeians' as you call them just routed your army," Emma returned defiantly. "And if they pose so little threat to you, why did you expend so much energy to isolate them?"

After throwing back his hood, revealing his features to all, Belmordan's mouth twisted with humor.

"I do not require an audience for the overture I am to make," he said. "The important individuals are gathered here before me. But as for my army being, as you say, routed, I must ask: were they really? Or is it possible they were merely the distraction necessary for me to achieve one my objectives?"

"And what might that objective be?" Regina cut in, her hand now returning Ruby's grip ten-fold. Ruby winced at the pressure, glad that she was a werewolf, as otherwise her hand would have been crushed. The display of strength from her human spouse told her that Regina was having trouble controlling her magic, which meant that she was also struggling to contain that part of her that resorted to violence when threatened.

Rather than appearing intimidated, Belmordan bowed with a fancy flourish. "Ah, your Majesty, how
I have longed to make your acquaintance!" he then said upon straightening. A pleased smile was present upon his face, showing how eager he was to be conversing with Regina. "I am a great admirer of your handiwork and have devoured all of your publications on magical theory. Your treatise on the benefits of violence in maintaining mass discipline was of particular interest to me. A masterpiece, I must say."

Ruby hadn't liked the way Belmordan looked at her back at the Dark Palace, but she was positively unnerved by seeing him level that gaze upon her mate. Her protective instincts flared to life with a vengeance, and she had half a mind to step in front of Regina, but was cut short as Regina squeezed her hand once again.

Cutting her eyes over, she saw Regina's jaw flex angrily at the attempt to butter her up with references to her past. But her eyes also betrayed a measure of surprise that Belmordan had read the materials mentioned, works that Ruby was not even aware existed. It made her wonder what else Regina had done or written during her time as Queen that she was not aware of, and less in a suspicious way than a curiosity to know more about her wife's less unsavory accomplishments as Queen.

"Your flattery is counterproductive," Regina replied. "I'm not that woman anymore."

After so many years together, Ruby could see though the denial. Try as she might to deflect the praise, Ruby could tell Regina was at least somewhat affected. It worried her to think that even her iron-willed wife could be touched by Belmordan's seductive words, and not so much that she feared Regina could be swayed to Belmordan's side as to the clinical fashion and surgical precision with which the knowledge of Regina's greatest character defect, her pride, was being wielded. Belmordan knew their weaknesses and was ready, willing, and subtly capable of exploiting them. Such knowledge betrayed how well-prepared he was.

"I'm aware," Belmordan said to Regina with deceptive warmth. "But my interest in you extends past your impressive achievements as a purveyor of human suffering, commendable as they are. Rather, I desire to avoid conflict with you as we are family via marriage." His eyes cut meaningfully to Ruby and then back as he linked his hands together behind his back. "Family, you see, means everything to me. I was never afforded the privilege of laying eyes on my own flesh and blood, so although your spouse is many times removed from my child, I still consider her a daughter. I desire to strengthen those ties with her," he then bowed his head slightly toward Regina, "and therefore you as well."

Ruby harrumphed, eyes narrowing. She didn't believe the flowery speech for a moment, but in the interest of keeping the fragile detente, she decided to humor her ancient ancestor.

"You have a strange way of showing it," she said. But then a thought crossed her mind as to his arrival in this world. "How did you get here, anyway? There are no beans left in the Enchanted Forest and I can only assume you did not travel here by magic. Time doesn't seem to be affected by your portal."

Belmordan tipped his head in acknowledgment of her question, his expression shifting towards regret stemming from certain unmentioned but silently alluded to events. "While you and your companions were feasting, I temporarily acquired the bean left in the care of the Savior. Using the Book of Ambrosious..."

"You mean the book you burned my ancestral country to the ground to obtain?" Regina interrupted, brow raised in anger.

"The very same," Belmordan replied. "The destruction of that land was unfortunate. Such cultural
sophistication and architectural marvels as to be unrivaled in my travels. My apologies for snuffing them out of existence. But I needed the book and King Xander was unwilling to part with it. There is a certain spell within which allows a person to reproduce any form of matter in limited quantities given the correct reagents. By utilizing that spell, I simply created another bean. Once the portal was opened, I utilized another useful incantation in the book to expand its circumference, rendering it substantial enough for entire companies at a time of my army to pass through.

His eyes then flitted back to Ruby. "As for your other concern, our previous encounter was infinitely regrettable. In hindsight, I was overzealous in my attempts to convince you of the futility of resisting my agenda. My haste to prevent you from leaving Misthaven was a mistake I am here to rectify, if possible, by offering a means of avoiding further casualties."

"Attacking my wife without provocation is not a pertinent example of a 'regrettable' action," Regina butted in before Ruby could muster a response. Her temper had clearly slipped its leash, made evident by the prominently bulging vein in her forehead and the reddening of her face. "If I were less inclined to show restraint, I'd have incinerated you just for daring to lay a hand on what belongs to me. But then you had audacity to invade my town without provocation, which posed a direct threat to my family's safety, and proceeded to kill my citizens by proxy. And you have the gall to suggest diplomatic resolution is feasible? I would say you are insane but I would risk criminal oversimplification."

"Your tongue is as sharp as your wit I see." Belmordan smirked, not the least bit perturbed by Regina's aggressive tone. Quite the contrary, he seemed almost joyous that she was still in touch with that baser part of her nature. His next words bore that out. "Your reputation serves you well. I am pleased to see that you are not quite so reformed as most here believe."

A collective gasp went out as all eyes turned to Regina. It had been years since anyone made a serious fuss over Regina's actions as the Evil Queen, which was likely the purpose of Belmordan's pointed comment. He wanted to plant the seeds of doubt and division in those who had finally learned to respect her if not grudgingly accept her as their political leader. Perhaps he even wanted to drive a wedge into the relationships that mattered most to Regina, even into their marriage. But if so, the ruse would not work.

Firstly, Ruby knew as well as everyone else who was close to Regina that Belmordan was baiting her, and Ruby – along with those friends and family members – had faith in her to resist temptation. Not only that, and more than anyone else, Ruby had never forgotten the woman Regina used to be. No matter how vile, the Evil Queen was part of Regina. She always would be. And while Ruby recognized that unsavory aspect of her True Love, she accepted Regina for who she was rather than for who she thought Regina should be.

That acceptance of the aggressive, antagonistic, hateful, rude, and sometimes violent side of Regina was, to Ruby, part of her wedding vows that she had never considered negating. She'd promised to love Regina unconditionally, and that meant loving all of Regina, which she'd done then and still did now, something Regina knew as well.

To ensure those vows were never forgotten, Ruby made sure to semi-regularly greet her wife of a morning with a tender kiss and a gently whispered, "I love you completely, just as you are, every part both inside and out." The phrase was a reductive code referencing their mutual acceptance of the beasts within them both. For while Ruby had loved the Queen just as much as the woman, Regina loved the wolf just as well as the human.

It was irrelevant to Ruby whether anyone else had blinded themselves to the Queen always lurking beneath the veneer of the heroic individual Regina had become. And it was just irrelevant to their
friends and family. Regina had changed. And while Belmordan was right that the Queen was still present, Regina had control of her in the same way that Ruby now had control of the wolf, which seemed to Ruby a potential advantage depending on the outcome of the negotiations. The Queen might be necessary before everything was said and done.

"You've yet to see the true depths of what I am capable of be manifested," Regina retorted, danger surfing along the waves of her low, gravelly timbre. "If I were you, I'd pray you aren't afforded that unfortunate privilege."

Eyes almost dancing with humor, Belmordan chuckled. "Of that, I have no doubt." But then his expression grew somber. "Thus, I extend this genuine offer, but I will only make it once. Consider your options prudently before answering. There is no need for further effusion of blood. Surrender and then take a vow of loyalty to me and you may retain this town and all its privileges with my blessing. I have only one non-negotiable requirement."

Cocking out her hip, Regina rested her hand upon it then fixed Belmordan with a glare that indicated her intent to refuse despite her almost cordial tone. "Before I hear this requirement, I want to know why you neglected to mention the purpose of attacking my town. You say it was a diversion, but since you are so graciously deigning to negotiate rather than fight, I have to wonder as to the necessity."

Belmordan's eyes narrowed into slits for a moment as he studied Regina intently. He then cocked his head in appreciation, as if he admired her ability to steer a conversation.

After allowing his features to relax once more, he replied grinning wryly, "That, my daughter's wife, is for me to know. But to soothe your curiosity, I will admit to obtaining leverage should negotiations go awry."

The ambiguous statement shot a lance of panic through Ruby regarding the children, and she felt Regina coil up like a snake ready to strike. With the way Belmordan had been emphasizing her blood relationship to him, she had no doubt he had his eyes upon his younger, more malleable descendants as well.

Growing enraged, her eyes flickered yellow as she bit out a threat. "If you touched one hair on my babies' heads, so help me..."

"Calm yourself, young one," Belmordan soothed, showing no fear of her whatsoever. "There is no need to resort to threats. As I said, I consider you my daughter. Why then would I dare harm my own grandchildren? Aside from the undeniable fact that they are innocent of all this meanness, they are as much my legacy as you are. Fear not. I personally guarantee their safety no matter the outcome of events this night."

While Ruby didn't believe him, she wasn't willing to chance provoking him by expressing that doubt. If she did, who was to say he wouldn't change his mind? For now, it appeared her kids were safe, and she would have to work upon that assumption lest she lose focus.

"Fine," she huffed. "For the sake of not prolonging this encounter further than is necessary: what is your requirement?"

A smile stretched over Belmordan's lips that nearly covered up the sinister gleam of his eyes. "It is two-fold, yet simple. Firstly, you, my daughter, must take your rightful place at my side as my heir. And secondly, you must provide to me a single droplet of blood with which to release my beloved mate from her unjust torment. Agreement to these terms will secure the safety of this town and all of its inhabitants."
Ruby's brows furrowed at the demands. There was no way she was willing to accede to becoming the heir of a megalomaniac who conquered worlds and slaughtered populations wholesale. What's more, she wasn't about to release anyone from an imprisonment that was, from Romulus' account, justifiable.

At the same time, she also knew that fighting him would likely result in, as he'd put it, an effusion of blood. None of them were powerful enough to stand up to him on their own, and even with Emma, Regina, and Zelena's powers combined, she wasn't sure they stood a chance of defeating a man who was capable of teleporting entire armies between worlds via his own magic. That level of power was unheard of. To fight against him, then, was tantamount to suicide.

"If I were to agree to this, my family will be safe?" she asked, needing more information before she made any kind of decision, and it was her decision to make. Belmordan seemed less than interested in anyone else's opinion. "These people who fought against your army? Romulus and my pack? What will happen to them?"

Regina immediately protested with a shout. "Ruby, no!" Her brown eyes were wide with disbelief, as if she couldn't fathom how Ruby could even be considering giving in to such ridiculous demands.

"Just...hear him out," she said, eyes imploring for trust as she rubbed her thumb along the back of Regina's hand. "Please." When Regina flexed her jaw and relaxed a smidgen after a curt nod, Ruby turned back to Belmordan. "So?"

"They will be safe," he said. "You have my word."

"What of the town's autonomy? I won't stand for any kind of puppet government being installed. This is our town and it has to stay that way."

Belmordan tilted his head, eyes narrowing shrewdly. "There will be no interference from me so long as no rebellion is fostered. Your government can remain in place and intact. Everything here will be as it was before I arrived. The only life that will change dramatically will be yours along with your kin."

Startled by the last statement, Ruby tensed uncomfortably. "What does that mean?"

"It means that when I leave this place, you and your family will accompany me," Belmordan answered matter-of-factly, tone brooking no room for argument. "You must accept this stipulation unconditionally. This world is not meant for us, child. Only Olympus is fit to be home for our line, and once I have subdued it, it will be."

Ignoring the mention of Olympus that had something niggling at the back of her mind, Ruby thought about his phrasing. 'This world is not meant for us.' A sense of foreboding rose in her chest at what might happen to earth as a consequence of Belmordan's invasion.

"And what of 'this world'? I mean the world outside Storybrooke?" she posed. "There are billions of people living on this planet that have nothing to do with you or me or this crusade of yours. They are innocent as much as my children are. Will you spare them also?"

Belmordan made a noise of disagreement. "Where this world is concerned, innocence is a farcical concept that I wholly repudiate. In researching the history of Earth, I came to the realization that it is perhaps the vilest of all within the system. This planet is defined by endless wars, mass genocides, and divisions of every sort that incite violence and prejudice within its populations. The people in it know only how to hate and to destroy. They are undeserving of clemency." He then made an absent gesture with his hand. "Besides, my benevolence only extends so far. This town shall be spared only
because you call it your home. The rest of this world will submit to me one way or the other, which I think in the end will benefit it. There will be no room for petty squabbles and the reckless ruin of nature under my rule. I will restore the Earth to a pristine state, cleansing it of the blight of human overpopulation and unchecked dominance, for which I should frankly be praised."

Despite agreeing with his assessment of how earthlings had treated their planet, Ruby could not, would not, accede to the wholesale slaughter of the type Belmordan was proposing. She had no illusions as to what cleansing meant. She did not need to hear any more.

"In that case: no deal."

"Do not be so hasty to pass judgment on my conclusions," he warned, eyes glinting dangerously. "You have not seen what I have seen, nor do you know what I know. I have walked upon the soil of regions left barren wastelands due to pollution, strip-mining, deforestation, and the vast over-consumption of natural resources. I have witnessed what humanity left unchecked is capable of. I am doing only what is necessary to preserve a precious bastion of life."

"But that doesn't give you a license to commit mass genocide!" Ruby cried, incensed at the rationalizing of so much wanton death. "That makes you a hypocrite, doesn't it? Because it was one of the things you mentioned as a reason humanity deserved to be 'cleansed'."

"Twisting my words against me will not change my mind," Belmordan sneered. "Your youth and naivete preclude you from understanding my grand design."

Ruby dug her heels in obstinately. "Maybe that's true but my answer remains the same. No deal."

Belmordan growled, his eyes glinting threateningly in the moonlight. "You may not accept my reasoning but be warned. There is a price to pay for refusal."

Straightening her shoulders, Ruby held her chin high in stubborn defiance. "Then I will gladly pay it."

Belmordan glowered menacingly. "Are you really so certain?"

"I am," she said without hesitation. "You can have this town and this world over my cold, dead body."

At her side, Regina squeezed her hand in commiseration, a proud grin on her face. "Well said, my love. I'm with her."

"Me, too," Emma added, along with Zelena's, "Me as well," and Esperanza's, "I also stand with Ruby." The Dire Wolf packed added their own howls of assent.

For a moment, Belmordan stared at them all with unconcealed frustration. But he quickly mastered it, masking his features in a way that made Ruby's spine tingle with fear.

He heaved out of great sigh, then said, "While disappointing, your rejection was not unexpected. Thus my need for leverage."

Aghast, Ruby took one step forward, shouting, "You said you wouldn't hurt the children!"

A bone-chilling smile formed on Belmordan's lips that stopped Ruby in her tracks.

"Who said anything about the children?"
With a snap of his fingers Belmordan summoned his magic, and after a flash of lightning, an elder woman appeared beside him, bound and gagged. It was Granny.

Terrified, Ruby shouted and rushed forward, but was immediately struck by a burst of white hot magic that paralyzed her from head to toe. When Regina and Emma began summoning spells of their own to rescue Granny from the dark sorcerer, Belmordan slammed his staff into the ground, knocking them – along with Zelena, Esperanza, and the Dire Wolf pack – back into a pile of flailing limbs. Before they could twitch a muscle to regather themselves, a sphere much smaller than the one isolating the rest of the town appeared over them, isolating them from Ruby.

Stepping up to Ruby, Belmordan's eyes darkened and his visage grew thunderous. "I make my offer once more in the interest of preserving peace: submit or face the consequences."

Tears flooded Ruby's vision as she locked gazes with Granny, desperately caught between what were to her equally impossible choices. Not an ounce of fear was present in her grandmother as she shook her head and attempted to mouth her answer around the gag. Ruby could not tell what word exactly Granny was trying to say, but she didn't need to. Granny's eyes were resolutely urging Ruby to refuse giving in.

Ruby dared a glance back at Regina to find her wife hammering away at the sphere with her fists as Emma attempted to hack her way through with Excalibur. But their efforts produced no noticeable progress. They were trapped inside and Ruby was helpless. There was no choice in the matter. As much as she wanted to give in, the lives of too many people were at stake, for she believed Belmordan's choice was a false one he had no intention of honoring.

"No." She spoke with more conviction than she felt and was suitably proud of herself. "I won't serve you. I won't help you. I'd rather die."

"It may indeed come to that, but for now, your beloved Grandmother must suffice." With that, he extended his hand to magically yank Granny over to him, then plunged his hand directly into her chest to mercilessly rip out her heart. After pulling it free with a sickening squelch, he held the glowing red organ up to her face, his own eyes illuminating, but not in the amber tint common to werewolves that they'd turned back in the Enchanted Forest. No, this time his eyes turned the same menacing shade of crimson she'd seen in the hellbeasts.

Focused on Granny, his posture radiating an undeniable authority, he pronounced with surprising respect, "You are a brave and strong example of our race. For that, I will honor you with a swift death."

As Ruby shouted panicky pleas for him to stop, he turned his baleful eyes onto her. He held the heart up to her nose, effectively shutting her up. "As for you," he sneered, "this is the cost of your continued defiance. May it be a lesson to you that you shan't soon forget." And then he squeezed his fingers together, reducing Granny's heart into ash that he allowed to slip from his palm and fingers like so much sand.

Ruby watched in abject horror as her beloved grandmother slumped boneless to the ground. In her shock and dismay, it seemed to her as if her childhood began replaying in her mind, flooding her with memories of the woman who so selflessly taken her in, raised her, loved and protected her when she was helpless and abandoned.

She could see Granny in her favorite rocking chair in their cabin next to the fireplace, knitting the night away as Ruby slept at her feet under her favorite blanket Granny made for her. Once, she got helplessly lost in the woods that hours passed before Granny found her, so cold and scared that she couldn't move from her position tucked into the hollowed-out trunk of a fallen oak. Granny had
scooped her up like a baby and carried her all the way back to the cabin and then spent the night curled upon around her sobbing, trembling frame until she fell asleep. The next morning, she got read the riot act but was so happy to be back home with her Granny that she smiled all the way through an hour long sermon about the dangers of such a young girl wandering around alone in the woods.

And then there was the time they traveled five miles to visit her grandfather's grave. Ruby was just about fifteen at the time and had just started to look at Peter as something a bit different from the friend who didn't judge her for being a little weird. It would have been, she learned at the little pauper's cemetery, Granny's fortieth anniversary.

"Your Grandpappy and I didn't always like each other," Granny had said, looking old and tired for the first time in Ruby's eyes as she peered down at the simple stone marker bearing her husband's name. "In fact, I hated him at first. He took something from me that I couldn't forgive for a long time."

The admission had stunned Ruby to the core, and she'd been aching to know what her grandfather could have possibly done to make Granny feel that way but way too arrested by the sudden show of emotion from her stoic grandmother to interrupt. It was the most Granny had ever said about a man Ruby never got to know, and it was the most she ever heard afterward.

"Even after I learned to love him, we were different," Granny continued. "Sometimes too different. We fought like cats and dogs but somehow that just worked for us, made us love each other more because we could respect the strength of the others convictions. More than anything, that's what I loved about him. I was a young girl when I married, didn't much realize what I'd got into, and he could have used that to keep me under his heel. But he didn't. He treated me like an equal in a world that saw women as property. His family sneered down their noses at him for it, too. He didn't care, though, because he was strong and they followed along in his shadow. But me he kept always by his side.

"When he got sick and died, his family finally had a reason to disown me. I didn't much care for them so it wasn't anything to me, but what's more I had just lost a part of me that I knew I would never get back. Time proved that right. I kept on because of your mother. She was just a tyke then, barely able to walk, so I had to get on with the business of living to provide for her. But I never got over him. I've missed your Grandpappy every damn day since he left and will do until I'm reunited with him in the hereafter." Turning with a level gaze, eyes misty and grave, Granny then said something Ruby will never forget. "That's the thing about love, girl. You take it for granted while you have it and only appreciate it when it's gone. Just like people. I'd give almost anything for just one more minute with that man, just one more second, if only to tell him all the things I forgot to while he was alive. Those are the things that keep me awake at night. So when you find somebody to love, don't do it halfway. Don't hold back the words you know you need to say right now just because you figure you'll get around to it tomorrow. Tomorrow might not come. I say all of this because I love you, and I don't want you to make the same mistakes I did."

Idiot teenager that she was, Ruby nodded as though she understood, which to be fair she had in the heat of the moment. But within a day's time she had casually dismissed the proffered wisdom as symptoms of a regret she'd never allow herself to fall prey to. How tragically wrong she was.

Snapping herself from the throes of remembrance, grief and rage cascaded in a terrific whirlwind within her being. The wolf was clawing at her mind, demanding to be unleashed. And with her heart battering against her ribs as if attempting to shatter itself into a million tiny fragments, Ruby thrashed against the magic restraining her until she had nearly exhausted herself.
Helpless, hopeless, grief-stricken, in despair, and wholly unable to contain her emotions any more, she raised her head to the sky and screamed and screamed until her vision turned white and she lost herself to the haze of the vengeful frenzy of the wolf.
A Heart Undivided

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of Granny’s death.

For a split second after Belmordan ripped out Granny’s heart and crushed it, Regina was paralyzed by disbelief. The speed in which events had unfurled left her mind spinning and her gut swirling until vertigo set in, disrupting her balance. She swayed in place, knees close to buckling under mountains of grief which accompanied the shock of witnessing the casual murder of a woman she loved as if her own grandmother. Granny was dead and Regina could scarcely comprehend the reality of it, not to mention the potential ramifications on her family. Wild imaginings flashed through her brain of how the loss of so vital a member of their clan would affect each of them.

Henry would be devastated. He’d grown close to Granny since Ruby became his step-mother. The two often commiserated over baking recipes, which sort of annoyed Regina since Henry showed no interest in cooking until the Lucas matriarch took him under her wing. Beyond that, they shared a love of knitting that Regina simply could not wrap her brain around; nor could Emma for that matter, who was equally as perplexed their otherwise modernized son enjoyed such an old fashioned, and tedious, hobby. That both adored Ruby only enhanced the fondness that developed between individuals characterized by seemingly divergent personalities. There was really no question that this atrocity would hit Henry hard, but Regina took comfort that he was a grown man now and capable of weathering the aftermath on his own. This would not be the first time someone important died on him, nor would it be the last, and he knew that quite well.

The same couldn’t be said for his sisters, however. The girls were too young to understand the magnitude of their loss, though they would surely be distraught to learn they’d never see their Gran, who spoiled them absolutely rotten, ever again. The strict, no-nonsense woman who’d reared their Mama all but disappeared when “Granny’s Little Angels” were present. In her place was a doting, infinitely patient, sweet old lady who couldn’t be further from the razor-tongued spitfire Regina tended to encounter on a near-daily basis. Not that she minded the dichotomy when this new facet of Granny’s personality made her babies so unbearably happy. Ruby sure liked to complain, though, and most loudly when Granny wasn’t around so that Regina was left stuck in the middle without a way to resolve the mostly playful if not wholly understandable bitterness her wife harbored over Granny’s recently developed, lax disciplinary standards.

Speaking of Ruby, Regina was hesitant to even imagine how the coming days and weeks would play out. As much as Cora, faults aside, had meant to her, Granny meant twice as much to Ruby – three times, maybe four or five even; there was really no accurately estimating the difference in esteem in which they held their progenitors. Sometimes Ruby would wax poetical about her childhood, how Granny had worked herself ragged in multiple avenues of industry to provide shelter, clothing, and sustenance for a girl who did criminally little to earn such generous bounties. Often those evening strolls down memory lane were accompanied by tears. Since the girls were
born, Ruby had truly begun to appreciate her grandmother’s many selfless sacrifices in the name of motherly love.

Over the years since, the tender strains of affection that already existed between Ruby and Granny had deepened into an affection so profound that it roped Regina into it whether she’d wanted to be or not. That said, she wouldn’t have fought the inexorable draw when Ruby was so readily willing to share her impressively devoted Grandmother and so eager to include Regina in a relationship that she quite frankly had already envied before marrying Ruby. And now that bond had been violently severed, left to dangle mockingly like a noose yet to be tied and fitted around the stretched-out neck of their unusually tight-knit family.

Would this be the straw that broke them? That broke Ruby, in particular, and for good? Regina dared not even entertain such a possibility. Granny being cruelly slain right before her eyes was bad enough. She wasn’t at all confident in her ability to hold the family together should this latest in a line of losses crush Ruby beyond her ability to recover, and that was the scariest thing of all.

Regina was a woman well-acquainted with loss, and yet even she had not endured so much as Ruby. Or at least it was so according to her perspective. Sure, she’d loved her Daddy and her mother as well after a fashion, but not like Ruby had Granny. For pity’s sake, at least Regina had known her parents, unlike Ruby who only met her mother when she was barely twenty-one, and then to save Snow’s life was forced to kill the woman who’d given her life only turn right around and abandon her. And while Daniel had been the light of Regina’s life while he was alive, she’d not given her stable boy her virginity like Ruby had her blacksmith’s son. Then there was the fact that Daniel’s death, while at least partially Regina’s fault, had not been by her own hand. Despite putting her best face forward at all times, Ruby still wasn’t over having slaughtered then consumed her first love as the wolf.

Now, as if that were not enough, Ruby’s beloved Grandmother, the only constant in her life from infancy, was gone. The likelihood was frighteningly high that this catastrophe would either send Ruby spiraling into a deep depression, a rage from which there was no escape, or, as Daniel’s death had done to Regina, both. None of those outcomes were acceptable. What could she do, though, to prevent their occurrence? And how could she caution Ruby against becoming the monster she had as Queen without sounding like a damnable hypocrite? Better yet, how was she supposed to accomplish either of those things while her own heart was breaking?

Only the sound of Emma’s pounding against the magical shield with the pommel of Excalibur broke Regina’s awful contemplation, and she glanced over just as Emma began shouting obscenities at the vile beast who had just snuffed out such a vital part of every day life in Storybrooke. There was scarcely a soul in town who could not claim to have been touched by Granny’s generosity at least once in their lives.

Meanwhile Zelena stood on Regina’s other side. Paralyzed, her sister was holding a trembling hand
over her mouth as tears streamed down her flushed cheeks. Just behind Zelena was Esperanza, who sank to her knees and let out a mournful cry of dismay expressive of how deeply the Lucas matriarch had burrowed into her heart in so short of a time. Even the Dire Wolves seemed keenly distraught, baying out their sorrow for a kindred spirit they regarded in high esteem, not only for her indomitable strength but for her having given rise to the one they so reverently referred to as Great One.

Lest Regina herself begin to unravel as she did the day she’d slain Joshua Woods, she did not dare cast a glance to her rear where Charming and Snow and the rest of Storybrooke were trapped in separate spheres of magic. Seeing so much anguish on so many familiar faces would mean what happened was real, and she was not yet able to fathom a life in which there was no wisecracking smartass of a grandmother for her to consult whenever she required sage advice or nuggets of wisdom for some present distress.

Who was she to seek out now after a heated spat with Ruby? Who would provide the sensible voice or reason necessary to assuage her rage or fear? And with what culinary rival was she now supposed to share new recipes she’d discovered for the sole purpose of provoking a contest to see who could prepare them better? Granny had slid so effortlessly into the role of the fearfully respected yet unconditionally loved parental figure, one Regina had so long lacked in her life. And while they’d exchanged cross words many a time over the years, mostly over Ruby, Regina was confident that her affection was wholeheartedly returned.

After the way she’d lost her father and mother, Regina didn’t know how to withstand such a devastating blow to the foundations of her existence. But as much as her heart was rent and openly bleeding for the loss of an irreplaceable part of her life, her primary concern was Ruby. To Ruby, Granny was less of a grandmother and more of a mother. It was Granny, not Anita, who had changed Ruby’s diapers and lovingly treated every scrape, cut, and bruise resulting from the many adventures of a young daredevil who never came across a tree she couldn’t climb or a boy she couldn’t beat in a fight. Excepting the years on the run with Snow and the decade plus living with Regina, Ruby could hardly be found further than a hundred yards away from her overprotective grandmother.

Gaze flitting fretfully between her screaming wife and the fresh corpse of a woman whose loss was irreplaceable, Regina felt as if she were reliving that awful moment she’d rounded the corner in Joshua Woods’ basement. Only this time the death confronting her was permanent. There would be no resurrecting Granny as she had Ruby, and the repercussions of the matriarch’s death loomed heavily and darkly upon the horizon.

Over the link connecting Regina with her spouse via their shared hearts, she could feel Ruby’s all-consuming anguish crescendo towards a tidal wave of unstoppable force. Allowing the feelings to bleed through momentarily robbed her of the ability to form coherent thoughts – not that she would have been able to anyway due to her own grief being compounded by that of those around her.
Granny’s death was the end of rationality. Closing her eyes, Regina drowned out the background noise of Esperanza’s muted sobs, Emma’s continued and futile attempts to bludgeon, slice, or stab her way through the barrier, and of the heavy breathing of an increasingly infuriated Zelena. Instead she focused in on her heart, on the irregular beat she could trace back to Ruby’s frenzied thrashing against the magical bonds holding her in place. In a desperate attempt to will calmness through the connection of their shared heart, she immediately dropped the magic block she’d placed upon her half to prevent it from unduly influencing Ruby. The effort was for naught.

One of the consequences Regina discovered of their shared heart was that their moods affected one another. This seemed unique to them, as neither Charming nor Snow had mentioned such a phenomenon existing, and they had been linked far longer. Whatever the cause of the emotional osmosis, Regina had learned to appreciate the fringe benefits.

When Ruby was feeling especially upbeat, her exuberance would often filter through the invisible but very present pathway joining them, resulting in Regina suddenly being overcome by a surge of happiness that could not be dimmed even when surrounded by a sea of aggravation or sadness. This was one of the reasons she never mentioned the side-effects to Ruby. She had grown too dependent upon the magical umbilical, not only because it often helped to temper her many foul moods, but because it gave her unique insight into how Ruby was feeling that was not constrained by their lack of proximity. As of yet, there was no terrestrial distance over which she could not ascertain Ruby’s present emotional state. The only limit seemed to be their residing on different planets, as when Ruby was in the Enchanted Forest, she’d been unable to access their special spiritual channel. Risking that unforeseen benefit with unnecessary honesty was therefore extremely unwise from her point of view, even when sometimes it could be detrimental.

Before she’d learned to sever her own emotional state from the mystical bidirectional cords binding them, Regina had inadvertently influenced Ruby by inciting a blowup between Ruby and Emma. The two bosom buddies did not speak to one another outside of work related issues for a week thereafter. Later on, once fences were mended, Ruby confessed that she couldn’t make heads or tails as to why she snapped at Emma. According to her, she’d been hit by a wave of anger so overwhelming that she couldn’t rein it in. Before she knew it she was accusing Emma of handing out lenience to criminals in exchange for favors. Regina declined to mention that the whole incident just so happened to coincide with her having learned one of the low-level staffers at City Hall was embezzling from the City. The funds they’d pilfered were set aside to spearhead a new Department of Children’s Services – an idea born out of the plight of Christopher, the lost boy who was apprehended the day Regina and Ruby’s life was turned upside down. Regina was so irate she’d went Darth Vader on the sniveling little serpent and might have done real harm had Snow not intervened to calm her down. Adding up two plus two to get to four was not difficult in retrospect.

Regina spent the subsequent days researching a solution to the alarming new byproduct of heart-sharing. Eventually she pieced together a method of essentially damming her side of the flow of traffic. In her haste, she hadn’t considered the ramifications on her own ability to sense Ruby’s mood. At times after enacting the spell, it seemed like Ruby’s emotions would get stuck in a feedback loop that rose in intensity until it was unbearable only to then drop out altogether as if the link had been abruptly severed. The absence created the discomfiting sensation of gaping hole in her
chest directly where her half of what was once a whole heart resided. Thereafter, the only way she could get a steady feed from Ruby was when she determinedly filtered out all other stimuli so as to hone her focus to a sharp point.

But now Ruby was broadcasting a soul-sucking grief so concentrated that it blasted through their tether. The force of it brought Regina to her knees. It took every spare ounce of her willpower to not lose herself within the turbulent, unrelenting stream of sorrow pouring out of her wife. It seemed like minutes passed as she struggled to retain her hold on to her own conscious thought when mere seconds flitted by. The only reason Regina eventually escaped the almost gravitational pull exerted by Ruby’s rampaging emotions was that they suddenly snapped shut as if a valve being closed to halt the flow of water through a piping system.

“Are you okay? Regina? Regina!”

Emma’s distorted voice cut through the thick haze enveloping Regina’s mind, and she glanced up to see the Savior peering down at her worriedly.

“I’m fine,” Regina responded Emma’s second query, and then worked herself upright just in time for a screeching howl to pierce the air.

Before that moment, no sound had permeated the barrier Belmordan erected but now it rushed in unfiltered so that Regina was no longer restricted to mere visual observation. She’d been previously in the dark concerning Ruby’s interactions with the sorcerer threatening their home and family, which only added to her frustration at being hamstrung in the protection of her wife, a duty she considered sacrosanct. But that cry of anguished, maddened fury was so powerful that it somehow managed to penetrate the incredibly dense energy field holding her and her compatriots captive.

So awful was the sound that it sent chills corkscrewing down Regina’s spine. She did not require the confirmation of her eyes to know from whom it originated. Frightened beyond belief, she turned her attention to where Belmordan stood before Ruby. His visage was only mildly distorted by the barrier so that Regina could clearly make out the transcendent joy that was gallivanting all over his craggy features. But when she caught sight of her wife, who was in profile, her breath caught in her throat.

Shoulders hunched and drawn forward, arms curling into her body, Regina watched in appalled fascination as Ruby begin to transform. Only this was no ordinary shift from woman to wolf such as she’d witnessed more times than she could count over the years. That transition was smooth and painless after years of practice whereas this was stilted and agonizing judging from the way Ruby
groaned and screamed as her muscles shifted, swelling prominently with supernatural strength in concert with a less extreme rearranging of her skeleton. Fingers grew longer, limbs thicker, and her legs took on a canid appearance while maintaining a bipedal arrangement that seemed inherently unbalanced. Along with a bushy tail that sprouted from the base of her spine, a thin layer of downy dark black fur grew upon her skin as her brunette locks darkened into a deep silken ebony that shimmered in the moonlight. Although appearing to be some kind of hybrid between a wolf and a human, apparently the form adhered to the rules of sexual dimorphism, for Ruby was still recognizably feminine in the flaring of her hips, the dip of her lower spine, and her modest breasts, which were thankfully still covered by a tattered and much more snug shirt.

When the entire process was finished, Ruby straightened and tested her modified appendages. The bulging muscles beneath her skin flexed impressively with every movement. Head tilted down, she turned to the side as if sensing Regina’s eyes upon her, revealing an elongated snout at the tip of which sat a coal black nose. Two humongous fangs hung from beneath her canine lips that looked so sharp and sturdy as to be capable of sheering through steel. It was strange, but even with such lupine features, Ruby was still very much recognizable. And absolutely gorgeous.

Regina gasped aloud as she took in the feral beauty of her wife’s new form. From nearby she heard a shout of dismay from Emma, who seemed particularly aghast at what had happened to her best friend. Regina was sorely tempted to rail against the blonde’s apparent disgust out of a simple imperative to defend Ruby, but also because she had never seen any creature so magnificent as Ruby was at that moment.

After turning a bit more, Ruby caught Regina’s gaze, and to Regina’s immense surprise, eyes she’d believed would be glowing as they normally did under the power of the wolf were an all too human green. But what thrilled her even more was the full recognition in Ruby as to who and where she was. This was not some spell that Belmordan had bewitched Ruby with, but was some sort of advanced phase of her shape-shifting ability. Perhaps, Regina thought, it was the culmination of the wolf’s prodigious growth these last years since their magical pregnancies.

On instinct, Regina reached out to place her palm upon the barrier, beseeching Ruby with her eyes for a sign that her assumption was true, that this transformation was something totally under her control. She did not have to wait long for confirmation. Tears gathering in her eyes as if afraid Regina would loathe her new hybrid appearance, Ruby made as if to speak, her jaw working and lips curling to form words that if spoken were so tentative and silent that Regina could not hear. The attempt was enough.

Her own tears forming, Regina sought out their connection and poured every bit of love she had into it, wanting to assure Ruby that she was beautiful and perfect and still the only woman Regina wanted to spend her life with. Regina watched, transfixed, as Ruby clutched at her chest in wonderment. All self-revulsion and fear drained from her eyes at the onslaught of adoration Regina was projecting.
An almost magical moment passed between them where it felt like the universe melted away, and were it not for the magical barrier preventing her, Regina would have rushed to her wife to take her in up close and personal. She would have reveled in the feeling of Ruby’s fur between her fingers and relished rubbing her cheek against the soft-looking fur upon Ruby’s long, elegant snout.

But the moment was broken upon Belmordan issuing a shout of jubilation. The sound of his exultation arrested Ruby’s attention, and her entire frame snapped into an aggressive stance as her features morphed into what Regina could only describe as the most loathsome expression she’d ever witnessed from her typically mild-mannered spouse. So soon after Granny’s death and in a newly developed state of being, the thread of Ruby’s control over her inner beast was bound to be at a hair’s breadth. No doubt Belmordan’s taunting delight at the unexpected turn of events clipped that thread with a single stroke.

With a roar that shook that earth, Ruby coiled her body up and then unleashed her might, breaking Belmordan’s magical bonds in an instant. She sprung at him then, rows of viciously-tapered teeth bared and her eyes almost manic with unadulterated hatred.

Shouting her dismay, Regina could only watch as Belmordan deflected Ruby’s first swipe of wickedly long claws, then caught her wrist when she swung at him again.

“Yes!” he growled, eyes glowing red again and his own teeth elongating into a more lupine shape. “That’s it! Give in to the anger! Give in to instinct! Let it reign over you. Revel in the power that belongs to us, power that sets us above all others, that qualifies us to ascend into the highest plane of existence, unto Mount Olympus itself!”

In response, Ruby barked out, “There’ll be no ascension for you! I’ll send you to hell first.” And then she snapped her teeth at his face so swiftly that he barely evaded the bite.

The surprise of her attack was enough to unbalance Belmordan, and Ruby utilized the opportunity to wrench her wrist free. Without allowing him to recover, she curled her wolfen fingers in a fist which she then slammed into the dark sorcerer’s sternum. The anvil blow launched him backward thirty feet in the air after which he skidded along the asphalt another ten. As the enemy regathered himself, Ruby broke out into a run to the cheers of all within the barrier save Regina, who watched with her heart in her throat as Ruby closed in on Belmordan and at leapt at him just as he regained his footing.

Rolling neatly out of the way, he sprang to his feet as Ruby passed over, then struck her between the shoulder blades, using her momentum to send her careening away. She landed roughly upon her side and tumbled a good five feet before sliding to a stop.
As Ruby unsuccessfully attempted to raise herself up off the street, Belmordan underwent a transformation not at all unlike Ruby’s. Soon enough where the human sorcerer once stood was a hybrid creature even larger than Ruby whose fur was somehow darker and whose teeth were impossibly larger and whose eyes now glowed a disturbing bloody shade of red that sent a shiver running through Regina’s spine. Miraculously, his armor was wholly intact, as if enchanted to accommodate a shapeshifter; it was a neat trick that Regina noted to employ for Ruby’s clothing in the future should her current form of metamorphosing persist.

Just as Ruby scrambled to her feet, Belmordan lifted his snout toward the moon and bellowed out a howl that set Regina’s teeth on edge. As the call rang through the still night air, he turned eyes frenzied with bloodlust upon his prey, then sprang forward with a vicious growl. Ruby had only just recovered enough from her rough landing to evade the ensuing bite at her neck, and her unsteady platform caused her to nearly stumbled over the sidewalk. But owing to her enhanced lupine reflexes – which Regina assumed were even more heightened than usual – she quickly recovered to deflect an incoming swipe from Belmordan’s massive humanoid paw. Using his momentum against him, she sent him crashing into the brick siding belonging to Geppetto’s Standard Clocks. The impact displaced several bricks and crushed many others, leaving behind a werewolf shaped indentation.

Before Belmordan could even flinch a muscle, she was upon him, sending a fist flying toward him that buried deep into the brick edifice. The blow would have taken his head off had he not suddenly teleported away. Regina gasped aloud at the fact that he could use magic in his alternate form, as she had read shape-shifters could only use magic to restore them to their original form.

Barking out a curse of frustration, Ruby extracted her fist from the wall then twirled around to face Belmordan, who was already crouched in anticipation. A terribly long pause ensued during which they stared at one another, eyes locked, ears pinned back, lips curled to bare rows of razor sharp teeth. Their growls rumbled through the cold of the night, growing in volume with each passing second until Regina could see their frames trembling from the force of them.

Then Ruby’s eyes flashed and she darted toward Belmordan as he did at her, both accelerating in a heartbeat to speeds that seemed to defy the laws of physics. In the blink of eye, they collided, creating a shock wave that shattered glass up and down the street for two and half blocks. Amazingly enough, the collision did not send them flying in opposite in directions, as upon impact, they had gripped onto one another by the arms. As they exchanged bites at faces and shoulders and necks, they wrestled for leverage with which to overpower the other.

“C’mon, Ruby!” Emma screamed right next to Regina’s ear. Regina winced at the abuse to her eardrum. Rather than scold Emma for it, she joined in with the Savior and the rest of the occupants of the force field to encourage Ruby, who was holding her own despite conceding significant height and weight disadvantages to her male counterpart.

For a moment, it seemed like the cheering was working, as Ruby managed to muscle one of
Belmordan’s arms perpendicular to his body, and then started pushing them backward. Emma immediately recognized the maneuver and began screaming even more vehemently. But the leverage was short lived, for with a simple give of his arm and a twist of his wrist, Belmordan had Ruby lurching forward. He immediately whirled and wrapped a meaty arm around her neck as the other grasped one of her wrists and pulled it painfully behind her back, just as she had been planning on doing to him.

Gagging at the pressure of his hold, Ruby lashed out with her free elbow and kicked with her heels, trying to work herself free. But Belmordan was far too strong and far too sturdy and seemed to feel no pain as his shins and rib cage were brutalized by blows that would have fragmented human bones beyond any hope of repair. Just as it seemed Ruby might pass out from lack of oxygen, she planted her feet firmly and bent her knees, then sprung upward. As gravity pulled her back down, she bowed her spine, dipped her back, grasped at the back of his head, and then used the generated momentum to heft his enormous body over her own. Upon being launched, Belmordan released his hold on Ruby out of instinct to brace himself against the fall, just barely extending his arms out so that he didn’t land face first on the pavement.

Knowing Ruby was winded, Regina began chanting under her breath for her wife to hurry the hell up and avail herself of the favorable situation. As if hearing the barely mumbled words, Ruby shook her head to clear her thoughts, then rushed Belmordan, leaping into the air and bringing her knee down at his head. Sadly, just before she made contact he rolled to the side so that her knee buried into the paved street rather than his skull.

In seconds, both were vertical once more. A vicious flurry of attacks ensued. Twice Ruby landed hits to Belmordan, once upon his chest, clawing huge lines in his armor but otherwise missing anything of substance. The other strike, however, found purchase when he raised his arm to block a blow and she was able to abruptly latch her teeth onto it, sinking them through his armor and into his flesh. For the first time Belmordan showed a sign of being vulnerable. He shouted in pain before recovering to pry Ruby’s jaws off of his arm. After freeing his arm, he surged forward with his elbow, knocking her back, then immediately followed up with a savage swipe that Ruby could not move fast enough to avoid. Regina cried out as his claws raked down the length of Ruby’s snout from just below her left eye to her nose.

Blood pouring from her face and in a daze from the blow, she was unable to avoid a fist barreling into her chest. She went sprawling ten feet down the corpse littered street and upon landing in a heap, went dreadfully still.

Chest heaving from exertion, Belmordan raised his eyes to the moon and gave a great cry of victory in a foreign tongue that Regina could not decipher. He then lifted his hands to the heavens, and she physically jolted upon watching a bolt of bluish lightning streak downward from the sky, where it forked into two bolts that entered his still-raised hands. As if harnessing the awesome power of nature, in one fluid movement, he turned, extended his arms toward Ruby, who was still struggling to work herself fully upright, and shot a white stream of arcing electricity at her. Half-hunched over, the bolt of lightning struck her shoulder. The massive surge of energy seized her limbs so that she
remained upright but was otherwise helpless to move.

“Ruby!” Regina screamed, then slammed her fists against the magical barrier as Belmordan continued to pour the stream of electricity into Ruby’s paralyzed yet quaking frame. “Stop it!” she cried in a hysterical tone. “Stop it you bastard! You’re killing her! You’re killing her!”

Mercifully, after one final plea, Belmordan quenched the flow of lightning from his hands. Ruby slumped to the ground as if boneless. Tremors wracked her body as tendrils of wispy smoke wafted off of her singed fur. After giving a satisfied grunt, Belmordan lumbered over to his fallen foe, reached down to grasp her by the collar of her mostly intact shirt, then proceeded to drag her limp body back over to the barrier. Once within arm’s reach, he released Ruby’s collar so that her upper torso flopped back uselessly to the ground. The left side of her furry face was stained red with blood.

Terrified out of her wits, Regina frantically searched for any sign of life in her comatose spouse and was relieved to see that Ruby was still conscious, but just barely. Though her lids were fluttering rapidly and her pupils were unfocused, at least her eyes were open.

Forgetting Ruby for a brief second, Belmordan glowered imperiously in Regina’s direction. “Now you see the futility of resistance. There is no hope of defeating me,” he said, and his voice, already gravelly, was even more thunderous and bass. “Surrender now. Cease this pointless insanity. No more blood need be shed.”

Before Regina could respond, he then turned back to Ruby and wrenched her upright by her arms. Eyes rolling and unfocused, she grunted when he shook her, an action to which Regina voiced her displeasure that went ignored. But she quickly regained a measure of focus after he repeated the rough thrashing twice more.

“Do you hear me, girl?” he posed.

When he received only a groan as an answer, he tightened his hold on Ruby’s arms so that his claws dug into her skin. A thin line of blood trickled into her fur that set Regina’s own blood to boiling. She said nothing, though, as she was afraid of what Belmordan might do in retaliation if she were to further provoke him. She did protest, though, when he released one of Ruby’s arms and slapped her viciously, snapping her head to the side with force that would have cleanly severed a human spine.

Belmordan cut hateful eyes over at Regina as Ruby’s head hung loosely, further dazed by the incredible blow. As if privy to her thoughts, he said, “If you know what’s best for her, you’ll keep your trap shut.” He then returned his attention to Ruby, who was suddenly alert and stock still, eyes flitting nervously between Belmordan and Regina. “Good,” he commented on her being able to
respond to him. “Twice I have extended a gracious offer to you only to be rudely rebuffed. Now that you know that your fight against me is fruitless, I feel generously inclined to make it once more. But first, a change of venue.”

Without releasing Ruby, the imposing sorcerer raised a hand into the air and twirled his wrist. A roiling cloud of inky magic began sprawling through the area until it enveloped everything around him, including the shield encasing Regina, Zelena, Emma, Esperanza, and the Dires. When the mist finally dissipated some minute or so later, they were no longer in the Town Square but dead in the middle of Maleficent’s cave. Even more strangely, only Regina and Emma remained trapped within the spherical shield.

Off-kilter from the discourteous relocation, Regina stumbled in place, only just managing to throw her hands out against the shield to remain vertical. Her mind was buzzing with questions to which she had no answers. Why had Belmordan chosen this location, the former sarcophagus of Regina’s oldest friend, for the final confrontation? How did he even know it was there when as far as Regina was aware only a handful of individuals were privy to its existence? But then her brain made a surprising connection between the centrality of the cave within Storybrooke and Belmordan’s adamant insistence that Ruby supply a droplet of blood with which to free Artemis. It all made sense now.

Having been raised by a powermonger, Regina was a student of history. Applying its many valuable lessons had enabled her to consolidate and exercise dominion over a vast, scattered populace that largely disapproved of her methods. During her lengthy studies, she’d read extensively concerning beings of transcendent stature, such as the Olympians, who were said to inhabit a world steeped in magicks she couldn’t begin to comprehend. Of course, most such histories were conjecture at best since Olympus was unreachable from the Enchanted Forest, but the authors she frequented were well renowned for the painstaking nature of their research. In every such tome, the Olympians were said to be immortal beings of immense innate energies, able to bend magic to their every whim. In ancient times, they had mastered the highly volatile and incredibly dangerous art of spirit magic – a discipline a rare few grandmaster magicians dared even dip their toes into. So awesome were they that projections of their spirit forms into other worlds were capable of feats commanding worship, such as on Earth.

Most of the Earthly mythologies she’d poured through during her many hours of downtime during the 28 years of the Curse were not so much mythology as misunderstood truths. Like the fairy tales collected by the Grimm Brothers, Hans Christian Andersen, and others, the Greeks – and subsequently the Romans – were visited by these projections of very real Olympians, and awed by their displays of power, began to revere them as gods. Zeus was not a fable. He was real – as were real as his siblings and his children. Artemis, Ruby’s apparent ancestress, was one such offspring of the God of the Sky and of Thunder.

Since Artemis was for all intents and purposes a goddess in her own right, and of more power than any being on earth or the Enchanted Forest, it stood to reason that her prison would require enormous amounts of energy. In fact, Regina could only surmise that the holding cell would have to
have been constructed directly upon a central ley line. If this was true, that meant that Maleficent’s
cave resided on said ley line as well, and that would account for a long unsolved mystery that Regina
had never been able to figure out: namely, why her Cursed town of Storybrooke was created upon
this very spot within the state of Maine. The magic of the Dark Curse had, she now believed, been
attracted to Artemis’ prison, which lay upon an immensely powerful ley line deep below the surface.

“Don’t d-do this.”

Ruby’s strained voice sliced through Regina’s thoughts, drawing her back to the presently perilous
situation. She noticed that both Ruby and Belmordan were now human once more, though the dark
sorcerer was a menacing tower of a man who stood in stark contrast to Ruby’s bedraggled hair,
tattered clothing, and crimson-oozing cheek.

“It’s already done,” Belmordan replied curtly. “At this moment, the bulk of my army will begin to
descend upon what remains of your pitiful defenses. Left even more vulnerable by the absence of
this realm’s most powerful denizens, they will fall in short order. Guns, swords, bows and arrows
will not help them repel my thousands of troops. And now my beloved shall be freed. My victory is
all but assured.”

Regina’s stomach plummeted at his first pronouncement, fearing both for her children and her friends
above. She heard her companions react with almost as much horror as they considered their own
families. If what Belmordan had said was true, not only would the defenders of Storybrooke be
wiped out to the last defender, but the town would then be all be obliterated.

“It’s not o-over yet,” Ruby bravely countered, straining against Belmordan’s iron grip on her arms.

His lips curled into a mocking grin. “Oh, but it is.” And then without warning, he released his hold
on Ruby and snapped his fingers, binding her with cords of angry red magic.

Assuming the worst, Regina threw a host of colorful curses in the direction of the invader, hoping to
steal his attention away from her disabled wife. The gambit worked. Belmordan burst out into
amused laughter as he whirled on her.

“Such spirit,” he commented, still chuckling darkly. “Do you believe I intend to harm her? Rest
assured, I have no such need. She will see sense soon enough once her foremother has been
released,”
“Then why restrain her?” Regina asked as she felt Emma step up protectively at her right side.

Belmordan’s expression turned nauseatingly ominous. “You are about to find out.” He then held up his hand and spoke a guttural word that rumbled the ground beneath his feet.

Regina did not have time to brace herself before she was forcibly ripped out of the barrier by magic beyond the pale of any she’d ever experienced. Shouts of rage from Emma reached her ears along with Ruby’s almost plaintive cries for mercy. Magic tangled around her like a network of vines from shoulder to ankle, restricting all movement as it also kept her hovering a foot in the air between Belmoran and Ruby’s respective positions.

Hand still extended toward Regina, he glanced back at Ruby, eyes hardened into intractable black orbs. “Give in. Pledge your loyalty to me now or watch your beloved suffer the same fate as your grandmother.”

Tears streaming down her cheeks, Ruby began thrashing against the magical ropes holding her in place. “Please! Don’t hurt her. P-please! I’ll do anything!”

“No!” Regina shouted in response to what she was sure to be an expression of surrender from Ruby. Tremendous effort was required to give voice to her words, and due to the almost suffocating pressure of the magic squeezing her rib cage her shout more resembled a wheezed grunt. “Don’t...give up! Not for me.”

“I have to!” Ruby wailed, sounding more broken than she had after her nightmare post-rescue from her harrowing experience in Joshua Woods’ basement. “I can’t l-lose you! I’d rather die!”

“Don’t...you...dare, Ruby Lucas!” Regina resorted to using Ruby’s maiden name to sway her headstrong werewolf. “Keep fighting! If not for me, then for our children!”

“While this is all very sweet,” Belmordan interjected sardonically, “my patience has come to an end. Your answer, child. Now!”

A strangled moan escaped Ruby’s lips as her green eyes found Regina’s, panic and angst so clear in them as to be palpable. It took nearly all of Regina’s willpower not to break down at the sight of her proud partner so beaten down and hopeless, as if all the fight had been sapped right out of her. But Regina could not allow Ruby to give in, no matter what the cost. If that meant surrendering her own life, so be it. There was nothing she wouldn’t do to prevent her family from falling into the hands of
a maniac capable of such pointless, wanton destruction, all in the name of love. And even though Regina knew that was hypocritical of her since she’d lost her own mind for the exact same reason, she had the benefit of people who loved her to help her recognize how grossly in error she’d been.

Holding Ruby’s gaze, she poured her energy through their bond to bolster her wife’s spirit. Doing this nearly exhausted all of her strength, but it was worth it when she saw Ruby’s confidence begin to wax stronger by the second.

Shoulders straightening, chin lifting, eyes shining with resistance, Ruby spoke her final answer while holding Regina’s gaze, seeming to somehow know that it was Regina supplying her with the confidence and reassurance to do so.

“I refuse.”

Belmordan growled out his displeasure. “Then you will watch your mate die!” he proclaimed, then in one fluid motion yanked Regina over to him and tore out her heart.

When his hand withdrew from her chest, a collective gasp went out from everyone in the cave, Belmordan included, who seemed especially perplexed to find half of a heart in his hand rather than a whole one.

“Regina? Wha...? Wh-where is the rest of your heart?”

Ruby’s softly spoken wonderment arrested Regina’s attention, and she both felt and saw her wife’s reasonable confusion. She knew what the unspoken question was, as it was one she’d driven herself sick with anxiety over for years.

“Please don’t be upset,” she pleaded, needing Ruby to understand why she’d made the decision to stay silent regarding their extra layer of union. “I didn’t tell you because I need for you to stay the free spirited, selfless woman I fell in love with. Knowing that we share a heart would’ve changed the way you lived your life. I couldn’t allow that to happen.”

“Perhaps you should have,” Belmordan growled before Ruby could respond, now straining with anger at the unforeseen turn of events. “Your selfishness means that now she must die along with you. No matter, I will raise her daughters up in her place.”
Hysteria rapidly began to cloud Regina’s mind at the idea of her children being brainwashed by Belmordan and then raised in his image to become monsters of little to no conscience. But it was quickly subverted by an unbearable pain shooting through her chest. Eyes bulging, she laser ed in on Belmordan’s hand that was applying terrific pressure to her excised heart. The harder the pressure the more agonizing the pain became. On and on he squeezed, unrelenting as the pain became unbearable. When at last Regina’s vision began to dot with specks of black, she heard Ruby’s own screeches of agony echo out through the cavern, and realized then that Belmordan was truly prepared to kill them both.

But then another cry rang out as the pain reached the threshold of surpassing both consciousness and sanity, only this one was deep, rumbling, and fueled by rage rather than suffering. A moment later, the pain disappeared completely.

Vision blurry, Regina stared at Belmordan as he studied the still-beating half of her heart in his hand. His visage darkened with confusion. “What kind of magic is this?”

Regina was stricken with awe upon realizing what had happened. Even as powerful as he was, he had been unable to destroy her heart because the greatest magic of all protected it.

Smiling through the pain of his hand clamped tightly around the vibrantly gleaming half of her heart, she replied, “True Love.”

Features twisted in maniacal fury, Belmordan sneered, “No matter. If I cannot kill you this way, another must suffice.”

Drawing his hand back, he began to gather magic into his palm, but just as he was about to unleash it, Ruby gasped and clutched at her chest. A shudder passed down the length of her frame. It was, Regina thought, as if Ruby’s body was no longer under her control. Her head lolled backward, eyes unfocused and fixed on the ceiling of the cavern, and after her arm raised parallel to ground, she pointed her index finger toward the wall of the cavern. A burst of white magic then erupted from her chest that engulfed her, and it cleanly cut through the magical cords binding her; they instantly dissipated into so much dust. Regina felt the hold on her slip as well, which sent her tumbling to the cavern floor. She scrambled to her knees just in time to watch the magic overtaking Ruby gather into the tip of her finger where it extracted a single droplet of blood, staining the condensed aura a lush crimson color.

In a trance like state, Ruby began to chant in a foreign tongue. “Ἀπό το αἷμα στο αἷμα, δοξάσον τον Θεό από τη φυλάκη της.”
Although Regina could recognize the words as Greek, she was not fluent enough in the language to translate on the fly beyond recognizing the words for blood, Zeus, and prison. Of course, she couldn’t really be bothered with figuring out what her wife was saying when with each successive repetition of the litany, the magic sparkling at the tip of Ruby’s finger grew in intensity until it was casting a brilliant red light over the entire cavern. After the seventh succession, Ruby’s whole body convulsed and she moaned as if in pain. And then the ball of magic at her fingertip suddenly cracked like a gunshot and surged forth in a thin line toward the opposing wall.

As the magic mingled with blood leaving Ruby’s body spread over the cavern wall, the luminous outline of an intricately decorated door became visible. It reminded Regina of the scene at the Gates of Moria from one of Henry’s favorite movies, “The Fellowship of the Ring.” Runes were written atop the design of a language Regina did not recognize, but she got the feeling they were issuing a warning against ever opening it.

A second later, the flow of magic from Ruby abruptly ceased. She slumped to the ground, spent and motionless. A moment of silence passed during which Regina’s heart stopped with fear that Ruby might be dead. She knew that to be untrue, though, because her own heart was still beating. Only when Ruby’s chest began to rise and fall did Regina relax enough to rush over to her wife’s side.

She had just fallen to her knees and gathered her unconscious spouse into her lap when a deep groaning echoed through the cavern. The walls began to tremble and crack. Bits of rock and dust were shaken loose in the turmoil, falling in bits to litter the stony floor with a layer of motes and pebbles. As the groaning and quaking of the cavern continued unabated, all conscious thought for Regina was eclipsed by an imperative to protect her helpless wife from harm. Utilizing her own body to shield Ruby from the debris as best she could, she summoned her reserves of magic to conjure a force field just large enough to surround the two of them. The spell took shape in the nick of time to deflect a series of large chunks of rock which otherwise would have done significant damage.

Untold minutes went by as the cavern was rocked by the ancient magic maintaining the prison being undone. When it was over, only a cloud of dust remained that obscured all vision along with an eerie quiet that made the tiny hairs on Regina’s arm stand on end. When visibility was restored, she gasped aloud at what she saw.

The area that once glowed with outline of the door was gone, having been thrown open by Ruby’s blood unsealing the prison. Only darkness remained. Light footsteps sounded through the cavern, tentative at first, then steadily growing loud enough to distinguish the padding of bare feet against stone. Regina did not have to look around to know that all eyes were upon the opened door as a trim, statuesque woman emerged from the inky shadows.

Dressed in a chiton of deepest purple fringed with ornately threaded gold, the woman’s brunette curls – of startling similarity to Ruby’s manner of styling back in the Enchanted Forest – cascaded down her shoulders. Upon her crown rested a delicate but extraordinary tiara of woven golden leaves. A
fine leather quiver was swung over her shoulders, while an intricately crafted double curved bow was held in her left hand, whose wrist was cuffed by an archer’s bracer. As she moved, her bronze skin seemed to glimmer with an artificial light that was being projected from within. This, Regina knew, was the goddess from whom Ruby was directly descended, a deified figure renowned for her deadliness in the hunt as much as for her protection of purity and innocence – though the latter seemed absurd considering her poor choice in mate.

After nearly a thousand years of torturous imprisonment, Artemis was free at last.
Ruby encounters Diana for the second time and learns something shocking about her past - and Regina's.

Upon regaining some semblance of consciousness, Ruby found herself floating upon a fluffy cloud of serenity as if she weighed nothing. Her every care drifted away alongside her as she was ferried down a surreal river whose crystalline waters were smooth as glass, the only disturbances the rippling of the water around her airy vessel. Although this effervescent plane of existence was lovely and peaceful, she got the distinct impression it was unnatural, which sparked a niggling sensation of familiarity that began prickling at the back of her mind. Unfortunately, she could not make much sense of it as hazy as her brain was at present. It was difficult to make connections with gray matter comprised solely of mush.

For a moment, Ruby struggled to gather her thoughts in an effort to remember what had happened to land her in her current predicament. Only scattered fragments came to her of a cavern wherein she had been locked in a brutal contest with an evil man who inexplicably wanted to hurt her. Regina's worried face also appeared along within her vague recollections – she'd been protectively hovering over Ruby as the cavern shook in an almost cataclysmic manner. Try as Ruby might, though, she could not formulate any kind of comprehensive picture of the preceding events.

Any further attempts at recollection were halted as the gentle river carrying her aimlessly into the ether took an abrupt turn. Immediately beyond the bend came a precipitous drop into an expansive abyss. Before she could even brace herself against the fall, she was diving headlong into the darkness. Startled, she shrieked with embarrassing volume as she tumbled into the darkness, and so acute was the rapidity of her descent that her stomach hurled into her throat. Down and down she plummeted into what appeared to be an endless stream of thick, black nothingness. That the cloud upon which she was resting somehow stayed in place beneath her was both confounding and an unexpected relief. At least she had something to cling to, however ethereal that something was.

The hair-raising journey continued for interminably long minutes, but just as panic started to gain a foothold, Ruby detected a pinprick of light that grew with terrifying haste. Again unable to adequately brace herself, she was all too soon engulfed by a brilliant light whose intensity nearly blinded her. All reality faded away as she felt herself pass through some sort of threshold, which was announced by a whooshing sound followed by an ear piercing whine that had her clamping hands over her ears as her eyes reflexively snapped shut. An instant later it was all over.

After a heartbeat of total stillness, she heard the gentle lapping of waves behind her, and found to her amazement that the ground was now solid – well, solid as sand can be. Anxious and uncertain, Ruby cracked open her eyes only for them to be abused a second time by sunlight so radiant that it bathed everything around her in a luminescent shade of gold.

After her eyes adjusted, she carefully stood and then gave herself a cursory check over. She was shocked to find herself dressed in a simple white chiton, cinched just below her breasts with a golden cord. Spiral bangles fashioned as if a vine, in the center of which was fastened a pale pearl shaped in a crescent, wrapped around her upper arms and her feet were shod with surprisingly comfy sandals.
that laced up well past her ankles. More than a little confused, she raised her hands to feel at her hair, finding it curled and braided much more intricately than she typically preferred. Atop her crown rested some sort of dainty, wiry diadem – vine-like, she assumed, to match the bangles on her arm.

Eyes wide and frightened at being in such a strange place with such an ancient if not unusual style of dress, Ruby cast her eyes out over her surroundings. The island upon which she had landed simply took her breath away. Although she could not recognize where she was, she was so in awe that she could do little else but soak in the glorious, almost otherworldly scene before her. A white sandy beach stretched out as far as she could see. Shimmering turquoise water gently lapped in-land at low tide. Not far in the distance, a rocky jetty jutted out into the calm sea, beyond which lay a pristine, idyllic harbor where ships of various sizes were at anchor. Biremes and triremes of impressive displacements towered over fishing vessels of various shapes and sizes.

Inland of the beach running parallel to the harbor ran a chain of rugged mountains that formed a rocky spine hedged in by sparse carpeted ribs of pine trees with a smattering of olives, pomegranates, and laurels. Upon the top of the highest peak, nestled between the beach and a small agrarian village, sat an extraordinary temple complex. So enormous was the temple that Ruby could see details she otherwise couldn’t have from her position at least a mile away. Built of gleaming limestone and smooth marble, it was comprised of giant carved pillars that ringed the entirety of the structure. With her keen werewolf eyesight she could make out a stunning frieze that stretched along the face of a roof decked with solid gold which displayed scenes of men and women embroiled in phalanx warfare flanked by charioteers and their horses in full gallop. There were even representations etched into the frieze of philosophers, scrolls in hand, locked in fierce debates and depictions of what appeared to be some sort of gifting ceremony. Upon the marvelous tympanum was carved a pantheon of heroic figures in various poses, some stern, some inviting, but all impressively authoritarian in posture and expression.

If she didn't know better, Ruby would have thought herself in Greece due to the architecture alone. The idea was absurd, though, as one did not arrive in Greece upon celestial rivers via boats comprised solely of fluffy clouds. Aside from that, there was a sort of mystical aura to the entire area that had her contemplating whether she was actually dead and this was where werewolves went in the afterlife. But that also made no sense. Werewolves abhorred the ocean in general, though Ruby herself loved it. Come to think of it, there were a lot of standards concerning werewolves to which she was an exception.

"You are very much alive if that is what you are wondering."

The alluring female voice from behind her startled Ruby so badly that she nearly leapt out of her skin. She twirled in place, hand over her heart, to find a tall, bronze-skinned woman of regal bearing standing before her dressed much the same as she was. Only the woman's chiton was more elaborately embroidered and arranged within the chestnut hair above her forehead was a much more exquisite diadem adorned with a crescent moon crafted of a translucent stone that glowed with an internal light. The woman's face, long and elegant with sharp features, was one Ruby only ever saw in her dreams – it was the same one that belonged to her mother.

A key suddenly slid into place and a lock disengaged, releasing a flood of memories that came rushing back. This was not her first visit to such a place. The circumstances were different as was the veneer of her surroundings, but even though she remained hazy on events that had precipitated her journey, she could clearly recall encountering this woman before.

Warm affection suffusing her being, Ruby felt her eyes tear up at being reunited with someone she thought she'd never see again. "Diana?"
"Yes, child. It is I," Diana answered her with an equally effected smile.

Upon hearing the confirmation of Diana's identity, Ruby cried out, then launched herself into Diana's welcoming embrace. "Oh my God," she gushed as she squeezed her ancient relative. "I didn't think I'd ever see you again!" Pulling back, she sought out Diana's eyes. "Where have you been? Why am I here? What the hell is going on?!"

Diana chuckled at the onslaught as she affectionately rubbed Ruby's shoulders. "Allow me to answer your questions in turn," she said. "Firstly, the last time we met, I told you that you would see me again. I'm only sorry that it's been so long. As for where I've been, look around you. This is a similitude of Olympus – my home. This construct is a reflection of reality, and it is where I have journeyed daily to watch you grow and flourish and become the woman I always believed you would be. One I am proud to recognize as the blood of my blood and flesh of my flesh. As for why I brought you here, my sister has been released from her prison, and she is bitter and angry. I believe that together, we can reach her, that we can appeal to the goodness I know remains within her heart, deeply buried as it may be."

Ruby frowned slightly. She remembered Diana's story of her twin sister Artemis, Ruby's maternal ancestress, and of how Artemis had fallen in love with a mortal and then succumbed to the temptations of power.

"How are we supposed to do that when my body is an entirely different world?" Ruby posed, now remembering how the spirit world worked in Avalon.

Diana lingered briefly without response, as if engaging in some internal debate with herself. "There is a process involving spirit magic I can use," she said a moment later, clearly troubled. "It is dangerous, but it would allow my spirit to temporarily inhabit your body so I could converse with Artemis directly. It is, I think, the best chance of reaching her."

Ruby's brows shot up in disbelief. "So you want to possess me?"

Diana bit at her lip apologetically before answering, "In a manner of speaking."

After crossing her arms over her chest, Ruby gestured toward the woman she had so quickly come to love. For the first time she felt apprehension in Diana's naturally soothing aura.

"Just how dangerous is this process?"

A wince worked across Diana's features that told Ruby it was very much dangerous, an assumption confirmed by Diana's response.

"I will not lie," the goddess said. "The spell will kill us both should it go awry. But I have been a practitioner of spirit magic for thousands of years, and thus am confident in my ability to successfully navigate us both through it. I would not have suggested it otherwise, nor would I whimsically risk your life. You mean more to me than that."

To Ruby, the concept of putting her life on the line in such a seemingly pointless gambit was absurd. She was not ignorant of the reality that Artemis was almost certain to fall in on Belmordan's side, however much she wished it were otherwise. Yet for whatever reason, she trusted Diana with a level of implicitness only eclipsed by that which she reserved for Regina alone. So when Diana expressed assurance that she could pull off the spell, Ruby was inclined to believe her. She just hoped that trust paid off, else Regina would resurrect her from the dead just to kill her all over again.

"Alright, then. Tell me what you need me to do," Ruby said with an accompanying sigh. A smile
began working its way over her lips as she watched Diana beam as if being given her trust was a rare and precious commodity.

Diana clutched excitedly at Ruby's hands. "Oh, thank you, my child! First, I'll need for you to..." She trailed off, eyes bugging out.

Before the process could be further explained, a deafening clap of thunder sounded, shaking the foundations of the earth beneath their feet. An enormous bolt of lightning then streaked down from the sky, and when it impacted the beach only fifteen yards away, it exploded, sending showers of glassified sand in every direction. Left in the center of the small crater formed by the impact was a man who was crouched with both fists and one knee pressed into the ground.

Ruby watched in dumbstruck awe as the newcomer stood and approached. Dressed in a gleaming white toga that left his bronzed and muscular chest and arms bared, his waist was also cinched by a cord of gold that seemed to be standard fare from Ruby's limited experience of Olympians. Golden bracers were fastened around wrists the size of human ankles and in his powerful hand was a luminous staff half his height that looked to be crafted of living lightning. His neatly cropped hair was white as pure driven snow, as was his thick but carefully groomed beard. Meanwhile, the face of the intruder was severe but handsome, characterized by deeply chiseled features including a strong jaw, patrician nose, and full lips set in a harsh line. Large eyes looked out from beneath white brows, one of which was a brilliant blue. But the other eye was what arrested Ruby's attention, for it arced with electricity in perfect synchronization with his staff and was bisected by a scar shaped like a bolt of lightning that spanned from the middle of his forehead all the way down to the jaw line.

Unable to speak for being so thoroughly intimidated, Ruby merely gaped at the man until his long strides brought him next to where she stood with Diana. Up so close, she noted that he towered over them both.

As Ruby stood paralyzed, Diana peered up at him with both confusion and a kernel of fearful respect plainly visible in her wide eyes. "Father?"

"Daughter," the man greeted, his bass voice resonant like rolling thunder.

"Why have you come?" Diana inquired circumspectly.

"Because there are certain things our guest must know before she returns to her physical form," said the man. "Things that even you are not aware of."

"I don't understand, father. What information could there possibly be I am unaware of? I have devoted my life to watching over my sister's line."

"A duty which you have performed most admirably. There are, however, truths I have kept from you because I knew they would incite you to intervene. Fate has determined the path that lead to this day, and it was not to be altered." After that, he turned to Ruby. "Forgive the dramatic entrance, my child. Haste, however, was necessary. I am Zeus, ruler of this realm, father among other blessed children of Diana and Artemis, the latter from whom you originate."

"Hi," Ruby replied meekly, worrying her hands together nervously. "I'm R-Ruby. Ruby Mills. Nice to m-m-meet you."

Zeus chuckled affectionately at her. "No need to fear, little one. My daughter is not the only member of our family who has grown fond of you. I, too, have observed you from afar. Through various means at my disposal, I witnessed your every defeat and triumph. I watched with pride as your tribulations forged you into a hero whose most notable attribute is your selflessness. But your greatest
accomplishment in my eyes was to so love a woman who believed herself unlovable as to inspire the True Love you share to create life. You are, indeed, Eleni reborn."

The last statement shocked Diana so much that she visibly jolted and her brows arched with both confusion and wonderment. "Eleni reborn? Whatever does that mean?"

Zeus smiled at his daughter, or so Ruby thought, with the loving gentility of father who lived to dote upon his children. The expression smoothed out his ruggedly stern features until they became even more handsome than they already were – almost inhumanly so. Seeing him so fatherly and tender helped her to relax for the first time since she'd realized she was in the presence of an honest-to-goodness god.

"As both of you are aware, love is the greatest power in the universe," Zeus then said, addressing both Ruby and Diana. His rich, sonorous voice flowed like sweet nectar as he talked, and Ruby couldn't help but wish she could sit at his feet and listen to him tell stories for hours or days at a time.

He continued, "There are those whose love is so transcendent, however, that it is deathless and timeless. These elect couples experience life through cycles in a process not at all alien to the Earthly concept of reincarnation. Each time they are born, they struggle through life until they find one another, and with each progressive manifestation, their love and devotion deepens and strengthens until the two have become so synchronized with, so unconditionally accepting of, and so intertwined with one another as to have reached the ultimate state of being, a flawless manifestation of their True Love.

"In this life, our kinswoman," he gestured toward Ruby, "has reached that state along with her Queen Regina. But in the life before, they bore different names. Names you, my daughter, know well. For it was by your very own hands that one of them was delivered into the world."

Diana gasped aloud, and when Ruby looked over, she saw tears welling within Diana's eyes. In an almost awed disbelief, the Olympian goddess whispered, "You mean…?"

"I do," Zeus confirmed, gladness present in his features that told Ruby this news was good instead of something to be concerned about. She'd followed what he was saying well enough, or so she thought, but she was still more confused than anything else. Or at least she was until Zeus proceeded to literally trash her entire worldview with his next sentence. "Before they were Ruby and Regina," he went on, "they were Eleni and Elaine."

Ruby's eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets at what Zeus was suggesting. "I don't mean to be rude, but who are Eleni and Elaine?" she asked, needing to have her suspicions confirmed before she freaked the hell out. She hadn't forgotten her strange dreams of being someone else. "Sounds like you're saying that one of them is me, but I hate to tell ya, as far as I remember I've only ever been plain old boring Ruby."

Zeus only peered at her with ancient, discerning eyes that seemed as if they burrowed into her very soul. Though there was no malice in them, only a fond patience, she shivered under his piercing gaze.

"And yet you've dreamed of another life, have you not?" he inquired, as if privy to her thoughts.

The question hit at something Ruby had been wrestling with for months. The dreams always featured her as some other version of herself who was living a foreign life with another version of Regina. Upon waking she usually dismissed the dreams as her brain's unique mode of sending her some sort of message she could not yet interpret, but what Zeus was suggesting flung open a Pandora's Box of possibilities that she wasn't sure she wanted to even be cracked.
"You mean to say those weren't dreams?" she posed, then winced internally at having answered the question with another question. However unintentional, utilizing the maieutic method was a tactic that Regina loathed and often chastised her for. The Queen was no fan of Socrates.

Zeus hummed in the affirmative. "Far from it. They were glimpses into the life you lived with your beloved in another time and place. Then, you were Eleni and your Regina was Elaine."

"But that means..." Diana began, but before she could finish the thought, Zeus finished it for her.

"She is not merely Artemis' progeny from afar," he said, eyes twinkling with delight. "The body she inhabits was birthed from different natural parents, although one could not tell any differences between her and she who sprang from your sister's loins. And yet her spirit within belonged to the very same Eleni you held in your arms as she took her first breath."

"That's..." Diana paused, looking perplexed but cautiously thrilled in a way that had Ruby tingling with happiness just because the idea seemed so welcome to the goddess. "That's amazing. I've always wondered why I felt so close to her as opposed to the others who descended from my sister. I had thought her uncanny resemblance to Eleni as a mere quirk of genetics as it was for her mother, Anita, but I see that I was wrong. Everything makes so much more sense now. She is my niece! Amazing."

"What's more amazing is that she and her mate only required two incarnations before reaching their perfect state. No other True Love pairing has so quickly arrived at it." Turning to Ruby, Zeus beamed at her, brimming with such pride that a surge of pleasant warmth suffused Ruby's chest.

Not quite sure how to feel or what to say about all of this, she began to pace restlessly, rubbing at her forehead as she wore a deep groove in the sand. Irrational panic beginning to win over, she grappled for answers that might give her control. Eventually her curiosity won out.

"I've heard a lot of wild shit over the years. But this takes the cake. I mean...c'mon. Reincarnation?"

Diana's expression softened at Ruby's near desperation to hang on what she'd thought was a firm grasp on the meaning of her life. Thankfully the goddess was not at all offended by the question – nor was Zeus for that matter, who graciously allowed the inquiry without his good mood being sullied. As the enormous god chuckled at Ruby's disbelief, Diana stepped close enough to grasp Ruby by the arms and still her.

"My father is the oldest being in all of the system," she said. "Even Odin himself defers to his wisdom. He has never lied to me, even though he has a terrible habit of only sharing information he deems necessary." She then cut a marked glance at Zeus, who smirked back smugly. Ruby couldn't help being amused that gods do indeed smirk, and she filed the factoid away. No doubt Regina would get a kick out of it. Heaving a longsuffering sigh at her father, Diana went on, "If that isn't sufficient reason, then perhaps you will believe me. There is no denying that you possess Eleni's features," the statuesque goddess reached up to brush a hand over Ruby's cheek, and the contact was so welcome, so comforting that Ruby leaned into it. "But now that I know what I'm looking for, I can see so clearly that you have her spirit as well."

"Why didn't you make this connection last time we met?" Ruby asked, a bit insecure at essentially her whole life being called into question.

If her Olympian relatives were correct, she was not the orphaned peasant she'd once believed herself to be, but the reincarnated daughter of a goddess. Marrying Regina was an adjustment that took Ruby years to settle into, and that was not nearly the grandiose leap in social status she was being asked to take. It was a lot to swallow for someone like her, whose self-esteem tended to inhabit lower
planes than the lofty heights of kings and queens, to accept a truth that upended her entire perception of who she was and what her life meant.

As if sensing her unease, Diana reach up to sweep a tendril of stray ringlets behind Ruby's shoulder. "As I told my father just now," she said, "I'd thought it was just genetic resemblance due to how your mother so accurately favored both me and my twin sister. Rarely have I ever been so happy to be wrong."

Ruby tucked her lower lip between her teeth, feeling stupid for being so dense. And for doubting the word of someone who had never lied to her. "Sorry for the stupid questions, I'm just...I just..."

"You are overwhelmed," Zeus interjected, finishing her thought. Ruby nodded to confirm his accuracy. "All of this is bound to be taxing, so do not be sorry. To be frank, you are handling the truth much better than I'd expected after all you've gone through. Take heart. In time, the puzzle of fate will come together."

Ducking her head down, Ruby began to idly draw lines in the sand with the tip of her sandal. She wiggled her toes as the granular material worked its way between them. "Can't happen soon enough," she sighed. "Sometimes I feel like a puppet on a string. Like a pawn who doesn't even have control over my own actions in a game I haven't even been aware I was playing. It sucks."

"Fate is strange in that way," answered Zeus in a tone suggestive of the kind of wisdom his daughter had proclaimed him to possess. "All of us have a unique role in the grand cosmic design. And yet each decision we make or fail to make is our own to claim. Destiny, you see, is not so inflexible as mortals believe. Much like a river, it ebbs and flows, bends but never breaks, as it maneuvers the contours of the infinitely complex terrain it must pass through – namely choice and free will. It is a subtly powerful force that influences without subverting agency, and while noble in that way can yet be coldly impersonal in others."

As Zeus related the analogy of fate as a river, Ruby thought about the ethereal body of water she'd floated into this spirit realm upon. When she voiced that parallel, his eyes lit up, twinkling back at her as if about to share a delightful secret.

"The stream that carried you here is a branch connected to the river of Fate," he said. "It is only accessible by spirit magic, for it flows in and out of Avalon to ferry the honored departed whose lives are left without unfinished business to that realm. There they will either pass on into paradise or await, if they are part of a True Love pairing, their reconstitution."

The idea made Ruby think of a television show based on the Arthurian legends that Emma raved about to the point she finally caved and promised to watch it. Regina took a lot of convincing, but eventually they binged the entire series over the span of three weeks.

"You mean like Arthur?" she asked.

"An entirely appropriate example," Zeus said, appreciating the connection. "Someday soon, he and his True Love will reenter the world, for their destiny is not yet fulfilled."

While Ruby would have ordinarily been content to pick the brain of a being older than she could fathom, there was something else bugging her.

"As fascinating as all this is, I have another question if you don't mind."

He tilted his head invitingly. "Of course."

"Again, not to be rude, but if all this reincarnation business is so great, why did you keep it a secret
"Frustrating as my omission was, it was necessary. The secrets of Avalon are closely guarded, for within that realm lies the beating heart of Yggdrasil. Few are granted awareness of even a portion of the knowledge held within the sacred Vale. Even I do not know all. But my primary reasoning was due to my headstrong daughter." He then glanced at Diana and winked, causing the goddess to huff and roll her eyes in an entirely human manner. "Had she known who you are," he went on, "she would have acted to spare you from painful journey laid out for you. As much as I admit desiring to do the same myself, I have been told time and again by the Oracle that yours is a destiny too important to interfere with."

Ruby frowned at the diplomatic inference to the most horrendous night of her life. "For the record I would have appreciated the rules being broken. Wasn't fun being whipped like a wild animal or, you know, having a scythe plunged through my heart."

With a suddenly grave expression, Zeus replied, "Believe me, child, when I say that it grieved me to watch you suffer. Even so, had I or Diana intervened, your life would have been dramatically altered from its current trajectory. Perhaps your precious daughters would not have been born if we meddled in affairs whose ends we could not possibly predict. Is that outcome preferable to the nightmares that haunt you?"

Ruby did not have to ponder that scenario at all to know what her answer was. "No way," she firmly stated. "I'd endure far, far worse than what Joshua dished out to have my babies."

"Well said," said Zeus, tone genuine in agreement. "I myself have undergone trials and temptations and have made many mistakes that I deeply regret during my long life. And yet if only because I have my children, I would not do anything differently."

"Do you really feel that way, Father?"

The way Diana posed the question made it seem as if she had long harbored doubts about her father's love. It made Ruby wonder if Zeus was as cad-like in reality as he was in the myths. Of course, she didn't dare give voice to the thought. The last thing she wanted to was incur the wrath of the God of Lightning and Thunder.

"Of course I do!" Zeus exclaimed, visibly hurt at hearing his affections questioned. "There is nothing in all of the universe I would trade for you or your sister, or any of your other siblings for that matter."

"Even that pompous brat, Athena, and the equally vacuous Minerva?"

Zeus chuckled amiably, then dragged his daughter into a bear hug. "Yes, my little huntress. Even your belligerent brothers Ares and Mars are more precious to me than any power or wealth that can be attained."

Ruby sensed a theme as the two bantered. It was strange to hear mention of so many of the Greek and Roman equivalents as being twins. The thought crossed her mind that maybe having twins was an Olympian thing, or maybe there was something peculiar about Zeus' taste in women. Whatever the case, she had to wonder whether this reinforced the idea of her really being some reincarnated version of Artemis' child, since if that was true she would technically be of nearer Olympian heritage than she'd been lead to believe. All of that might even explain why the True Love she shared with Regina had got them both pregnant at the same time instead of only one of them, resulting in her own unique set of twins. However, the more she contemplated the mental gymnastics required to make sense of it all, the more she began to develop a headache.
To circumvent further descent into the rabbit hole of Zeus' seemingly vast and complicated family, Ruby cleared her throat to regain the attention of her Olympian relatives. How she fit into said family was a can of worms she wasn't eager to open at present.

"As lovely as all this bonding is," she said, and had the grace to blush at her interruption when both Diana and Zeus awkwardly parted. "Why did I need to know any of this? How is any of this relevant to me?"

If Zeus was disappointed or angered at the touching moment between him and his daughter being so abruptly derailed, he didn't show it. With a kindly and open expression of allowance, he said, "Because Artemis must also know and it must be you who tells her."

Ruby's brows arched at that, her hand instinctively coming up over her chest. "Me? Why does it have to be me?"

"It is simple," said Zeus indulgently. "Your ability to convince her that you are, or once were, Eleni is the only hope of redeeming her before it is too late. I believe that only her daughter can pierce the veil of darkness that has shrouded her heart all these many long centuries, the same darkness that infected a soul once bright with love and life as the morning sun. If you fail, all will be lost. For with Artemis renewed at Gryffyn's side, he will be unstoppable. Together they will achieve their goal of overthrowing Olympus, and after that, Asgard shall sure fall. With them ruling all of Yggdrasil with impunity, there will be no preventing the great calamity that will ensue."

Ruby thought for a moment to further inquire about this ominous future being quite convincingly painted, but she remained silent in deference to Diana.

"Artemis may hate me, father," the goddess said, tone brokering no argument, "and she may have succumbed to darkness, but she is still my sister, the other half of myself. Though she may well refuse my warnings and curse my very existence, I must try to reach her...if only for my own sake. I owe her that much for my ignorance regarding her pain."

"And you have my blessing to try," said Zeus, appearing pained at the mention of his other daughter's fall from grace. Neither Zeus or Diana seemed inclined to share whatever secret pain Artemis harbored that turned her to evil, and Ruby was not about to chance asking when she still felt like an outsider. "But know this," Zeus continued, "the spell to occupy your niece's body will last only for a few scant minutes. After that, I will forcibly pull you out lest irreparable damage be done to both of you."

"Then I will have to be extra persuasive, won't I?" Diana quipped fearlessly, then winked at Ruby much as her father had earlier. She then rubbed her hands together and held them out toward Ruby. "If you're ready, take my hands and I will begin the spell. Time is of the essence."

Ruby did not hesitate to do just that. However dire the circumstance awaiting her, she needed to get back to Regina and to her family and friends. "I'm ready."

As Diana closed her eyes and began to mutter lowly, Zeus' booming voice issued a last address.

"Safe journey, my children," he said, and then shifted his aged but bright eyes upon Ruby. "As for you, granddaughter, when your ordeal is over, you may journey to Olympus at any time you please. It is your home now, and in more ways than you know. I advise you to do so with expediency, however, as there are many things I have not the time to tell you."

"When all of this is over, I will," Ruby shouted over the din of Diana's magic swirling around them. "I promise."
Zeus tightened his grip upon his staff, causing it to arc so brightly that Ruby could have seen it clearly through the thickest fog. "Then I will await your arrival most eagerly! Be strong now, for the first crucial battle for the fate of our system will soon commence."

And with that, Diana began to chant in a language Ruby did not understand. As her words rose in volume and fervency, the scenery of the mock Olympus she was currently inhabiting began to waver and flicker in and out of existence. With one last glance at Zeus, who stood smiling at her as the ever-proud father and grandfather, Olympus-in-Avalon faded away, and for Ruby all returned to darkness.
Streams of dust rained down from the rocky ceiling as aftershocks rocked the cavern. When the containment cell embedded within the rock was opened, it had apparently destabilized the entire cave system, threatening catastrophic failure. For a moment Regina worried the devastating ruckus might trigger a cave-in that would bury everyone alive. That the body count would include a Savior, an Evil Queen, an ancient Sorcerer and an Olympian made no difference to the tens of thousands of tons worth of stone above them. Mother Nature was not a discriminating killer.

Destruction by crushing was not to come, however, and an eerie calm settled over the area as the rumbling diminished into a faint background hum. Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, Regina studied her surroundings. Her attention was immediately arrested by the newly released Artemis, who stood silently drinking in the sight of her lover. Belmordan was equally preoccupied with his Olympian goddess. Their reunion, nauseating as it was, presented a much needed reprieve for her to tend to Ruby.

When Ruby regained consciousness less than a minute later, Regina immediately knew something was horribly wrong. The wounds upon Ruby's face inflicted by Belmordan had suddenly vanished, leaving behind not so much as a speck of blood or a hint of scarring. Her muscles were tense to the point of snapping. Eyes shaded a foresty green were instead a shocking pale gray flecked with tendrils of gold and white, and lacked the seemingly inexhaustible stores of love they customarily exhibited. It was as if the woman in her arms was not her wife at all, but some mere acquaintance whose affection for her was fresh and limited by a recent introduction.

Regina's breath left her in a whoosh along with her tentative greeting. "Ruby?"

Ruby's answering smile as she sat up was more than a little disconcerting, as it lacked any warmth and vibrancy.

"Queen Regina. We are well met," Ruby said, the voice undoubtedly her wife's although the tenor and verbiage were not. Ruby's delivery was never so painfully formal even during their intensely private roleplay sessions.

Instantly recognizing what was going on, Regina's eyes narrowed. "Who are you?" she demanded, frightened for Ruby's safety. "What have you done to my wife?"

"My name is Diana of Olympus," the person inhabiting Ruby's body said, expression reassuringly kind. "Do not fret for my niece. I assure you that she is safe. In fact, she consented to sharing her body with me, else I would not have taken such a drastic measure."

A sable brow arched with doubt at the being's assertion that she was Diana of Olympus, the same goddess depicted in Belle's book as being the source of the prophecy that forebodingly pointed to the
current predicament in Storybrooke. To say Regina was dubious of the claim was an understatement, though she had to admit that in the volume of miraculous events that comprised her life to date, such a happening would merit little special notice. The ludicrous was beginning to seem commonplace all of the sudden.

Deciding to grant this 'Diana' the benefit of the doubt, Regina ignored for the moment the mention of Ruby being said woman's niece. Instead, she directed her response at Ruby's supposed acquiescence to this unnatural possession of her body.

"Why on earth would she agree to such a thing?" she asked pointedly, tone brokering no tolerance for deflection.

"To answer that question would require more time than we are presently afforded," Diana said, clearly apologetic for being unable to provide adequate explanation.

The only reason Regina took the woman's words at face value was because she had little choice in the matter. She couldn't afford to take a chance offending the self-proclaimed Olympian since she was being hosted by Ruby's body. Who knew what damage could be done to Ruby if the entity holding her hostage was unwisely provoked.

"Declare your purpose then," she countered. At the very least, she needed to know why this was happening at such an inopportune a time.

Cutting her eyes toward Belmordan, Regina noted that he was still locked in an embrace with his recently freed mate. The danger posed by the current situation apparently dawned upon Diana as she followed Regina's line of sight.

"I see now that I must indeed be swift," the woman murmured, then continued more forcefully, "I have come to speak to my sister.

"You have arrived just in time then," Artemis interjected, stepping away from Belmordan. The Olympian goddess sauntered nonchalantly in their direction. A foot away, she paused to smirk derisively. "Hello, sister. How nice of you to make an appearance to celebrate my freedom, even if with your typical self-aggrandizing flair." The smirk shifted into a bitter scowl. "It is cruel of you to manipulate that which belongs to me. You took my child away and now you wish to control all that remains of her? Do the roots of hatred run that deeply?"

Looking stricken, Diana took a step forward but halted when Artemis braced herself as if about to be attacked. In response, Diana raised her hands in deference. "I do not hate you, Artemis," she insisted. "I am here because I love you. You are my twin! I could no more hate you than I hate myself. As for Ruby, I assure you that I have her permission to be here. We are of one mind and one heart in our desire."

Artemis huffed dubiously. "And what desire is that?"

"To beseech you to listen to reason." Risking a glance backward at Belmordan, Diana gestured toward him. "Gryffyn is mad. His lust for power has made him a monster. He is not worthy of your affection, or of your loyalty."

Regina found it interesting that Diana had referred to Belmordan by that name. She could only assume that Gryffyn was his given name and that he had taken the name Belmordan – she ventured on an educated guess that it was a portmanteau of the Akkadian word for "lord" and the Latin term for "death" – to signify an ascension into the pantheon of godlike individuals. The hubris propelling such a self-designation was something with which she was familiar.
It wasn't by chance she was bestowed the moniker the Evil Queen. Liberal application of the power of suggestion had the peasantry adopting her new title within weeks of wanted posters, which bore the likeness of their beloved princess, being plastered in every village near and far. An intimidating appellative did wonders for inducing obedience, thus her rather clever re-branding via subtly planted mentions whilst in disguise. Belmordan obviously recognized the same benefits, and she might have found that admirable if she wasn't salivating for the opportunity to use him as a vessel upon which to practice her vast array of skills within the realm of torture.

That said, she couldn't help being amused that Diana had essentially called him out on the tactic by deliberately speaking his true name.

"It's comforting to know some things never change," Belmordan bit back, face darkening with outrage. "You always were a conceited, jealous spinster, Diana. This pathetic attempt to sway your sister is nothing more than a cry for attention from an insignificant whelp who could never escape the shadow cast by the better twin."

For some unknown reason, Diana seemed pleased at the slight, though she ignored it to further appeal to Artemis. "He wants to entice you to join him in his effort to destroy the entire system," she said. "As far as you drifted away after Nyctimus perished, I can't imagine you would endorse such a plot. There is an opportunity here to make a better choice. Sister, please! Choose hope. Choose the light! Do not fall under his sway, not after enduring a millennium of imprisonment for the same mistake."

Belmordan growled, eyes flashing a malefic red. Regina tensed frantically for a split second, worried that the two would come to blows. With Ruby not in control of her own body, Regina was ready to intervene, but at a single cutting glance from Artemis, Belmordan backed down.

Interesting, Regina thought, breathing a sigh of relief under her breath.

Artemis, now enraged, bore her teeth in a vicious sneer. "How dare you mention my beloved Nyc!" she thundered. "If you had not been so hopelessly naive and foolishly reckless, he would still be alive! I warned you against venturing to Nemea! But you simply had to prove yourself to father. To prove yourself greater than I! Hail Diana, slayer of the Nemean lion! Only you failed and would have died in the process had I not followed you!"

"How many times must I apologize for that? I am sorry your wolf was killed, Artemis! I was just trying to make you proud."

"Meaningless words are not sufficient to assuage my anger, Sister. How would you feel if it had been Lycaon who perished for my sake? And not only did Nyc die for you, but you took my only child away from me and then banished me to a thousand years internment where my suffering never ceased!"

After a thousand years of imprisonment, Regina could only imagine the anger Artemis felt. Were she to trade places with the goddess, she was quite sure she would not be in the mood to trade barbs with Zelena after she was freed. Likely, her response would have been to destroy the prison she was held in and then immediately seek out those responsible upon whom she would then dispense her own creative brand of retribution.

That Artemis was talking rather than fighting was a good sign, but Regina knew better than to place all her hopes on the rationality of a woman who had not seen sunlight in a thousand years. Prolonged exposure to darkness could turn the meekest of sheep into a ravening wolf.

"You cannot imagine the torment of being bound a thousand years in that… that ghastly tomb!"
Artemis then shouted, visage twisting. That she had echoed Regina's thoughts was troublesome, and it left an odious taste in her mouth to discover how easily she sympathized with a megalomaniac who had once attempted to conquer the known universe. That darkness in her could see things from Artemis' perspective. However in the wrong Artemis was, Regina knew what it was like to suffocate within an inescapable prison, and she understood how it felt to languish in helplessness because of the decisions someone else made on her behalf.

"And how dare you besmirch my love!" Artemis continued to rant. "Just because you remain alone and childless does not give you the right to judge me for my choices. Gryffyn is right. You always were envious of me!"

Holding her hands out in a mollifying gesture, Diana said, "I'm sorry you saw all those things, Artemis. I am! Father told me nothing of your imprisonment, only that it was necessary and required my assistance as I was your closest kin. And I promise you that I am not jealous, even though I can understand how it might seem that way. I made the choice long ago to remain unwed to dedicate myself to my craft and to the service of my people. You also may have forgotten that when you first met Gryffyn, I was happy for you! But then I saw how he seduced you, how he tempted you to taste of the forbidden, and..."

Artemis gave a harsh laugh that interrupted Diana's speech. "My dear sister, you are sorely mistaken! It was I who tempted him." The statement was delivered to shock, and shock it did, as Diana physically reeled. Artemis seemed to take pleasure in the visceral affect her revelation produced. Smiling dangerously, she pressed on, "Oh, Diana. So trusting. So naive! You never once questioned my long absences from Olympus in our youth, though you most certainly should have. You were ever just as blind as Father to the true nature of power. You see, a being of endless might and ageless wisdom far beyond the Pantheon beckoned to me. I would have been a fool to refuse his call."

Gasping, Diana stumbled back yet again, clutching at her chest. Not for the first time, it struck Regina as to how odd it was watching the interactions, as despite the appearance, it was not Ruby doing or saying those things but the alien being inhabiting her body.

"It is not possible!" Diana breathed out, and it was evident that she understood Artemis' implication.

Artemis purred darkly. "Oh, but my dear sister, it is possible. Our grandfather is not quite so disposed of as Father made us believe. It was he, the mighty Kronos, who taught me how to properly harness magic and instilled in me a desire to right this universe gone so horribly astray. He also warned me of the fickle ties of family and how easily they will betray you."

Diana seemed aggrieved at the unspoken accusation. "Artemis, no! Our father rebelled against Kronos, his own sire, for a just cause."

"As just as that which resulted in my inhumane imprisonment?" Artemis countered, glowering. "Your actions only proved our grandfather right. What family I have is the family I made. Father turned his back on me just as you did! Our brothers and sisters care for naught but themselves! Pride and selfishness are the core characteristics of our family. Nay, sister, they are your family. Gryffyn is mine now, as was our child until you stole her away from me."

She paused, looked down at her hands and flexed them angrily. "I was only able to hold her for a few precious moments and bestow a name upon her before you ripped her from my arms and gave her to that scrawny peasant unfit to bear the name Emrys! My baby grew up without me while I languished in agonizing solitude! When she died, I felt it from the depths of a prison even our Uncle Hades would balk at utilizing. Unable to do anything but dwell on my misery, I mourned her for centuries, my waking punishment fueled by nightmares of a life I will never know! I will never again hold her in my arms, Diana. And it is all...your... fault!"
"But that's not true!" Diana cried, stepping forward to reach toward her sister. "She lives!"

"You lie!" growled Belmordan as he maneuvered himself between Diana and Artemis, forming a protective hedge before his mate. "I have visited the paltry monument my cousin fashioned for her and mourned over her freshly dug grave!"

As he spoke, his eyes were murderous, so Regina readied herself to spring into action at moment's notice while at the same time praying that the situation would diffuse before conflict erupted. With Ruby caught in the middle of a battle of titans, all she could do was hope for the best, which seemed to be what she had been reduced to on a constant basis over the past half hour.

"And she did die at that time," said Diana, deep sadness etched in her features and present in her voice. "For that I am truly sorry. But I am trying to explain to you that her existence did not end there."

"That we know," Artemis said around Belmordan's shoulder, glaring hatefully at the sister inhabiting the body of her descendent. "She is undoubtedly in the care of our uncle now, awaiting the opportunity to find closure with the parents she was so callously robbed from."

"I'm not speaking of mere spiritual life," Diana said. "She is here right now before you, within your very reach! Unbeknownst to me, my niece and her beloved were one of the elect couples whose love is so powerful it granted them ascendance into Avalon itself. Now at the end of this age, she has been reborn as a woman with another name. Here she is known as Ruby, but she is your daughter just the same."

Regina was sure she was wearing an equally baffled expression as Artemis and Belmordan. The air left her lungs in a whoosh as she attempted to compute the data Diana had so dramatically unleashed. Ruby was actually Artemis' deceased daughter? But, she thought, that would mean…

"Reincarnation?"

When all eyes turned to her, she realized she had spoken aloud. Flushed with muted embarrassment, she chastised herself internally, feeling especially foolish considering the untenable nature of the situation.

"In a sense," Diana replied, smiling gently, which was only reassuring because it was Ruby's smile.

"Liar!" Artemis suddenly exploded, face reddening with outrage as she surged past Belmordan's shoulder. "What you are suggesting is impossible!"

Quirking her head and smiling gently, and perhaps much more calmly than warranted under the circumstances in Regina's opinion, Diana said, "Is it? Search your feelings. You know it to be true! The woman whose body I now inhabit is, in fact, your own flesh and blood reborn. Father even confirmed it to us. I swear to you, Artemis, I would not lie about my niece."

The pronouncement deflated Artemis as if she were a balloon suddenly untied. Going limp as a sail without a breeze, she floundered for a response. "She...you...it cannot be."

"But it is!" Diana insisted as she grasped her sister's quaking hands. "You can have the life with her you dreamed of for so long. But only if you stop this madness at once!"

"Ignore these silver-tongued falsehoods, beloved," Belmordan interjected, features schooled into cool impassivity. "Diana is plying your love for our deceased child to sway you from the course of action we set out on so long ago. Do not allow the sister who constantly and deliberately undermined you to steal your glory here at the critical hour!"
Diana just gripped at Artemis more tightly, expression openly begging for her sister to believe her. To Regina's pleasant surprise, the gambit appeared to be working, as Artemis' eyes no longer held that steely edge that had previously characterized them where Diana was concerned.

As if spurred to boldness by Artemis' wavering resistance, Diana reached out to cup her sister's cheek. When Artemis did not pull away, she said, "I want no glory from this. I just want my sister back. Please, Artemis! Please! I love you! In time memories of the past will return for Ruby, and she will love you, too. All you must do is give us a chance. I pledge an eternal oath on our mother's memory that you will not regret...argh!"

Before she could finish the sentence, Diana doubled over in pain, which set Regina's heart racing seeing as it was Ruby's body being distressed.

"What's happening?!" she demanded as Artemis frantically gripped onto Diana's arm to keep her from toppling over.

"The magic tethering Diana to me...is being severed," was the reply given just before Ruby pitched forward unsteadily.

Even though spoken in distress, Regina immediately recognized her spouse's timbre and sprang into action accordingly as Ruby lost motor control. She only barely made it over in time to leverage her body between Ruby and the ground. It required all her strength to hold her slumping wife up as Ruby panted and groaned in discomfort. To further secure her hold, she wound one arm around Ruby's shoulders while the other wrapped around Ruby's slender waist. Using the new position, she pulled Ruby into a pseudo-hug that Ruby all but melted into.

Once Ruby's legs didn't seem so unstable, Regina adjusted her hand to rest upon the small of Ruby's back while she buried the other in the mass of brown hair she so loved.

"I've got you," she said as she pulled Ruby's head down to her shoulder, ignoring her audience for the moment to soothe her hand up and down Ruby's back, as it seemed both Artemis and Belmordan were both stricken dumb by the turn of events.

As Ruby shuddered under the tender ministrations, Regina risked a glance at Artemis, finding the Olympian staring at Ruby in new-found awe and wonder. Mouth hanging open tentatively, it appeared Artemis was afraid to even vocalize the name upon her tongue. When she did it was barely above a whisper.

"Eleni?"

At the mention of that name, something extraordinary happened, and it all went down so quickly that later Regina could never adequately describe the sensation of weightless eternity that descended upon her. All she knew was that one second she was trying help her wife regain a measure of stability after being possessed by the spirit of an ancient ancestor and the next she was lying abed in a cabin she had never visited before. On top of the vertigo from being transported through time and space to someplace unknown, she felt horribly ill. Fever wracked her body, punctuated by wet coughs that rattled her ribs.

Casting a glance upward, she saw Ruby sitting at the edge of the bed, picking at the skirts of a modest green dress, her expression laden with heavy grief as silent tears cascaded down her cheeks. The noticeable swell of her belly did not escape Regina's attention. In perfect synchronization with the vision, she reached out a hand and gingerly rested it upon where she instinctively knew her child – a child conceived of True Love – to be growing.
"I'm sorry," she croaked, voice hoarse from disuse and the sickness rampaging through her greatly diminished frame.

Visibly startling, Ruby's reddened eyes widened. When she noticed Regina was awake, her entire countenance changed in that extraordinary way no other could imitate, as if her very soul was made of unadulterated sunshine that was impossible to contain.

"You're awake! I didn't think I'd ever get to see those pretty brown eyes again!" Ruby exclaimed, and the warmth emitted by her loving solar wind settled down deep into Regina's aching bones and muscles, revivifying them if only for a moment.

"Don't be so..." Regina paused to cough, wincing at the pain that lanced through her throat and chest before finishing her sentence, "dramatic."

Ruby's smile soured at the flippant dismissal of her concern. "I'm not being dramatic. You've been in and out of consciousness for a week, and in delirium when you weren't. I've worn a rut in the floor fretting over you."

"Has it been so long already?" Regina asked weakly, feeling out of sorts not only due to the sickness ravaging her body but because of the large loss of time.

"Yes." Ruby dipped her head, looking defeated before glancing back in misery. "Papa told me what you did." More tears slid down already ruddy cheeks, and the brokenness in her Ruby's green eyes made Regina feel even more wretched upon suddenly remembering the reason for her ailing state.

"I would apologize but I'm not sorry," she said, meaning the words even though they were bound to hurt one of the two people she loved most in the world — one of which had not even been born. How was she supposed to regret paying the price to guarantee the safety of the other when she counted them both more valuable than her own life?

In the vision, she wasn't even officially a mother yet, but already those instincts had suppressed all common sense, being mixed so inextricably with an all-consuming love for her mate. The combination of those supremely powerful biological imperatives were what drove her to sacrifice herself for the life of their unborn child. Made of True Love, magic demanded recompense for so exceedingly lofty a gift, and she was more than willing to be the one to provide it.

Expression resolute, she declared, "I'd do it again if it meant both of you will live." To emphasize the point, she rubbed at the swell of her partner's belly.

A grieved cry escaped Ruby's lips as she clutched at the hand upon her distended stomach. "I want to hate you for what you've done, but I can't! How can I when I love you so much? Oh, Elaine, how am I to live without you? To raise our daughter without you?"

It was strange that being called Elaine seemed as natural to Regina as the name she'd been given at birth, the only name she'd ever known until now. Somewhere in the back of her mind, caught up in the vision as she was, the scrambled pieces of a life far more layered with complexity than she'd known began to make the most bizarre form of sense.

"All I can tell you is that you are the strongest person I have ever met and that you can do this with or without me," she replied, feeling past and present begin to blend together at a break-neck pace. "I believe in you. And my love for you is more vast and boundless than I ever believed was possible for a human heart to contain. I may soon depart from this world, but I shall wait for you in the next." Reaching up, she cupped her lover's cheek and brushed away stray tears with her thumb. "You are my heart and my soul, Eleni. Forever and always."
The instant those final words escaped her lips, a pain emanating from her lungs and chest seized her entire being, stealing her breath and causing her heart to beat with a cadence and speed more closely associated with the hoof-beats of a horse at full gallop. The terrific agony within her breast lasted for what seemed like minutes as she was afflicted by an exponential degradation of her own body, made only more intolerable by the torturous screams and pleas from Ruby to which she could not respond. But then in an instant everything screeched to halt. As her heart stopped abruptly and her last breath escaped her lungs, she saw horror enter Ruby's eyes followed by a keening wail that pierced through the blanket of hazy death surrounding her from all angles. And then all faded to a cold and merciless black.

Everything then fell into place for Regina as she realized she had just relived her own death. An onslaught of deeply buried memories flooded her conscious mind as the lingering residue of the former vision shattered into a million pieces. In it's place emerged another and another and another, each vivid to the point of tangibility. The onrush of relentlessly surging memories crashed into her with the savage force of a cyclone in spring, pummeling her conscious mind into submission.

The swirling vortex of the distant past did not let up until her former life as Elaine was fully restored and she was no longer anchored to the present.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long wait. I lost all interest in writing for about six months. Honestly I thought I might be done with it for good. The bug hit me again a couple weeks ago, though, and with this burst of activity I was able to finish up this monstrous story’s rough draft at long last. Thank God. I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. With that the case, the previous format of posting a chapter a week is over. I'll be posting up the chapters as soon as I get them edited from now on, however many or few per week that means.

To all those still reading, thanks a ton! Your support, in whatever form you choose to offer it, is very appreciated. Much love to everyone.
Deja Vu All Over Again

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In the throes of whatever spell was at work, Regina regained access to a depository of memories she hadn't been aware existed within the vault of her mind. Caught up in some sort of limbo where time stood still and she was neither in her body nor out of it, she entered the depository. The Inside was fashioned as a quaint study that was remarkably similar to the one in her home on Mifflin Street. Books lined the shelves, and as she studied the spines decorated with titles formed by gilded letters, a picture began to emerge of what she was looking at. Of My Year in Garlot, one tome read, and she realized with the utmost astonishment that she was looking at a record of her life as Elaine, brief as it was.

That there were only a few small rows of books told her that her life as Elaine had been tragically short. To her amazement, brushing a finger down the spine of that volume unleashed a flood of memories of the seasons she'd spent as a very young lady in the realm of King Nentres, who had taken a fancy to her and was in negotiations with her mother to arrange a marriage when her sister Morgause showed up to rescue her from such a barbaric fate. Curiosity winning out, Regina began to sift through the volumes of information contained in the other books hoping to make sense of what was going on. In the process, she essentially relived the entire history of her past life.

As Elaine, she had grown up in relative seclusion, raised by a mother whose frequent delirium made her unfit for the job, a woman whose debilitating grief after the death of her husband rendered her unable to function outside of the necessities. Vivienne, who by some cosmic joke could have passed for Cora's twin, had not been an utter failure. In spite of her mental instability, she'd made sure they were fed and clothed, although usually that was accomplished by prostituting herself to the nearest available minor noble, and when not in said noble's company spent her time indulging her delusions of a pristine life that did not exist.

And oh her mother had such plans for her! The idea was to restore good fortune to the family name by marrying her off as if she were a prize heifer fit only to command a healthy dowry with which respect could be bought. Like she had as Regina, she had foolishly believed she had a say in her fate and made other plans for herself. She fell in love with a local peasant boy, and to spite her mother and escape being condemned to a marriage she did not consent to, she and her lover concocted ill-fated arrangements to flee the country. When he died in a tragic accident before they could abscond, she withered for a time into an empty shell.

It was only after her sister, Morgause, rescued her from her insane mother's clutches in Garlot that she wrested any semblance of purpose from the ceaseless miseries of her life. Morgause took her in, loved her, taught her to harness her innate magic, and then convinced her to enter into a pact with the Triple Goddess. For a time, she was happy again. Not only had she gained a sister, but she had found a family in her fellow priestesses and discovered her true purpose: to usher in a glorious new age of magic.

But then Morgause was slain, and she descended into a half-crazed state that only worsened some years later when news reached her of her other half-sister Morgana's death at the hands of the great sorcerer Emyrs. Years passed like viscous molasses after that, during which she haunted the northern reaches of Albion, killing indiscriminately and terrorizing the mostly peaceful citizenry to appease the monstrous rage that stalked within the dark areas of her psyche. Hatred became her astringent sustenance and loneliness her faithful companion. So wretched was she that the local folk began to...
refer to her as *Le Fécreuse*, the Hollow Fairy.

An existence of cruelty and emptiness seemed to be her lot in life until one day during a dreadful tempest, hoping to escape the downpour and the blinding arcs of lightning streaking through the sky, she wandered into a remote village far along the northern coast of Alba. There she spotted a little tavern nestled between an old apothecarium and a blacksmithy. It was quaint but homely establishment, and ripe for the picking.

Being hungry and cold, she pulled her hood over her head to better disguise herself. After all, there was really no need to terrify the locals until she was properly fed and could once again feel her extremities. Then, she decided, she would put on a show the simpletons inside would never forget.

After trudging inside, she shouldered her way through the crowd, then scanned the room for threats. Seeing none, a secluded table in the far corner then caught her eye. She shuffled over in a nonthreatening manner then settled in to brood while she waited to be served. The next thing she knew she was being offered a piping hot cup of cider by the most beautiful woman she'd ever laid eyes on.

Regina experimentally tugged on the volume that contained that memory, *Of The First Encounter With My True Love*. As the book pulled free of the rest, she felt herself pass through the threshold separating past from present. Suddenly she was no longer Regina Mills, who was trapped in some crazy-ass dimension where she could interact with her memories of a past life. In a flash of blinding light, she actually became Elaine…

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Scowling dangerously, she lifted her eyes from the steaming cup to the woman who had placed it so brazenly on the table.

"It's on the house," the unusually tall brunette said, totally unaffected by Elaine's prickly demeanor. Her smile was so luminous that a spark of heat flickered to life within a heart once frozen over solid.

"Whatever for? I don't know you from Eve," Elaine said, eyes narrowing. Suspicion was her default state of being outside of manic depression or an unnatural hankering for murder.

The brunette serving maid, far too beautiful to ever be referred to as a measly tavern wench, merely shrugged as if disaffected by her motives being so baldly questioned. Tilting her head, she gave Elaine a lopsided grin.

"You looked like you could use a little pick-me-up," the woman said with a honey-smooth voice that was sure to have trapped many a poor soul into her all-too-tempting honeycomb. "The weather is awful, even for this time of year. I know if it were me dragging through the door, I'd want someone to offer me one of the most delicious cups of cider I'd have ever tasted. And besides," leaning forward a bit, the saucy girl then gave her a wink, "I never could resist a beautiful woman."

The barely concealed interest in the maiden's forest green eyes made Elaine squirm in her seat. It had been a very long time since she'd found herself so discomfited by another's presence, and was even more so disturbed by how much she found herself craving being the object of such blatant, if not flattering, desire. She was not so out of practice in picking up cues from a potential bedmate that she hadn't recognized the open invitation made clear by the flirtatious comment. As tempted as she was to scratch that itch, and oh! it had been so long since she'd had a woman in her bed, the isolation of her self-imposed exile after Morgana's death made her mistrustful to the point of paranoia.

"Flattery will get you nowhere with me, girl," she bit back, falling on acerbity out of habit.
Unfortunately for her, or rather fortunately as time would prove, her new acquaintance was not afraid of a surly witch. Even if said surly witch was the most powerful alive at the time.

Smile turning smug, the girl cocked a hip to the side and her jade eyes danced with mischief that was heavily laced by arousal. "Won't it, though?" she taunted, nostrils flaring as she inhaled deeply and closed her eyes to savor the aroma she took in. "There's no need to play hard to get when I can already smell your interest."

Half-incensed and half-intrigued, Elaine straightened in her chair and sucked in a breath through her teeth. The part of her that was innately curious about the world at large wondered how the brunette could have possibly detected what she'd implied she did. Magic had to be behind it. But what type? Intrigue nearly won out before the caustic side of her battered it down. However fascinating the little tart was, she had never received so lewd a comment before, and could not abide such an offense, especially from someone she'd just met.

"If I were you, I'd select my words more carefully," she warned in a tone of voice she used to strike fear in the hearts of her countless victims. "You're entering a dangerous game that can't be won. Don't fool yourself into thinking you will come out of this unscathed. Many have played and all before you have met ruin."

"It's too late for that," the girl had said, still unbothered by the clear and present danger she was in. "I entered said game the moment I approached you. I must say, though, I am honored to be a participant despite your fair warning. It's not every day an infamous individual such as the mysterious Le Fécreuse deigns to patronize my little establishment."

Elaine felt a chill run down her spine at being so casually recognized. In her travels, she took great pains to conceal her identity. None had ever seen her face and lived to tell the tale. Yet the simply dressed woman working a painfully mundane and occasionally degrading job had ferreted out the truth with alarming ease.

Before she could visibly react, the girl extended her hand. "My name is Eleni, by the way. The least I could do is introduce myself after so unceremoniously outing you – and privately enough that none could possibly have heard I might emphasize. You know...just in case you are thinking of roasting me alive and eating me for dinner." Eyes twinkling, she added, "But if I may be so bold and if you're inclined, we could skip the roasting part altogether and just get right to the eating."

Leaning forward with a threatening scowl to hide her blush at the crass euphemism, Elaine batted the proffered hand away. "How do you know who I am?"

"I have my ways," said Eleni, smiling mysteriously. Some strange emotion passed through her then which turned her warmly inviting features into something that might pass as sinister to anyone else. Upon nibbling at her prominent lower lip, her eyes glinted gold, but not in the way of those who practiced magic. This was a different brand of sorcery, a wilder more primordial strain that bellowed an irresistible tune that Elaine, even in her current mood, could not resist.

She tilted her head in unveiled fascination. "Now I am definitely intrigued." She gestured toward the chair opposite her. "Won't you sit for a moment? This infamous individual, if that indeed is who I am, has just suddenly developed a tolerance for companionship. If," she clarified with narrowed eyelids, "said companion happens to be some form of magical creature heretofore unknown to modern scholars."

"Said companion may or may not be such a creature." Eleni cocked a hip to the side, and her green eyes danced playfully. That alluring grin of hers was firmly in place, setting a not at all unpleasant sensation off in Elaine's chest. "I'm free of obligation in half an hour, if it pleases the lady to wait that
long for a chance to assuage her curiosity...

Elaine didn't want to seem overeager, so she sat back and crossed her arms over her chest as she hummed noncommitally. "I suppose you'll just have to return in half an hour to find out."

Eleni's smile only grew wider, as if she knew at a glance that Elaine had taken the bait and all that was left for her to do was give the rod a good yank to inextricably hook her. With her impossibly bright green eyes twinkling, she curtseyed deeply. "I'll see you in half an hour then," she said, tone full of cheek, and then disappeared into the crowd.

Torn out of the memory, Regina gasped. She felt such a strong sense of déjà vu that she could not ignore what she had seen. The whole scene had played out with eerie similarity to the day she'd gone to the diner to drown her sorrows over losing Robin with a large chocolate milkshake. The last thing she'd expected was to make a friend of Snow's best buddy. And yet before she left the Diner for home, she'd not only done just that but had also unknowingly been set upon a path that would lead her to True Love. The only difference between the events of the recent and distant past was what had come of the night. When Regina left Granny's, she'd gone home alone whereas Elaine had not.

True to word, Eleni returned after finishing up her obligations, smile still in place and eyes still dancing with invitation. During the subsequent conversation, Elaine had learned that her intriguing maiden was a creature unheard of in all of Albion: a woman who could turn into a wolf at will except during the full moon when the call became compulsory. That they were both beings of magic languishing in an increasingly prosaic world proved a common thread that fully dismantled what remained of a heart-scarred witch's previously impenetrable defenses.

That night she went home with Eleni, in the process ignoring every instinct inside her that was screaming to run away. But Eleni wielded a power over her that was simply irresistible, and she found in the coming weeks, months, and years, that saying no to the girl was impossible. Once inside Eleni's cozy little cottage, nature took its course, and lips were soon warring for dominance as clothes were shed haphazardly in a rush to reach the poor excuse for a bed the girl slept upon. Haughty assessment of her lover's furnishings aside, she slept like the dead afterward, and upon waking the next morning felt sore, sated, and more alive than she ever had.

At first, she refused to allow anything beyond a purely physical connection. Sex was a wonderful distraction from one's woes until emotions got involved. Things got messy after that. Or at least that is what she had believed as Elaine until Eleni came along and destroyed every flawed concept of romance that she'd harbored. In time, biweekly trysts blossomed into something unique and profound, a love so deep and abiding that it lead to the conceiving of a child via True Love.

Another common thread. Just as in the present, back then she hadn't known the cost incurred by that miracle of all miracles. But unlike what happened with their modern selves, there was no escaping the callous hands of fate and magic. When she'd consulted the Triple Goddess about what must be exchanged for the creation of life and discovered the horrible truth, she knew what she had to do. The deal she made with her ancient benefactor would spare the life of her lover and their child at the cost of her own.

What memories Regina retained of her time in Avalon between her death in that time and her reemergence in her current persona spanned less than two decades. During that spiritual convalescence, she watched over her family, fretting endlessly over the grief that ever-haunted Eleni and aching at her absence at so many key events in the life of their child. When Eleni died not long after their daughter passed her eighteenth winter, she was there to welcome her mate into the afterlife. Once reunited, they were put into a state of stasis, taking them out of the natural cycle of the world. A thousand years passed by during which they slept in ignorant bliss, only to be reborn as the
women they now were.

Somehow, despite countless obstacles and mistakes and tragedies, they had found their way back to one another in their new physical shells. And now they were whole once more, two halves of the same coin reunited at last. It felt exhilarating as well as daunting. The weight of history on top of the present was exceedingly cumbersome.

As the memories spiraled uncontrollably through her mind, Regina cried out for her other half. As if beckoned by the call, Ruby appeared in her mind's eye, and when she caught sight of Regina, she stretched out her arm, hand open for the taking, an angelic smile upon beatific features. Heart filled to overflowing with so much love that she could barely contain it, Regina took her wife's hand.

Upon their skin contacting, an explosion of white magic ripped apart the ephemeral plane they were inhabiting so that it crumpled up like a piece of paper which then vanished into nothingness. Alone together in the vacuum between worlds, they hovered as if unbound yet somehow anchored to each another and to the strings of existence by the inescapable gravity of their love.

"I remember everything," Ruby said, wide-eyed and breathless with awe.

Regina smiled with untold adoration for the woman she had a brand-new appreciation for, a woman she had loved for more than one lifetime. Reconciling both of her selves was nigh on impossible without adequate opportunity for reflection, but acceptance was not very difficult to muster when the concept of being reincarnated was underpinned by the innate connection she shared with her True Love. A thousand lifetimes could war in her mind for dominance so long as Ruby was by her side to help her make sense of them.

"I remember, too," she then said, recalling a particularly vivid memory of speaking her last words as Elaine. "I told you I would wait for you."

Ruby's countenance soured at that. "Yes, you did. But you didn't stick around long enough to hear me say I wouldn't make you wait long." Her displeasure was not unexpected. Regina's death as Elaine was neither swift nor peaceful.

At the same time, though, Regina had righteous indignation of her own to wield at her eternal mate. "And I'll have you know that I'm still angry at you for giving up," she said, thinking of her time in Avalon and how she'd watched, disembodied and helplessly bereft, left to languish in a constant state of agony as Ruby – Eleni, rather – suffered silently while raising their child without her. Brows furrowing, she folded her arms over her chest. "Our daughter was barely grown and moved away before you grieved yourself to death. And I had a front row seat to the show. There were times I felt as if I were dying all over again, only it was so much worse because it was actually happening to you. I'd rather die a thousand deaths than watch you perish even once, but I didn't have a choice! I couldn't escape, couldn't turn away from your protracted demise. My love for you bound me in torturous fixation."

The thought of that time made Regina shudder from head to toe. It had been a fresh form of hell to watch her True Love wither away into a pathetic shell of a human being who had lost all interest in her own welfare. She all but stopped eating, barely slept, and paid no heed to the dangers of the wild as she wandered aimlessly through the forests of Albion. Even Merlin, the greatest wizard to ever live and the same man who had doted on Eleni from a baby, could not aid the heart-sickness that took hold. Desperate, plaintive cries and god-awful shrieks produced by endless nightmares were the lullaby sung to Regina each night – even in Avalon the connection their souls shared prevented her from avoiding them for even for a moment.

For eight interminable months the misery continued, the last three weeks of which were so harrowing
Regina wouldn't have wished such suffering upon Snow White at the very height of her madness. It had felt like an enormous gift of mercy when Eleni finally passed away.

Ever the stubborn pup, Ruby shrugged off the chastisement dismissively. "What can I say?" she huffed, matching Regina's defensive posture. "Save for Alexis, life without you was intolerable. Once she married and made a life of her own, she no longer needed me. No one needed me anymore. But I needed you, and you were gone. Without a purpose to focus on, all I could think about was how much I loved you and how much I missed you. I mourned for you every single day for eighteen years, Regina, and I just wanted it to be over so we could be together again. You're the other half of my soul. I'm fortunate to have made it as long I did."

Even were she not swayed by the tragically beautiful truth of that proclamation, Regina could not remain severe when confronted by Ruby's pouting. It was a weapon of manipulation to which she was forever vulnerable, no matter what name she was called by and even if it wasn't being used purposefully. But Ruby's reasoning had also struck a harmonic chord that echoed back to when she lost Daniel and again to when Ruby fell victim to the insanity of Joshua Woods.

If she were being honest with herself, had she not been able to resuscitate Ruby that day, there was no telling what she might have done after Sophia, the child that would have survived in her womb, was grown. Loathe as she was to admit it, suicide was an option she had seriously contemplated in the past, and now that she knew it was possible to literally grieve to death, she could not deny she might have done the same as Ruby did as Eleni.

Heaving a sigh, Regina relaxed her stiffened limbs and approached her taller spouse, reaching out to rub at taut arms that were indignantly crossed. "Well, we're together now. *Again.*" She smiled gently at the last bit, hoping to improve both of their moods from the currently morbid subject matter. The gambit worked, and her smile widened when Ruby's lips quirked up.

Ruby then hummed, green eyes recovering their liveliness. She shuffled forward into Regina's embrace until they were flush from head to toe. "Good thing, too. One lifetime was not enough for me. Two won't be either. I need forever this time. I can't live through losing you again."

While sympathetic to Ruby's feelings based on their former life, Regina had, as previously mentioned, almost lived through the very same thing in *this* life. Perhaps, she thought, should Ruby someday recover the memories of that event, it would lend her more impetuous spouse some perspective; and if not, then at least Ruby would understand what it was like to be rendered helpless to save the person she loved more than life itself. There was a reason Regina had, as Ruby would put it, lost her shit and went medieval on Joshua Woods' pathetic ass.

Thoughts of Joshua Woods, however, linked back to the person who was ultimately responsible for his brief reign of terror, which in turn reminded her of the present dire situation. "I want forever just as you do," she said. "But we can't have it at the expense of our friends and family. They are all still in danger back in Storybrooke. We must return to finish the battle with Belmordan before it's too late."

At the mention of Belmordan, Ruby stiffened. Clearly, she was having issues reconciling herself to the reality that not only was he her ancestor but also, in a form, her direct parent. Belmordan had not sired the body Ruby now inhabited, but he had given life to her spiritual essence, which for all intents and purposes made him her father. Regina could not fathom how difficult that was to process on top of everything else she and Ruby had gone through.

Ruby heaved out a heavy sigh as she leaned further into Regina. Her eyes were almost imploring for reassurance as she said, "You're right. We have to face him. I just...after all he's done, how can I do that knowing we will probably have to kill him? He's my father." She winced, averting her eyes to
take a shaky breath. "I mean, not only do I have one monster of a father now, but two, and even though I know how insane Belmordan is..." Trailing off, she sucked her bottom lip between her teeth, eyes pooling with unshed tears.

"Hey." Regina tipped Ruby's chin around to meet haunted eyes. "Evil he may be, but he's still your father. If anyone can sympathize with your position, it's me." Ruby nodded gratefully at the mention of Regina's own complicated relationship with her villainous parent. "As you know, I hated Snow for taking my mother away from me, but now I realize that while the circumstances may have been different had events played out otherwise, my mother's doom was inevitable. No matter what she said, no matter how fervently she promised I would have been enough, heart or no heart, she was always going to meet a violent end. Some people can't be saved, sweetheart, even when we try our very best to rescue them."

"In my head, I hear you," Ruby replied around a shaky breath. "My heart is another story."

Her own heart aching for her sensitive wife, Regina cupped Ruby's cheek with one hand and soothed her back with the other. She then deposited a brief but intensely intimate kiss upon those all-too-kissable lips.

"I'm sorry," she said after withdrawing. She replaced her lips with her thumb to rub tenderly across Ruby's full lower lip. "I don't envy what's being asked of you, and I wish more than anything that we had another choice. But we don't. We have to stop him. Whatever it takes."

Ruby gave her a sad nod before her eyes turned hopeful. "As long as we do it together."

"That was never in doubt, my love," Regina said, and with that, she leaned forward to join their lips once more.

The familiar tingle in her extremities and the surge of both affection and desire that accompanied every kiss with Ruby almost instantly flared to life, enveloping Regina in a cocoon of warmth that washed all extraneous thoughts away. As she lost herself in the embrace, a burst of magic emanated from somewhere between them. In the blink of an eye, they were back in the cavern, tethered once more to their physical bodies.

Regina came to herself still holding Ruby in her arms, just as she'd been before her previous life was unexpectedly restored to her memory. What exactly had transpired to produce the anomaly, she couldn't say except to speculate. They had been transported to some ethereal plane without solid material form, but she wasn't even sure it was a real place. Maybe it had been a spiritual projection or some otherwise esoteric magical phenomenon. Whatever the case, now was not an appropriate time to conduct a detailed analysis. There would be occasion for that when the world wasn't in danger of falling prey to madman.

Ruby's gasp abruptly wrenched Regina's attention from her thoughts. "Diana really wasn't lying," Ruby said as she pulled away to look Regina dead on, amazement making her eyes sparkle as if backlit by a billion glittering diamonds. "I still remember everything from before."

Regina beamed back at her. Ignoring their present surroundings, she kissed Ruby's forehead, whispering against sweat-dampened skin, "Me, too, amada. Me, too."

But before Ruby could say anything else, a movement from behind them caught their attention, and they both swirled to see Artemis approaching. Hands held up, the goddess' amber eyes were laden with turbulent emotions as she took one tentative step forward at a time.

"My child, is it really you?"
Ruby's eyes welled with tears. "It's me, Mama," she replied, then wrenched free of Regina's grasp to launch herself into her mother's receptive arms.

Though Regina remained ever aware of Belmordan's looming proximity, she was unable to suppress the feeling of gratitude at being given the privilege of witnessing the beautiful reunion between a mother and daughter who had endured so much adversity to reach this moment. She could feel Ruby's unbounded excitement through their link, tempered by a dreadful anxiety that was almost certainly related to Anita. That reunion hadn't ended so well.

Regina hoped against all logic that this time Ruby's mother would not fail her. That Artemis would make better choices than her descendant doppelganger had, if only for Ruby's sake. She'd lost so much already – too much, really – and deserved a break from playing one of fate's favorite punching bags.

How many loved ones did Ruby have to bury before it was enough? Dealing with what happened to Granny was going to be a nightmare of epic proportions, both literally and figuratively, but if Artemis could be saved, if some goodness within the Olympian could be salvaged and they all emerged from this disaster alive if not unscathed, perhaps Granny's death could be blunted by the presence of a mother who appeared to be at least partially driven by love for her child.

Counting on Artemis to do the right thing was a fool's hope, she knew, but absent a viable means by which to defeat Belmordan, what other choice did she have? No one in the square had any idea where they were. Emma was trapped and unable to get free of Belmordan's shield. Ruby was far too weakened to present a credible threat. And Regina herself was clearly no match for a sorcerer whose powers rivaled those of the gods. Therefore hope was her only resort.

If only she'd known how cruelly it was about to be dashed...

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully this chapter made sense. If not, I'm sorry! Somewhere along the line writing this story, I got the idea to play around with the concept of reincarnation. If in any fandom, I thought it would have a place in OUaT, where the fantastical is pedestrian. It made sense to me to expand on it some, to mold it to the OUaT universe by tethering it to the romantic variant of True Love, as explained in the chapter with Ruby, Diana, and Zeus.

So in this story's canon, True Love couples have all been reincarnated. This process happens over and over again until they reach a 'perfect state' where their bond cannot possibly grow any deeper, after which they will move on to 'paradise'. That means it's happened to Snow/Charming, Belle/Rumple, Aurora/Philip as well. I could go on about this because I spent way too much time thinking about, but I'll stop there lest this drag on to the point of being irritating.

As always, thanks for reading, sending kudos, comments, etc. Next chapter will start the last section of Emma POV installments, which will wrap up the main narrative. It's almost over, folks. Thank God.
A Swan's Perspective, Pt. 7

Chapter Summary

Emma enjoys a front row seat to disaster.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In all the years Emma Swan had served as Storybrooke's resident Savior, she had witnessed a number of fantastical things her twenty-seven year and three-hundred-sixty-four-day old self would have laughed off as the absurd delusions of a recently escaped mental patient. That Emma had been a creature of extreme pragmatism who didn't believe in much aside from her own proven ability to survive. Scraping and clawing her way through life had got her that far, and she couldn't fathom that worldview changing anytime soon. Fairy tales were nothing but moral relics left over from an uncivilized bygone era.

And then on her twenty-eighth birthday, a ten year old kid from a town she'd never heard of in Maine showed up at her apartment.

It all seemed so surreal now in retrospect. The whole process of returning Henry to his mother wasn't meant to take more than a day. Being constrained to stay in Storybrooke by forces beyond her comprehension hadn't entered the equation when she dropped Henry off at Regina's house, nor had she anticipated encountering a gorgeous young waitress whose smile did things to her she'd thought she buried alongside her youthfully naive adoration of Neal. Meeting Mary Margaret the next day initiated the sewing of a magical seam that conspired with fate to slowly and methodically transform an aloof bailbondsman into a Savior she never wanted to be. Of course, she knew now it was no coincidence she'd become best friends with the woman who turned out to be her long-lost mother, but back then she'd just liked the pixie-haired teacher too much and been too suspicious of the tyrant raising her son to leave town just yet.

Then the Curse broke, officially recorded in Storybrooke history as Emma's first act as Savior, and her eyes had been opened to a whole new reality. In the aftermath of that awakening, she'd discovered that her parents actually were Snow Friggin' White and Prince Friggin' Charming. Only their reunion was to be rudely interrupted by Gold's shenanigans.

After being briefly reunited with the family she'd dreamt of for so long, she and her mother – who, by the way, just so happened to be the same age as her – managed to get sucked into another world inhabited by fairy tale characters and ogres and pirates and scary as hell sorceresses who just so happened to be the mother of her chief rival at the time. Said sorceress making it back to Storybrooke culminated in another interesting stretch where she'd been praying on an hourly basis that Regina wouldn't roast Snow alive for accidentally killing Cora. Somehow, they'd got through all that without destroying the town or each other.

But then Henry was abducted and she'd had to travel to Neverland of all places to rescue him from an evil Peter Pan. Again in keeping with the twisted family trees of Fairy Tale Land, Pan wound up being her son's great-grandfather. The damn stories had gotten that one wrong, alright. Making peace with her status as an unofficial Lost Girl hadn't been a picnic, and Neal's unexpected reappearance hadn't helped matters, either. Dealing with one potential suitor was irritating enough, not to mention
two untrustworthy scoundrels vying for her affection. But again, she'd stumbled through doing her Savioring and in the process – and with a lot of help from her compatriots – salvaged a boondoggle of an operation to return Henry back home safely.

Following that tumultuous ordeal, she had to team up yet again with the reforming Evil Queen in order to defeat said reforming Evil Queen's crazy ass sister. And then Zelena went back in time to erase Regina from existence which resulted in Regina's supposed Soul Mate leaving her after they got back to Storybrooke. That went down because, oh hey surprise!, Zelena accidentally let it slip that during Regina's reign of terror as Queen, Marian – her supposed Soul Mate's wife – was executed on her orders, which left Robin a widow and his son, Roland, motherless.

That she and Regina forged a genuine friendship out of this unending crucible was an unexpected boon that soon thereafter turned fortuitous when Regina and Ruby hit it off. If she was being forthcoming, Emma would admit to being a little jealous of Regina back then. She'd still been harboring a bit of a crush on Ruby before she decided to give Hook a chance. Not that she ever would have acted on her feelings anyway; she valued their friendship far too much to risk ruining it by making a move, even if she thought at times Ruby might have reciprocated. Seeing Regina and Ruby together took the sting out of her envy, though. First and foremost they were both her friends, so she was happy to see them happy.

During that stretch, the live action version of the movie Frozen came to Storybrooke in the form of a flesh and blood Elsa. And eventually Anna and Kristoff. As if that were not exciting enough, Emma was soon to learn that one of her former foster parents, one of three she had actually cared about, was the Ice Queen. The end of that conflict was still a bittersweet memory for Emma. As much as the woman had made some remarkably bad mistakes, she'd done so out of a pure if not ultimately misguided love that in retrospect, with her memories restored, Emma came to understand and even appreciate. Ingrid sacrificing herself to save the town was one of the most terrible experiences in a life chock full of them, and were it not for Elsa, she might have dissolved into a mess of tears at the unfair timing of their reconciliation. But Elsa had been reeling from her aunt's death and living in perpetual stress over Anna's fate, so Emma sucked in the pain like she always did and went on with the thankless job of being the Savior.

Elsa. Thinking of the Queen of Arendelle sent a pang through Emma's heart. She missed Elsa more than she could express. The two weeks per year the Queen of Arendelle visited Storybrooke were just not enough in her opinion, though she understood her platinum-blonde friend's obligations to her family and nation. Being a ruler seemed like such a drag. Even so, Emma took what time she could get with her sister-from-another-mister (a phrase that without fail reduced Elsa into a fit of very undignified giggling), and was even making plans to visit her kindred spirit now that reliable bean transport was soon to be an option. She couldn't wait to see Elsa's face when she arrived in whatever corner of Arendelle their monarch was occupying at that moment.

What's more though, Emma was dying to bend Elsa's ear regarding a subject both incredibly exciting but also just as worrisome for those of innate powers of their caliber. Normally Emma would discuss private things with Ruby, but this was too sensitive for even Ruby's ears since her lanky bestie was unable to keep secrets from either Regina or Snow. Elsa, on the other hand, was someone Emma felt safe enough with to confide her most deeply guarded secrets. And this one was certainly a doozy.

Up til now, the icing on the cake of her tenure as resident Savior had been becoming the Dark One. The only silver lining out of that hellish experience was realizing what she had with Hook was real, something she could build on for the rest of her life. A lot of regrettable shit went down in the interim, though. Much of it stained Emma's conscience colors more befitting a Sauron level villain than a Savior with an Atlas Stone burden. As a kid who grew up in and out of foster care, she was no stranger to deeply disturbing emotions, but she'd never imagined she could be so insidious and
cruel. The things she'd done to Killian and her parents...to Regina...to Ruby...she shuddered to allow even the fringes of her thoughts to turn there for fear of getting lost in the murky haze of self-loathing.

Needless to say, after so much adversity in the course of her Savioring career Emma thought she had seen it all. She hadn't. Not even close. There really were no words to describe what she had witnessed in the Enchanted Forest with Ruby, from the time dilation near the Dark Palace to the revelations concerning the origins of werewolves. The past hour proved even more daunting to process, seeing as a literal army straight out of the pages of a fantasy novel had invaded Storybrooke only to be heroically defeated. Then Belmordan made his theatrical, mustache-twirling appearance onto the scene. Granny's death at his hand soon followed, and Emma barely had time to register what had happened before Ruby shapeshifted into furry humanoid rage monster. Honestly, Emma thought that Ruby's new form resembled a creature come to life straight out of the digital code of the *World of Warcraft*.

And then there was the bombshell revealed when Belmordan attempted to crush Regina's half of the heart, her own heart, she had split years ago to save Ruby's life. Apparently True Love couples with hearts in common were protected from one half being destroyed so long as the other remained intact, a tidbit that went a great deal toward easing Emma's mind where her parents were concerned. She'd long harbored anxieties over the heart Snow White and Prince Charming shared, knowing it meant her parents' fates were inextricably linked by the potent magic that made that miracle possible. Sleep would come a little bit easier without worrying about the accidental, or purposeful, death of one robbing her of both.

No matter how relieved Emma was for her mom and dad or how overwhelmed she was by everything that had gone down today, all she could really think about right now was how to escape the damnable bubble Belmordan had trapped her in. Her blood was boiling to help Regina and Ruby kill the bastard, if only for what he did to Granny. It was just wrong that the woman had survived so much, both in Storybrooke and the Enchanted Forest, to die that way – and in front of her granddaughter's eyes at that.

Of course, it hadn't really registered to Emma yet that said bastard was in some metaphysically twisted way Ruby's father. That oversight was soon to be corrected.

"I remember my old life again. So does Regina," Ruby said to Artemis, drawing Emma's attention back to what was unfolding in front of her.

She had sort of gone haywire when her friends all but went catatonic for the space of a minute. What happened to them, she hadn't the faintest idea, but she was extremely relieved they both seemed to be okay...ish. All of this talk of reincarnation was bending her gray matter in shapes it wasn't supposed to be in. That kind of shit was more up August's alley. It mostly gave her a headache, and it had to be even worse for Regina and Ruby.

"I was Eleni once, but I'm someone else now," Ruby added, piling on to the mystifying situation Emma found herself mired in. Ruby then shrugged bashfully. "I like being her better, actually. So please, call me Ruby."

"What in the actual hell is going on?" She mumbled under her breath as Artemis took every opportunity to touch Ruby, roaming exploratory motherly hands over Ruby's face, hair, neck, and arms. That Ruby let the woman paw at her wasn't all that surprising. If what was being said was true, there was a reunion of sorts going on between Ruby and her ostensible mother. That, and Ruby was a very tactile person who loved to both give and receive hugs and kisses from those she loved. Emma was quite fond those hugs and kisses, in a platonic way of course, and returned them every chance
she got, but it was weird to see Ruby permitting a stranger to display such intimacy.

"Whatever your name, you are my child," said Artemis, eyes gleaming with happy tears. "My precious girl, I thought to never see you again, to never hold you in my arms. And now here you are, alive and beautiful and grown into a woman befitting your lineage. I have missed so much! Oh, that I could turn back the wheels of time, if only to witness your first steps or hear your first words! If only I could change..."

Ruby cut in, eyes imploring. "But you can't, Mama. We can't go back, and even if we could, I don't want to. I love my life here." Then her features smoothed into steadfast determination. "But there is something you can change: the future. And you can do that by ending this right here, right now. Help us make peace, not only for this world but for so many others that have fallen prey to your mate's ambition. We can start fresh. It's not too late, you know? We can build a relationship, become a real family. You have grandchildren! Oh, and they are so beautiful, Mama! Don't you want to meet them and watch them grow up?"

Emma nodded along, understanding now what Ruby was doing and hoping against hope that it worked. All the better if this weirdest of situations could be leveraged to convince the freed goddess to abandon whatever maniacal plan her lover had for the world. Too much blood had already been shed in Emma's estimation. Far too much.

"I do. More than anything," Artemis replied, eyes glistening. Emma could tell the Olympian meant that, causing her heart to swell with hope. Sadly, it was to be mercilessly squashed as if a wayward insect under a booted heel.

"I've heard enough of this blasphemy!" Belmordan roared from over Artemis' shoulder. He advanced on the embracing mother and daughter, face a storm of hazardous fury. Emma's heart plummeted back into her stomach as the Dark Sorcerer summoned his staff back into his hand then pointed it threateningly at Ruby. She clenched Excalibur, which was humming at her side, tighter in hand. "Eleni is dead!" he thundered, eyes sparking crimson as lightning gathered at the spear-point of his very scary weapon. "This girl is a heretic! Her lies desecrate the memory of our child, a crime for which she must die!"

Emma shouted in horror as Belmordan aggressively leveled the staff at Ruby, murder etched upon his deep features. But before he could send the bolt of lightning streaking into Ruby's chest, Regina lashed out with her magic, knocking the staff from his hand.

"You selfish bastard!" Regina cried, now herself infuriated. "All she ever wanted were her parents and you would keep her from having that? How dare you!"

"Regina, no!" Ruby shouted to no avail, reaching for her irate wife as Artemis held her back.

Ignoring the pleas that came pouring out from Ruby, Regina struck an off-kilter Belmordan with a burst of magic from her palm, sending him careening against the stone wall of the cave. Before his ass ever contacted the ground, she was advancing on him, sword drawn and frigid shadows of death dancing in her eyes. She lifted the sword to his breast upon reaching him and was poised to thrust it through his heart when his head snapped up and his eyes flashed red. Unspoken magic sent Regina flying back against the opposite wall, a return of the favor she'd bestowed upon him. Unlike with Belmordan, though, when Regina hit the wall, she stuck there, frozen in place by tendrils of snake-like magic, red as blood and thick as Emma's wrist.

Belmordan moved to stand, and once upright leveled a glare upon Regina that sent shivers of fear chasing down Emma's spine.
"For that," he growled, eyes now glowing that disturbing shade of malevolent red, "you'll watch while I send the mendacious mongrel you call 'wife' straight to hell." When he extended his hand a moment later, his staff flew toward him. He caught it without ever looking, striding purposefully toward Ruby.

Artemis, panic written across her features, stepped between them. "No, Gryffyn, stop!" Her pleas fell on deaf ears. On came Belmordan, his eyes tinted with unrestrained mania, a deeply furrowed brow, and sharpened teeth bared in rage. "I beg you, please! Can't you see that she is our child? Stop, damn you! STOP!" Her pleas being ignored, Artemis stepped forward, extending her hand out toward her lover's heaving chest.

As if blind to Artemis' presence, Belmordan callously waved a hand through the air, batting her away with his magic. That same hand then reached toward Ruby, making an open fist as though it were wrapping around her throat. Like a scene from Star Wars with Belmordan cast as Darth Vader, Ruby's eyes widened with terror as she began choking and clawing at her throat, her feet leaving the earth one inch at a time.

"Time to die, bitch," he declared, then hefted his staff with the other arm. Spear tip poised at Ruby's breast right over her heart, he drew back to strike the fatal blow.

When Emma caught the twitching of muscles in Belmordan's forearms, she tensed so tightly that her own muscles and bones issued complaint. Her mind flashed back to that night which had terrorized her dreams ever since she'd rounded the corner of a seemingly innocuous basement to find a scene straight out of Texas Chainsaw Massacre and her best friend the barbarized victim. Ruby had been dead when they found her, and now she was about to die again with Emma impotent to intervene. Her magic was useless against Belmordan's save for that one instance in the Enchanted Forest that came frighteningly close to draining her. Whatever had happened to empower her then seemed reluctant to rear its head now, leaving Emma to watch as yet again she was about to fail one of the handful of people she loved enough to lay down her life for.

Unable to watch what was about to happen, she clenched her eyes tightly shut, teeth grinding together so viciously that her jaws protested the abuse. The air stilled. A whoosh cut through the oppressive silence. Emma's heart thundered erratically in chest. Another space of stillness. And then a scream shattered the quiet, rattling everything within the cavern. The walls shook and the ground trembled underneath her feet. Dimly, she recognized that the scream was distinctly male. Her eyes shot open, hardly daring to hope. In equal measures of horror and joy, she was met by the sight of a statuesque woman skewered upon the end of Belmordan's bladed staff. Emma's joy was because the victim wasn't Ruby; the horror because it was Artemis.

Eyes bulging, mouth hanging open in shock as the Dark Sorcerer dropped his staff, and without Belmordan to hold her up, Artemis fell limply upon her side and did not move. For a moment, her lover made no move save to stare in disbelief as the woman his thousand year reign of terror had been designed to liberate bled out upon the cold, filthy cavern floor. His face twisted, ugly with insanity, as his entire frame began to vibrate. A beat later, a low rumbling sound worked upward from his stomach until it erupted from his lips. Another scream of grief was unleashed, this one so forceful that it strained every muscle in his neck and face, causing veins to bulge and his flesh to redden.

In the immediate aftermath of the accident, Belmordan lost control over portions of his magic, which released the bonds holding Ruby and Regina in place. Emma remained frustratingly trapped, but her friends, now freed from his grip, tumbled to the ground in undignified heaps. Ruby predictably
recovered with lupine grace and swiftness, after which she deftly rolled onto to her hands and knees, then scrambled to the side of the fallen Olympian.

"Oh, my God, please, no!" she wailed, tears flowing freely as she vainly attempted to staunch the steady stream of blood flowing from what Emma knew to be a fatal wound. "Please don't go! Please! I just found you again!"

While this was happening, Regina got to her feet, pausing for a second to regain her footing; but upon catching sight of Artemis and Ruby, she rushed over and fell roughly on her knees beside her distraught wife. The stricken look on Regina's face when she inspected Artemis' wound up close told Emma all she needed to know. It was, as she initially deduced, fatal.

Regina visibly gathered her nerve, then placed a supportive hand at the small of Ruby's back. "Remove the blade, sweetheart," she instructed, voice impressively neutral considering this latest in a long line of tragedies that had befallen her family.

"B-but she'll b-bleed to death," Ruby said in reply, her agony on full display.

Regina's cheek twitched. Emma could tell her friend was having a hard time keeping her emotions in check, but was being brave for Ruby's sake.

"She is bleeding to death already, Ruby," Regina said, matter-of-fact while remaining sympathetic. She gently rubbed circles over Ruby's upper back. "If Olympians are anything like humans anatomically, her liver is shredded beyond repair."

"You can't save her with magic?" Ruby asked, looking beyond desperate.

A groan escaped Artemis' lips before Regina could reply. "Her magic..." she trailed off to groan again, "is incom...incompatible to Olympian physiology. N-not even Gryff..." she paused to gasp a lung full of air, "can help me now. There is nothing to b-be done. R-remove the...blade."

Another groan, followed by a wet cough. "Please, my daughter...let me spend...my last moments looking...at you."

Though Ruby was clearly close to breaking down at the awful request, she nonetheless complied. Whether out of duty or love for her mother or simply because she recognized the truth in the statement, Emma was not sure. One harsh tug from Ruby's trembling hand had the bladed staff sliding free from Artemis' torso with a sickening squelch. Ruby immediately tossed it away, then arranged herself into a seated position, legs outstretched, and with Regina's help, carefully maneuvered her dying mother onto her lap. Cradling Artemis as if a child, Ruby's tears spilled down her cheeks uninterrupted.

Artemis smiled up at her, teeth stained red but her eyes brimming with adoration. She reached a weak hand up to place it lovingly upon Ruby's cheek. When it slipped off because of her rapidly waning strength, Ruby caught it and pressed it back against her flushed skin.

"I love you, Mama," Ruby cried as Regina turned her face away, unwilling to watch Ruby suffer yet another loss, or unable to.

"My beautiful baby girl," Artemis said, voice strong in stark juxtaposition to her rapidly paling skin. The entire front of her purple chiton was staining dark with blood. "I lo..." she gasped a pained breath, "love you, too. So much. So much." Artemis smiled again for one moment. But then Emma whimpered in dismay, right along with Ruby it turned out, upon watching the goddess' eyes begin to glass over. "Tell Diana..."
"Mama!" Ruby screamed upon Artemis trailing off. When the Olympian's head lolled and her eyes rolled in their sockets, Ruby gave her a frantic shake.

Emma held her breath. For a moment, Ruby's efforts were fruitless, but then as it seemed she was about to lose her grip on control, Artemis gasped yet again. After amber eyes refocused, the goddess fixed them on Ruby, who was caught somewhere between despair over what was inevitably coming and an almost euphoric relief she had a few more seconds to spend with a woman she had just met.

Emma didn't need a glimpse into Ruby's mind to decipher the unconditional love her friend was feeling; she'd experienced it herself the first time she looked upon Mary Margaret Blanchard as her mother instead of her adorable roommate. It was a daughter's love that somehow and against all sense transcends the most abysmal failures of her mother to instead embrace, even celebrate, the attributes that make them so very easy to love. For Emma, it had been her mother's fathomless well of love for her that got her past being abandoned; she could tell in a glance it was the same for Ruby.

A moment after, an almost awe-struck quality overtook Artemis. "Tell her she was right about me," she then said, as if she'd written herself off as lost but now realized there was some good left within her.

But before Ruby could respond, Artemis' breathing stilted, becoming irregular and labored as her eyes widened in stark terror. Emma's throat closed in. She knew death was coming to claim the proud Olympian and there was nothing she or anyone else could do to stop it.

Artemis gripped at Ruby's shirt after desperately sucking in oxygen several times, the act appearing painful as if her esophagus had shrunk to internal diameter of a silly-straw. But the importance of the message prevailed, and with once last heroic effort, she heaved out with a rasping voice, "Tell her I love her, and forgive her, and that I wi-wi-wish..."

This time, however, Artemis did not recover to finish her thought. As her speech slurred into an incomprehensible drone that rapidly faded into a decrescendo sigh. Golden eyes dulled as all signs of life left them and a previously imposing body went disturbingly lax. Emma was familiar enough with death to recognize it's arrival.

Her eyes immediately sought out Ruby, and the primal scream her best friend released as she cradled her dead mother was nothing short of bloodcurdling. And just like that Emma was transported back in time to Joshua Woods' basement all over again, a place of excruciating despair where her heart nearly stopped beating at the sound of Regina's crazed banshee wails.

With no one or nothing to anchor her, Emma sank deeply into the turbulent undercurrent of emotions as the present tragedy blended with that god-awful memory. She became so mired in crippling sorrow that it was hard for her to tell how long Ruby released her anguish into the chilly air of the cavern. All she knew was the keening despair seemed to go on in one unending howl, at times sounding more the choked cries of some poor, wounded creature only to surge once again into a pitched screeching that defied the ability of human ear drums to withstand.

Hands over her ears, Emma wept silently as Regina held fast to Ruby from behind, keeping the distraught werewolf stable lest she slump boneless over the limp corpse of her mother. It was to Emma more like a scene out of some overly dramatized tragedy than real life, and she would have been convinced she was locked fast within the inescapable talons of a vicious nightmare were it not for the lingering pain in her side.

During the battle in the town square, she'd been nicked by a glancing blade while trying to muscle three brutish looking soldiers away from delivering the fatal blow to a wounded citizen. Up until the present she'd not felt the wound, but now that the adrenaline of open battle had worn off, she could
at last feel the protest of damaged nerves sending frantic bursts of communication to her brain signaling for emergency repairs. The pain wasn't unbearable, which was good, but mostly she was perversely grateful that it kept her grounded. She couldn't afford to lose perspective, to slide so perilously close to the edge of devastation as Ruby was and nearing the precipice of uncontrollable rage as Regina.

Not that Emma begrudged her friends how they felt. Far from it. Ruby deserved permission to scream her head off if she so wished, just as Regina was perfectly justified in seeking retribution for yet another crime committed against the woman who literally carried half of heart inside her chest. Hard pressed as she was to conjure up two people who had seen more tragedy in their lives, Emma could hardly fathom how the couple kept each other from going Humpty Dumpty and shattering into fragments so vast and tiny they could never be put back together again. There was one thing she was certain of, though: when all of this was over, she planned on having herself a good cry on their behalf.

In the present distress, all of Emma's focus was on maintaining a tight leash upon her emotions. Knowing her friends might already have succumbed to irrationality made it imperative she stay in control. Now was not the time to break down. As she clamped down on the complex, visceral feelings swirling within her breast, she felt her heart rate begin slow down, along with an accompanying calmness that ran contrary to the tragic scene before her.

While Ruby remained a prisoner of an almost tangible grief, Regina appeared on verge of unleashing the darkness of the Queen upon the man responsible for all the calamities that had befallen her family over the past decade. Meanwhile Belmordan was still paralyzed by inaction, caught somewhere between his own immeasurable grief and a looming break from sanity that was rapidly tinting his eyes crimson red. They glowed in the dimness of the cave, illuminating his twisted features so that Emma could clearly make out cheeks quaking manically, nostrils flared like a bull set to charge, brow creased in unspeakable anguish, and sharpened teeth bared with unchecked aggression. Eyes burning with malefic intent flitted between Artemis' corpse and Ruby as Regina observed him warily. The moment he snapped a heartbeat later was impossible to miss, what with the way his entire visage blanked as if he suddenly severed himself from all feeling. Emma's gut clenched. She knew what was about to happen.

With a shout of lamented fury, he strode forward, features warped with an animosity that no one and nothing could contain. Reacting more quickly than Emma could have predicted, Regina abandoned Ruby, slipping between her wife and the maddened sorcerer bent on killing her in retribution. An arm was raised toward him as her lips twisted into a snarl.

"Stay away from her!" Regina warned, voice low and commanding and seething with hatred. Ruby's lamentations stopped abruptly at her wife's tone.

Unsurprisingly, he did not heed the command. On he came, red eyes blazing, and when he was within striking distance, Regina lashed out with her magic, sending him sprawling backward. But the ancient werewolf recovered with astonishing dexterity, his lupine reflexes affording him quick purchase back onto his feet.

"You can't stop me with your paltry magic," he said, and when Regina summoned a fireball and flung it at his head, he batted it away with a hand that seemed to be wrapped up in inky darkness. Another five fireballs followed the first, each batted away or sidestepped by a devilishly grinning Belmordan. The last volley puffed into a useless wisp of smoke at a single wave of his hand. In the low light of the cavern, he appeared to grow in stature, casting a pale shadow so hideous and ominous that it stole Emma's breath away. "I've tolerated your interference for the last time," he then bellowed, white teeth glinting crimson from the hellish glow of his eyes. "I'll have my revenge on
He sped the remaining distance between them in a blur of movement, catching Regina around the throat with an enormous hand before she could even brace herself. As she choked, gagging for air and increasingly red-faced, she vainly batted at his arms. For a moment, Ruby sat stunned, as if unable to comprehend what she was seeing. When Regina's eyes started to roll into her skull, Emma began shouting at the top of her lungs at Ruby to do something. For whatever reason, the pleas registered in Ruby's ears. Irises flashing yellow, teeth on display, she surged forward with inhuman speed.

Belmordan didn't bat an eye as he neatly flung Regina against the cavern wall with such force that the former Queen crumbled to the ground, immediately unconscious. Just as he released Regina, he deftly sidestepped Ruby's advance, using her momentum to push her away so that she lost her balance and pitched forward. Thankfully Ruby was able to roll into her fall, tumbling head over heel, so that she could utilize her momentum to spring up onto her haunches.

"I won't kill your mate just yet," Belmordan said as he swirled to march toward Ruby, who was glowering at him from a position poised to retaliate. "I'm going to end you first. But know that after you are dead, I will visit such horrors upon her that the pathetic whelp who once so callously slaughtered you would balk at them."

The threats, along with the reference to what Joshua did to her, pushed Ruby over the edge. Coming unhinged, she roared with such volume that the cavern shook, just barely, but enough for Emma to feel the ground subtly vibrate beneath her boots. Emma watched, fascinated and more than a little disturbed, as Ruby then began to shift into that freakish hybrid form she'd entered earlier.

"I'm going to tear you limb from limb," Ruby replied, now in her humanoid fur. Her voice was deeper as if in a permanent growl, yet still somehow unmistakably Ruby. The sound of it sent a shiver corkscrewing down the length of Emma's spine.

Belmordan just smirked, unaffected by her ire. And then he, too, shifted into his hybrid form. After lowering his snout, crimson orbs peering balefully at Ruby, he replied in that unnerving wolfen voice, "A bold threat. We shall see if you can make good on it."

A heartbeat passed in silence. Emma felt a drop of sweat run down her temple and could hear her heart hammering in her ears. She braced her hands against the shimmering magic of the barrier keeping her trapped, pressing in close so that her nose was nearly touching it, and waited.

A tick of an eyelid was the only warning sign before Ruby launched at Belmordan with a viscous growling snarl. In the blink of an eye, she was swiping a furry, clawed hand at her enemy. The attack was easily batted away. A flurry of blows followed, each so fast that Emma could barely keep track of what was happening, each of them easily blocked by her opponent. On the last swipe, he caught her wrist, gripping it so tightly that Ruby yelped before closing her free hand into fist and smashing it into his chest.

Reeling back, he stumbled, eyes bulging in disbelief. Ruby did not allow him time to recover before she was on him again, this time punching at his head. The dark sorcerer was able to duck out of the way, but only just barely, so that Ruby's fist clipped the tip of his wolfen ear, folding it back in that funny way that happens to dogs sometimes and usually ends up in an image plastered all over Facebook. Emma might have laughed had the situation not been so perilous.

Ruby's punch had unfortunately opened her up to counterattack, which Belmordan exploited without mercy via a brutal strike to her ribs. Emma heard the snapping of bone just as Ruby doubled over in pain. Belmordan took advantage of her temporary disability by crashing an iron fist into the back of
her head. Ruby fell to the ground in a heap, lambent amber eyes rolling and unfocused from the concussive force of the blow.

Kneeling beside her, Belmordan encircled her neck with his right arm, which he locked in with the left. Her oxygen supply cut off, Ruby struggled against the choke hold, slapping and punching as she flailed her legs to find purchase for her feet on the slippery cavern floor.

"Do not fight against the inevitable child," he said as he tightened his grip, causing Ruby's eyes to bulge both from the pressure and the realization that she could not escape his superior position and strength. "This is the moment of your demise. You will join my beloved in the underworld, and who knows what fate awaits you there. Do not fret. I will send your mate along shortly. Then I shall find those pups of yours and groom them in your place."

Mention of her children caused Ruby to struggle even more valiantly, but Emma could see that it was futile. Her resistance only cost her energy that was fading so quickly that Emma could see the light fading from her eyes. Ruby was dying, and Regina would be next. After that, could Belmordan possibly be stopped? If his army was half a big as he boasted, there was little to no chance the defense in the town square had held strong. Likely, all of the citizens who banded together to fight for Storybrooke were dead, and if not, soon would be once their enemy had dispatched Emma and returned to the surface to finish what he started.

As the evident finality of events settled deeply into her bones, she cried out, and quite unexpectedly, her dismay caught Ruby's attention. Casting dull eyes in Emma's direction, Ruby opened her mouth as if to speak, though no words came out.

"I'm so sorry!" Emma cried out, failure lancing her tattered pride. Rendered useless, forced to watch two of the people she loved most die horrible, hot, bitter tears began falling. With her legs suddenly unable to hold her up, she collapsed heavily to her knees. "I'm sorry, Ruby! I'm so, so sorry!"

Ruby opened her mouth again to reply, but again nothing came out aside from a prolonged groan as Belmordan tightened his grip one final time. On the precipice of unconsciousness, Ruby involuntarily shifted back into her human form and mouthed three simple words that pierced Emma to the marrow: "I love you." And with that, Ruby's eyelids shuttered closed and she slumped against Belmordan, who released her then stood to gaze down with visible regret at his fallen offspring.

Emma stared dumbly. Her heart stuttered in her chest. Dread washed over her like the oppressive pall that hangs over a cemetery at night.

*So this is what the end feels like,* she thought. If so, it was worse than she had ever imagined.

Chapter End Notes

Not much to say here aside from encouraging patience. There's a reason I went back to Emma's POV for the conclusion of the narrative. Hopefully it makes sense as the finale unfolds.
In a showdown for the ages, Emma earns her title of the Savior.

Numb with shock, Emma studied Ruby closely to search for any movement in her chest that might indicate she was still breathing. Even the slightest tremor would have sufficed. But no matter how fervently Emma prayed, Ruby remained unnaturally motionless. Her skin even seemed paler than usual, an indication that could not be misinterpreted when taken together with the previous observation.

Something broke inside Emma then. Her closest friend and confidante, someone she loved almost as dearly as her own flesh, was lying dead upon the dirty cavern floor. What made it worse was that is was second time in less than a decade she'd been put in this position. When they found Ruby dead in Joshua Woods' basement, Emma hadn't been prepared for how visceral the reaction would be. So that her parents wouldn't see, she'd internalized it as best she could, but between the grisly discovery and Regina doing her thing to dispatch the culprit, Emma had visualized taking the law into her own hands. It took all of her strength to keep from pulling her service pistol and putting a bullet through Joshua's skull.

She hadn't acted for a variety of reasons. For one, it wasn't her place to intervene seeing as she wasn't Ruby's spouse. Secondly, being a woman starkly independent in her vindictiveness, Regina wouldn't have needed or appreciated help in the matter. Thirdly, there was nothing Emma could do to Joshua that Regina couldn't do a thousand times worse. And lastly, in the end she hadn't needed to do anything because Regina was able to bring Ruby back to life by sharing her heart. None of that changed the fact that a sworn officer of the law, someone the entire town celebrated as some untouchable bastion of virtue, had contemplated cold-blooded murder. And not just contemplated. Had none of the above prohibitive factors existed, there was little doubt she would have followed through on her primal desire for revenge.

Now, just as before, her mind veered down darkened alleyways unfit to trod for a bastion of light and hope such as the Savior. An insatiable craving for violence took control of her conscience so that all sense of right and wrong lost meaning. Her chest burned with more hatred than she had ever felt before. Blood rushed through her veins, molten with fury, searing her from the inside out. Her extremities tingled with dreadful anticipation, itching for the chance to be turned loose in a fight. Every pore of her body sang a song of slaughter. Stripped clean from her righteous mandate as Savior to serve and protect, she was transfigured into an instrument of vengeance.

_This is the hour for which you were born. Release your inhibitions. Become who you were always meant to be!_ she heard a disembodied baritone voice say. Somehow she knew it was the call of Excalibur, just the same as she'd known it in the Enchanted Forest, and she was not inclined to resist its summons.

She reached for the sword obediently, steely resolve and an unshakable sense of purpose guiding her movements. Her knuckles crackled and popped as her fingers wrapped around the leather grip.
Planting one foot upon the ground, she rose from her knees as if some creature of nightmares emerging from the fathomless depths of a sanguine sea. Now upright, she took a single step away from the barrier. Magic swelled within her breast, a paradoxical power doused in infinity and edged in finality, and as it reached a climax of meteoric proportions, it began to pour through her arm into her sword.

Once again, and as she had done back in the Enchanted Forest, Emma acted on instinct to channel her magic into Excalibur. As she raised the weapon above her head, she noticed in her peripheral vision that it was shimmering with white magic, and were her faculties capable of rational analysis, she would have been amazed that she was even capable of drawing upon a force so pure when her sole desire was to kill. Even so, Excalibur gleamed in stark contrast to the malice within, and it shone so brightly that the entire cavern was flooded with light. Later she would learn that even hatred was a weapon that could be wielded out of love, and in that moment it had empowered her beyond any height of magical prowess she had ever reached before or ever would thereafter.

With a mighty cry, she brought the blade down upon the magical barrier holding her captive. But rather than disintegrating in an explosion of ephemeral magical debris as in her previous escape, the shell shattered into ragged fragments as if glass. The shards rained down all around around her, bouncing from her shoulder and head, slicing at the bits of skin left uncovered by her armor. She paid no heed to the pain. All she could see was her target: Belmordan, still hovering menacingly over Ruby's body.

"It's just you and me now," Emma said, jaw taut and brows deeply furrowed. Rage like wildfire licked through her limbs, an inferno that an ocean could not quench, and she embraced it, allowed it to wrap around her body and mind and heart and soul until she was trembling from head to toe. "There is no one to interfere, no way of escape. There were be no magic, either, unless you are too much a coward to face me with only cold steel and warm flesh."

Belmordan's eyes narrowed at the slight, which pleased Emma more than it should have given how powerful he was. She knew her only chance at defeating him was to lure him into a battle of physical skill. Her magic, though strong, was no match to his. Appealing to his pride seemed the best way of securing an honorable duel.

To sweeten the incentive for him to kill her with raw melee prowess, she added a haughty smirk. "And this time I'll take your head instead of your hand."

Belmordan barked out a gruff laugh, as if amused by her audacity. For a second, she feared her gambit had failed. But then he gave her a flourishd bow, and with one subsequent snap of his fingers summoned his bladed staff into his outstretched hand.

"Boldly said. I welcome you to try, Savior," he said, grinning, and then took a stance with his feet shoulder-width apart. Hand still outstretched clutching his staff with the butt planted into the dusty floor and an invitation in his gaze, he stilled to await her move.

It was an invitation Emma was more than happy to take. With adrenaline flooding her system, she adjusted her grip upon Excalibur. A beat later a battle cry more fit for a demon from hell than a Savior from Storybrooke tore loose from her lips, and she rushed headlong toward either unending glory or utter annihilation. A swirl of her sword as her feet punished the uneven stone floor had Excalibur in position so that upon reaching an arm's length from Belmordan, she swung viciously at his head. Thousands of hours of practice and the euphoric high of battle made the motion silky smooth.

Himself a warrior of renown, Belmordan ducked the blow effortlessly, then batted Excalibur away with his stave. In a neat move, he utilized the momentum to twirl himself around, allowing his stave
to shift in hand as he turned so that the bladed head reciprocated his foe's initial attack. In an awkward state of recovery, Emma was unable to do much more than bend away from the oncoming blade, taxing her spine to the point of losing her balance. She had barely straightened when a follow up overhead blow was incoming, forcing her to duck and pitch forward into a roll.

Chest heaving upon regaining her feet, she watched Belmordan spin his stave between both hands, twirling it around his back and then over his head before grasping it firmly to plant the butt end on the ground. The fluid movement of his body betrayed a fighter of a caliber Emma had yet to face. No foe had ever bested her straight up in melee combat, but Belmordan surpassed the best of her opponents by a seemingly exponential degree. It was as if his staff were a part of him, an extension of his very being rather than a tool or weapon to be wielded; rather, she thought, how Excalibur felt in her own hand.

"You'll have to do better than that," he said, a mocking grin cocking his lips sideways. He was taunting her, so condescending and haughty and sure of his superiority that Emma bristled with indignation.

"I'm not an idiot. I always save the best for last," she shot back, allowing a haughty grin of her own to settle upon her features.

Extending a hand out, Belmordan beckoned with a quick wave of his fingers. "Let's see it then, shall we?"

Emma charged without further need for prompting. This time upon entering combat range, she thrust her sword forward toward his right hip, anticipating that he would deflect it away toward the ground. He did just that, much to her delight, so she rotated her arm around and tightened her grip on the handle of her sword as it arced over her head. She brought it down at his shoulder with as much force as she could muster. Rather than flesh, the pure and unblemished blade of Excalibur met the shaft of Belmordan's greatstaff. Emma half-expected the wood to give way under the terrific energy applied to Excalibur's impervious edge, but it held fast as if made of something even stronger than steel. Her blow unexpectedly reflected backward.

For a split second, surprise took Emma out of the game, accompanied by a ringing vibration that traveled up the bones in her arm that threatened her grip on Excalibur. Even if a relative stranger to her, she knew Belmordan was not the type to waste any opportunity, and to his credit, he did not miss this one. When her fingers went lax and her blade wobbled, he thrust the blunt end of his staff forward. It collided with Emma's nose, sending her flailing a foot away onto her ass. Excalibur, dislodged from her hand, went flying away, clanging uselessly upon the cavern floor.

Ignoring the pain blossoming behind her eyes, she sprang backward with her feet, rolling nearly onto her head before she pushed upward upon arms extended back behind each ear. An acute arch of her back as she surged upward had her feet back under her, and she landed gracefully on both.

Thank you, Mulan, she thought, beyond grateful Ruby had started dragging her to those private classes she'd been taking with Storybrooke's resident badass ninja warrior. If she got out of this, she would definitely be dragging Mulan out for drinks on her as thanks.

Emma's thoughts of her stoic friend were rudely cut short when she caught Belmordan advancing. Getting her head back in the fight, she sprang upright rushed over to retrieve Excalibur. Just as her hand secured the handle, Belmordan sliced the bladed end of his staff at her neck. Moving more quickly than she ever had, she batted the strike away then riposted. A parry from Belmordan followed before he made his own move, thrusting the blade of his weapon at her stomach. She only barely avoided being skewed by sidestepping at the last possible second. After a split second recovery, she returned the near miss by swiping at his knees. Damnable werewolf reflexes prevented
an injury that would have disabled the Dark Sorcerer; he deftly leaped over Excalibur's deadly edge without losing a bit of momentum.

Time slowed to a crawl as the two combatants settled into the intimate dance of battle. Never straying far from melee range, they came in close enough proximity at times for Emma to smell Belmordan’s hot breath, and they only ever veered out of reach for less than a blink of the eye before they were on each other again. The only sounds reverberating throughout the spacious cavern were the dull thuds of steel meeting wood and the clanking of metal on metal whenever Excalibur's blade met the busines end of Belmordan's greatstaff.

Sweat streaked down Emma's brow, rolled off her nose, and dripped off her chin as she lunged out of the way and sidestepped kicks and punches in addition to serving out some of her own. Over and over she exchanged deflected swipes of metal on metal with her opponent and twirled her blade along an ebon staff that had surely shed the blood of thousands. After five minutes of near constant combat, her arm rightly should have ached to the point of failure. But something supernatural had taken hold that provided energy and durability beyond the pale of her limited human body.

In the heat of battle there was no time to question what happened to her, though later on Emma would dissect the fight from every angle and still come short in explaining exactly how she, a mortal woman, had bested a man a thousand years old who had elevated himself into a demigod. Belmordan was a man of such terrifying power that he could command the weather and open up portals to other worlds through the sheer force of a magic as expansive as that of a hundred common magicians. His martial abilities were no less impressive. Clearly he had fought more than his fair share of battles and won them all. She should have rightly stood no chance against him, even with him shockingly abiding by the ground rules she had proposed.

All she knew was that as the melee raged ever on, her conscious mind and subconscious instincts melded into a symbiotic harmony. All at once she was less than she had ever been and so much more. It was as if for that brief span of time she stopped being a mother, a wife, daughter, a best friend, a Sheriff, or a Savior. Instead, she became the warrior princess of epic tale Ruby liked to describe her as.

In this, her greatest moment as Savior, she had been reduced to the simple, all-consuming objective to kill or be killed. She was as happy to slay the day away as to spend it meting out law and order or loving and allowing herself to be loved. And yet a feeling of righteousness smoldered within her chest. A warrior, yes, she was that, but she was also an arbiter of cosmic justice, an instrument of the gods wielded with terrifying precision to strike down a man who threatened to upend all order and balance, thus plunging the world into chaos. She knew down deep in her bones she was born for this moment, just as she had heard the voice proclaim. All of her years serving as the Savior boiled down to this single task. It was her calling. It was her purpose. It was her destiny.

With fate guiding her hand, she fought as never before. She had transcended her mortal limits, a ballerina of war in the midst of her greatest performance, all grace and precision with just the right touch of flair. Her entire body hummed with an electric ecstasy that came alive as it flowed into her sword. Every whistle of Excalibur as its razor shape blade sliced through the air was a divine hymn of warfare performed to the accompaniment of the pounding of her boots upon the stone and the drumming heart hammering a staccato rhythm inside her rib cage.

Some time later, it was impossible to gauge how much passed in the heat of combat, with both of them panting from exertion, Belmordan arced a slice toward her left side. Emma parried it then seamlessly transitioned into a deft riposte, an overheard slice of her own that signaled the beginning of an allegretto conclusion. Belmordan replied with a series of swift jabs, one passing the bladed head of his greatstaff in the gap between her arm and waist, while the other narrowly missed
skewering her kidney. On the second swing, he made his first mistake, overextending so that he lost his center of gravity. The unbalance sent him hurtling past her. Emma capitalized by twirling in place, bringing Excalibur around with her, landing a glancing blow across his back. The ever-sharp edge of the mythical weapon cut through the Dark Sorcerer’s robes, lancing the flesh of his back diagonally from just beneath the blade of his left shoulder to the ribs of his right side.

A howl pierced the air, interrupting the symphonic recital of single combat being composed in real time. But pain was not an impediment to a man hellbent on the destruction of the world, and Belmordan recovered his feet with breathtaking haste before swirling with that werewolf rapidity. In a flash of movement, he charged at Emma, reckless with fury at his injury. He unleashed a feral shout as he sprang at her, and was on her faster than lightning arcing through the sky.

The music started playing again, fast and furious. Strings and horns were replaced with the staccato clanging of cold, pitiless steel. With every attack the pace intensified. Belmordan slashed upwards at Emma, who leapt back, then surged immediately forward once the tip of his weapon passed by her left cheek to return a horizontal sweep of her own blade at his chest. Unnatural speed enabled him to recover, twirl his stave in hand, then utilize inertia and gravity to swing in a downward arc, deflecting her sword from his body.

Another dance broke out, even more ferocious, set to the emphatic noise of clashing blades, shuffling feet, grunts of effort, and heavy breathing. It wore on interminably so that Emma dimly marveled at how she was yet impossibly sustained when ordinarily she would have tired out minutes earlier. It was to her utter amazement, though, that she soon noticed the first signs of her opponent wearing down. Brow furled in bewilderment, beads of sweat dotting a flushed face, Belmordan strained to keep up with her unrelenting attacks. When he faltered after blocking a thrust of her sword, she brought her elbow up and smashed it into the side of his head right at the eye socket. The maddened sorcerer stumbled back, brow already swelling as a trickle of blood seeped from the wound.

"Enough!" Redfaced, Belmordan spoke through a jaw flexing with unbridled animosity. "Every Savior before you has met a violent end. I will delight in giving you yours." His eyes flared, the fire burning behind them having been stoked to a blaze of red hues. And then he gripped his staff and lunged at Emma, a battle cry of some foreign land preceding a flurry of blows that would have overwhelmed anyone else.

But not Emma. Not amped up as she was on the unbridled energies of creation itself. The very stuff that powered stars and arranged solar systems and galaxies and which made the impossible possible surged through her veins. Her senses and reflexes were elevated to an almost inhuman efficiency. Every incoming strike, delivered at such velocity as to be blurry, was easily countered. Excalibur hummed within her hand as it trumpeted an exultant chorus of victory that rang out into the cavernous room, echoing from one end to the other and side to side until reaching crescendo when Belmordan at last made a fatal error.

After a thrust of his stave was knocked away, he rallied to swing the foreboding weapon over his head. But he had not cleared Excalibur as well as he thought. Still in full control of blade and body, Emma redirected the sword upward, sliding it with the blade on a flat plane through Belmordan’s ribs just a fraction to the left of his sternum. As if cutting through butter, it passed with minimal resistance straight through his heart.

Eyes bulging, mouth hanging open in disbelief, the enemy of all that was good in the world glanced down at Excalibur, now sunk to the hilt into his chest. His greatstaff slipped free from loosened fingers. Mouth forming words with no voice behind them, he grabbed at Emma’s shoulders, pulling her close.
She met his eyes which for the first time showed a hint of fear. "For Ruby," she said, then gave a sharp twist to the handle of her legendary blade.

Belmordan gasped, stiffened, then sighed as his eyes glazed over. Emma watched with grim satisfaction as the iridescent light faded from the demonic lanterns that were his eyes. Unsympathetic for the life she had just taken, she then pushed forward on her sword so that the impossibly large man pitched back, then fell, sliding off Excalibur as he dropped, as if a tree that had been properly wedged before being roped down.

His hefty frame landed with a heavy thud not a foot away from Artemis' corpse, one arm landing at a forty-five-degree angle to his trunk while the other reached out his toward departed lover, whose arm lay stretched out in his direction. His head also turned toward Artemis in death, dilated pupils fixated on the place where she lay, her own lids still open. Sightless eyes met, and then all movement ceased.

At last, it was all over.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone is wondering, this chapter is the reason I wanted the climax to be from Emma's POV. While Ruby and Regina are the protagonists of this series, I felt like Emma needed to be the hero. OUaT was her story, not Regina's or Rumple's or the Charmings. Her departure was the entire reason I didn't watch the last season. That said, it just felt like a betrayal for me to let anyone else secure the victory. That may not be a popular opinion, but there it is.
Chapter Summary

Emma and Regina get another miracle.

Emma heaved a weary sigh. She was sure she looked like an absolute disaster. The tight ponytail she had arranged her hair in before the battle was barely holding, and what strands had got loose were sticky with sweat and gore. Her face was smudged with all sorts of grime, her armor was just as filthy in addition to being tattered and torn, and there probably wasn't an inch of her body that was not bruised from the beating she'd taken during the worst of the melee in the square. Blood was still seeping from her nose as well, so she swiped at it angrily with her sleeve as she stared hatefully at her defeated foe.

She stood there glowering at the dead man until a shrill shriek broke through her muddled thoughts. Lifting her eyes, she found Regina, whom she hadn't even heard stir, frantically pawing at Ruby's unnaturally still form.

Ruby. Oh, God! Emma's heart stuttered at the remembrance of what had prompted her dramatic liberation from Belmordan's spherical prison. After hastily wiping Excalibur's blade of blood upon Belmordan's robe, she secured the weapon in its scabbard and then rushed over to her friends. Heedless of her already battered body, she flopped down onto her knees beside Regina and grabbed Ruby's wrist to check for a pulse. There was nothing. Not even a flutter. And her skin lacked its usual elevated warmth. Emma knew what the signs were telling her, but she didn't want to believe. Images of Ruby going boneless as Belmordan strangled the life out of her came roaring back to the forefront of her mind. She could see the lights go out of those pretty green eyes with vivid clarity and could hear the rustling and gagging decreasing second by second. It was like she was right back there, stuck in that damn bubble shield, her magic rendered ineffective, nothing but a spectator to the slow, agonizing death of her closest friend. And this time, there was no mortal combat to distract her from what her senses had concluded: that Ruby was dead.

Tempted to join Regina's panicky pleas for the obvious not to be true while equally ready to pull her away from Ruby's body if necessary, Emma screwed her eyes shut and with great effort extinguished the emotional upheaval threatening to send her spiraling over the edge. Now was neither the place nor the time. She could freak out later when she didn't have an audience. Which she planned to do. And it would probably involve breaking or shooting some shit. Good thing she had plenty of spare targets from the Station locked away inside the shed. They would be getting plenty of use in the coming days.

Once largely re-centered, she wound her arm around the shivering mess of tears and snot whose name alone once struck fear into the hearts of an entire realm. If only the people of the Enchanted Forest that was could see the Evil Queen now. Emma couldn't remember ever seeing a more pitiful sight. No doubt if Regina could see herself, she would be morbidly embarrassed. And God forbid if her alter ego got a glimpse of her in such a state. There would be no end to the Cora-esque rants about love being an unforgivable weakness and that she ought to be ashamed for ever letting another soul get so close to her to be able to do so much damage.

Luckily that Regina was no more, having been banished to the nether by the unconditional love of a
lanky waitress with an impossibly gorgeous smile and an even more beautiful heart. All that remained now of that vicious creature was a wife bereft of her other half, begging the universe for yet another miracle. It was a heartbreaking scene all too reminiscent of the one in Joshua Woods basement, and Emma was so choked by a second wave of anguish that all she could offer the rapidly deteriorating woman beside her was paltry physical comfort. Resting the palm of her hand halfway down a tightly coiled back, she battled back tears of her own.

Not willing to deny Regina a meltdown she thought was perfectly reasonable, Emma held a respectful vigil. Or at least she tried to. It was hard to contain the sniffles or keep the whimpers at bay when her eyes burned with unshed tears and her throat clenched tighter every time she glanced down. Her partner in crime and best friend in the world was laying dead in front of her very eyes for the second time in less than a decade. It was almost too much to endure.

And then a couple minutes later, something visibly snapped inside Regina. Emma watched, paralyzed with fear, as familiar deep brown eyes began to blacken as if being transmogrified into coal. That tell-tale expression of mania spread across the former Queen's face, indicating Regina was about to well and truly flip her lid. This development put Emma in an impossibly awkward position.

On one hand, she could ride out the grief-induced lunacy from Regina that was sure to follow and hope for the best. But that didn't seem particularly wise considering how destructive Regina could be when she went off her rocker. The last time it happened was when she found out one of the girls was being picked on by a kid in their preschool class. If Ruby hadn't been there, the teacher, principle, and the guilty kids parents would have left the building without their tongues. And that was a minor incident. Dealing with an irrecoverable loss only made Regina that much more unpredictable. By her own admission in their earlier encounter with Thomas Hatter, she had executed Joshua in a such a barbaric fashion that Caligula would have blushed to witness the butchery. On the other hand, though, Emma had the marginally less unappetizing option of magically sedating her overwrought friend. This seemed to be the most prudent course of action, except for the fact that once Regina woke up, she might very well go on a killing spree that started with Emma. She quite enjoyed being alive, thank you very much, so that went out the window, too.

Anxiety built to intolerable levels as she languished in indecision. But just as Regina's crazed, nonsensical begging morphed into even more scary silence, the miracle Emma had all but given up on actually happened.

All of the sudden, Ruby's eyes shot open, huge and bloodshot, and she sucked in a lung full of air that Emma was sure pulled half the oxygen out of the cavern.

"Holy shit!" she gawked at Ruby in disbelief as Regina frantically pulled the brunette to her and into the tightest hug Emma had ever seen.

"Oh, my God! Don't you ever do that to me again, Ruby Lucas!" Regina cried, loud enough that Ruby winced at the volume; that and being called by her maiden name meant she was in big trouble. Generally speaking, that was also how Emma knew it was time to vacate the premises and let the occasionally incendiary couple have it out where no innocent bystanders such as herself could get caught in the crossfire.

When Ruby caught Emma's eyes over Regina's shoulder and noticed that Emma was staring at her in utter disbelief, she pulled away slightly. Giving both women a sheepish grin, she said, "Did I just die...again?"

The absurd question proved to be what broke the tension. There was no stopping the laugh that bubbled up from Emma's belly, rose into her chest, and climbed through her throat only to spill out of her mouth until she was bent over at the waist cackling uncontrollably. When taken into view with
the past decade, what had just happened was so paradoxical that she couldn't contain her mirth. How could something so ridiculous have become mundane for her? Her twenty-seven year old self would have told her she was loony toons. Honestly, sometimes she felt loony toons. But that was her life.

Regina, however, was not quite so amused. "How you can find any humor in this is beyond me," she said, glaring a hole into Emma's forehead.

"I'd say I was sorry," Emma said around latent chuckles as she swiped at the tears in her eyes, "but it's either laugh or cry right now, and I'd like to stick with the former as long as possible. There will be plenty of time for the latter later." She snuck a conspiratorial glance at Ruby, who was chuckling along with her. Or least she was until she caught a glimpse of the fresh corpses not eight feet away.

All good humor drained away almost as fast as it came on. Ruby's muscles stiffened reflexively as her face underwent a myriad of changes, from confusion to shock to disbelief to grief, one coming right after the next with fluid regularity. Emma wasn't quite sure what to expect when reality set in and Ruby settled on a reaction, only that it was likely to be extreme. Histrionics not dissimilar to Regina's were not out of the question.

It was with great relief that Emma found herself being proven wrong. A heaving sob tore loose from Ruby's lips, but rather than lose her mind as Regina almost did less than two minutes ago, she disentangled herself from her wife's arms and on hands and knees crawled way to her where her dead parents lie.

Glassed over eyes were locked onto one another, amber on blue, and Emma might have thought the scene touching were one half of the deceased couple not a mass murderer on a scale that would make Hitler, Stalin, and Mao green with envy. Emma's hatred of Belmordan roiled on in her gut, unquenched by his demise. Ruby's perspective was radically different. She did not see a villain hellbent on universal domination at the cost of oceans of blood, nor did she have any consideration of the worlds left ravaged by chaos and sorrow in the wake of her ancient sire. All Ruby saw was the man who had given rise to that eternal part of her that many referred to as the spirit – or at least that was Emma's understanding of things from what little she'd been able to glean from the earlier conversation before everything went to hell in a handbasket. Monster or not, Belmordan was her father, and that meant something even if she did not want it to.

Dirt caking her long fingers, Ruby situated herself between the bodies. With Artemis on her right and Belmordan on her left, she settled into a position seated on her hip with her legs curled out to the side. She gathered up hands not yet stiff, which once were grasping for one another in death, and held them together nestled gingerly between her own. Almost as if she was disconnected from the present, she began to rock to and fro. A low keening began to resonate from her chest, sounding almost to Emma like a pent-up howl too steeped in anguish to be released.

Reverently, and very carefully, Regina shuffled behind Ruby, approaching slowly so as not to frighten or needlessly agitate the grieving woman. A werewolf startled was one breath away from a feral response, a lesson Ruby taught Emma that neither she nor Regina had forgotten. As an old hat at dealing with werewolves, Regina was all grace and proper solemnity as she arranged herself around Ruby. Legs wedging Ruby in and arms going around a slim waist, she pulled her wife backward into her body, and though Emma tensed for a moment against a possible snap reaction from Ruby, none came. Instead, Ruby melted into the embrace with the hands of her original parents, weird as it was to think, still sandwiched in her own. Tears now streamed down her face in fat rivulets.

Not wanting to intrude but needing to be close to her friends, Emma followed in Regina's wake. She took up a position kneeling at Regina's left shoulder, one hand resting there as another found its way
"I didn't even get to say goodbye," Ruby said a moment later, voice hitching with such profound sadness that Emma wanted to weep. But she couldn't, so she held in it. "I know they did bad things but they were mine," Ruby went on. "They were mine. And now they're gone. I've lost another mother." Ruby choked on her grief then as the emotions of a fresh memory passed over her face. "That's three now. First Anita, then Granny, now Artemis. How much more is the world gonna take from me?" She craned her neck back, sorrowfully searching Regina's eyes for answers or reassurance or indication that fate did not have it out for her; Emma couldn't fathom how Regina could offer any of the above as she was pretty sure it did.

Regina's answer held nothing but firm conviction. "Nothing more that I'll allow. I can't promise that you will never face any more loss, but what I can promise is that I will protect you until my dying breath. Should the entire pantheon of gods from Olympus descend to this mortal coil to take anything else from you, I will be your living shield. Life has taken more than enough from you, angel, so if there is anything at all in my power to make the rest of yours, ours together, a happy one, I will do it."

"That's a promise I'm willing to throw my hat into the ring for," Emma said, giving both shoulders beneath her grip an affirming squeeze.

Regina reached up to cover Emma's hand with her own. It was a gesture of gratitude that the Savior cherished almost as deeply as she did hugs from her mother. Softened by the years or not, Regina was not the type for touchy-feely affection, so when it was given it was best appreciated, which Emma did and always would. She had not forgotten the hardhearted woman who first greeted her at 108 Mifflin Street all those years ago.

"See there," Regina said, glancing up at Emma to smile before returning her attention to Ruby. She placed a kiss to her wife's forehead, Ruby's eyes briefly fluttering closed at the contact, then continued, "If the Savior is on our side, we can't lose. After the show she put on today, and that without the help of the Evil Queen and the Big Bad Wolf, I doubt any figure who fancies themselves a deity would dare to oppose her."

Emma was sure she blushed to the roots of her hair. Now she knew that Regina had been conscious long enough to catch some of the fight.

"I didn't do all that much," she said, deflecting the praise. The foster system had taught her that being the center of attention was a good way to get set up for disappointment. More often than not, she fell back onto that deeply ingrained instinct. "To be honest, I don't much know what came over me. It was just like back in the Enchanted Forest." Ruby glanced over at that, eyes concerned. Emma gave her a reassuring smile. "I didn't bottom out or anything. Don't worry. But just like then, a power like I've never felt welled up inside and it was like the sword became part of me." She gripped at the handle of Excalibur, which was still singing a song of triumph, only none could hear save her. "I was just acting on pure instinct. Kind of scary now that I think about it."

"Yet no less amazing," said Regina, who threaded a hand through Ruby's hair. "Belmordan," when Ruby winced at the name, Regina corrected, "your father, appeared to be a fighter whose equal I am unacquainted with. But Emma here bested him fairly, and I'm certain as I can be that he held nothing back."

Ruby nodded. She smoothed a thumb over her sire's large hand, and the gentility of the motion had guilt welling up in Emma's breast. Guilt that she had been the one to kill Ruby's father.

"He wouldn't have," Ruby said, still obviously despairing her loss. "All he cared about was power.
Getting as much as possible consumed him." Here she peered up, eyes finding Emma's, and the forgiveness and understanding shining in those green orbs struck Emma right in the heart. "You did what you had to do. I don't blame you even a little. So don't beat yourself up over it."

Emma's hand gripped at Excalibur more tightly. "I'm still sorry. He was your father, however that works, and I killed him. I won't ever forget that."

There was still no recrimination to be found in Ruby's eyes. "He was my father as Eleni and I am her in some way even I don't fully understand. But father or not, he was also a monster, a rabid wolf that had to be put down for the good of not only this world, but every other that he destroyed or had the misfortune to lie upon his path of conquest. I won't tell you any more to not feel sorry over it, because God knows if I were in your place I would feel the same. What I will tell you is that you did the right thing, and that is something you should never regret. Ever." Emma bit at her lip, eyes watering, but said nothing. Ruby, perceptive as she was and as well as she knew Emma, did not miss the pause. "I meant it, Em. If you have to wallow in guilt for a while, I can't stop you. Just don't lose sight of why you did this. Don't forget what you did here today."

"She's right," added Regina. "You saved Ruby's life. And mine. And while you were at it, you went and saved the entire world! Eons from now people will read the tale of the Savior who fought the Lord of Death and defeated him, freeing captives and preventing catastrophes and slaughters innumerable. You did that, Emma."

"Yeah, well..." Emma shrugged bashfully, toeing at loose rocks on the cavern floor. "I had some help. A little bit." At that, she raised hand, pinching her index finger and thumb until they were only a hairsbreadth apart. "That much, I'd say."

Emma grinned, and there was no guilt or shame accompanying it because Ruby's lips also tipped upward at the corners. Eyes that were just moments before submerged in an ocean of grief were recovering some of the warmth and joy for life that seemed to always exist in their verdant depths. Ruby was looking more and more like Ruby should, and that went a long way toward making Emma feel more like herself again. And as the two bosom buddies shared a chuckle over the admittedly lame joke, a semblance of normalcy, however slim, begin to return.

Everything would be okay, Emma knew, because lo and behold, Regina was smiling, too.
Chapter Summary

Back in the town square, Zelena and company process their loss, and then prepare to face their doom.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"What the hell just happened?" Zelena asked no one in particular, staring in bewilderment at where there once was a magical sphere. Only moments ago she had been trapped there along with her sister and the Savior, but now nothing remained of it. Or of her fellow detainees. Or, for that matter, of Ruby and the absolute nutter responsible for all this mayhem.

Zelena paced the area, feeling like a cat too long confined. Escalating anxiety made her heels dig at the concrete. If they'd been made of diamond like Glinda's slippers, they would have worn a rut in the road.

It had been a little less than two minutes since Regina, Ruby, and Emma Swan disappeared in the blink of an eye. To say the least, Zelena was upset. The sorcerer, Belmordan, wielded magicks unlike any other she knew of, and as proficient as Regina was, they could not hold a candle to the type of power capable of trapping a hundred people inside an impermeable magical bubble. Even with Ruby's new, steroidal wolf form thrown into the mix, they did not have a snowballs chance in hell of surviving a straight up encounter with Belmordan. And that wasn't to demean Ruby's abilities.

Her sister-in-law was an impressive creature whose strength was unrivaled, but she was no magician. Werewolves were hardy survivalists that could endure injury in ways no human could ever hope to. They were fast and adroit and rarely ever lost an engagement in close quarters. But Belmordan would not afford Ruby to leverage such advantages, and what's more, Ruby had already tried to take him on mano a mano only to fail miserably. Granny's death in the wake of that defeat only emphasized the hopeless nature of continued resistance.

From Zelena's point of view, the odds were unpleasant for anyone to make it out of the current predicament alive. In addition, two of the four individuals other than her daughter she was willing to die for had been magicked away to parts unknown. Neither of which encouraged her to fight any harder for a cause not so precious to her as it was to the rest of her family, friends, and acquaintances. Storybrooke was home now, but Zelena never put much stock in places as being home. It was the people one loved and who loved one back that made a home, something she'd figured out after her mother died one disparaging remark or angry lash of a switch at a time. That old raggedy house had stopped being a home when her only company inside was an angry man who blamed her for everything wrong in his life, including his wife's death.

Not that Zelena was going to give up. Surrender was not in her nature. She would fight to the bitter end, but rather than striving to defend Storybrooke from invaders, her motivation was to protect her daughter, her sister, sister-in-law, and her nieces. They were what really mattered in her world. Everyone and everything else was extraneous. That said, she knew that many of the folks gathered in the square were not so expendable to Regina and Ruby, so for their sake she would fight for them, too.
Right now, though, her primary concern was figuring out just what the hell had happened only two minutes before. Stepping into the latent, barely visible ring from which Regina and Emma disappeared, she hastily cast a tracking spell using blood magic. The spell fizzled out instantly, which made no sense unless whatever form of energy Belmordan was harnessing also prevented such locating spells. That, or her loved ones were no longer on Earth. Frustrated beyond belief at the turn of events, she'd begun pacing, trying to think of a way to locate the missing people before something more awful than Granny's death occurred.

Zelena cast mournful eyes down at the fallen werewolf. Tears welled beneath her eye lids. Poor Ruby. Granny was more mother to Ruby than grandmother, having raised her from infancy and provided for them both by sheer force of will and that gritty determination that seemed to radiate from every pore in a compact but sturdy frame. Ruby's reaction when Granny was murdered spoke to how poorly she would deal with the loss when the stark finality of it finally set it; that is if the present situation was resolved in their favor.

Being the proudly infamous Wicked Witch of the West meant Zelena was intimately acquainted with a vast array of magicks, and her time traveling the realms with her slippers wrought familiarity with nearly every from of magical being under the suns of many a world. Ruby was not the first werewolf Zelena had met by a long shot, but she was the first to undergo such a startling transformation. It had seemed as if Granny's death triggered some sort of mutation in which the wolf and woman merged together into a creature straight out of a child's warped nightmares. If that kind of reaction was sparked in the immediate aftermath, it stood to reason that once Granny's death truly settled in, Ruby would be in for an extended and precarious period of grieving. Were there something Zelena could do for her sister-in-law, she would do so without question, but it was impossible for her to conjure any type of flowery apologies or thoughtful gifts that would alleviate the hurt Ruby was in for. And besides that, it was hard for Zelena to wrap her own mind around Granny being dead when she'd been convinced the cantankerous old hound would outlive them all.

She had always appreciated Granny's frank nature, even before Regina had coaxed her to step onto the road to redemption. For a woman well into her sixties, the elder Lucas was a spunky if not caustic character who was wise beyond her years and always ready to tell the truth no matter how prickly or indigestible it was. For certain the woman held nothing back in her opinions or judgments. As a fellow individual whose tongue was genetically molded into a razor-sharp weapon, Zelena respected the hell out of that, even though sometimes those blunt assessments rubbed her the wrong way. If one was willing to look close enough, there was value to be found in those deadly accurate barbs, as Granny rarely said anything that wasn't worth heeding. Also, and most impressively, Granny was never afraid of Zelena. She never backed down when Zelena challenged her or got in her face over a needling verbal jab that had Zelena flushing scarlet with anger. In a lot of ways, they were kindred spirits, her and Granny, and though they butted heads with marked regularity, there was a thread of mutual affection running beneath the surface of every seemingly combative interaction.

Zelena was a woman with precious little family in this world, but in the years since Ruby and Regina married, she had come to view Granny as a part of her own clan. The silver-haired werewolf had become the grandmother she'd never asked for or wanted but appreciated nonetheless, even when on the receiving end of an acerbic retort or sarcastic remark. Thus it pained her deeply to see those blue eyes glassy in death, knowing she'd never catch a glimpse of deep dimples that in the blink of an eye could turn an austere expression into something that warmed the cockles of her heart. There would be no more banter over coffee of a Sunday morning while Frankie gobbled up a mound of pancakes that Mummy couldn't hope to reproduce in her own kitchen. No more gleeful commiserating would be done in planning birthdays and anniversaries for Ruby and Regina despite the latter loathing such celebrations and the former uncomfortable being fawned over. There would be no more late-night phone calls to check in just because Granny had wanted to, in her own words, "make sure you're still
free of the itch to break out the ole hat and broom." Zelena always parlayed back with her own witty rejoinder although she never missed the subliminal code. It was Granny's way of saying, "I know you get lonesome out there in that farmhouse sometimes, and I just wanted to check in on you to make sure you're not going to get yourself into trouble." Those conversations carried Zelena through many a restless night when she had actually been fighting that itch while insisting otherwise. Somehow Granny always knew, yet never judged Zelena for a weakness that could not be helped.

Granny understood her more than anyone save for Regina, and she was going to miss the old biddy more than she could accurately express. But there were plenty of others in Storybrooke to whom Granny was a fixture of life, and it was likely the entire town would mourn her passing. None more so than the Charmings, who were currently huddled around the cooling corpse of a woman they had known for so long. Esperanza, her new cousin, also lingered nearby, clutching to her daggers with white knuckles, her dark brown eyes laden with unshed tears. The Dire Wolves who came to Storybrooke along with Esperanza formed a shield around the humans, sitting with their snouts pointed down in respect for their fallen kin.

"I'm sorry about Granny," Zelena said to the bystanders, mostly directing her condolences to the Charmings. She stopped, hoping her eyes conveyed the sincerity of her words. Snow's grateful smile, tight at the edges, told Zelena her efforts were at least marginally successful.

"Thank you, Zelena. I know you loved her, too," the diminutive teacher said after delicately rolling the dead woman's eyelids shut. There was no venom or vitriol present in the response, which was a nice change of pace from her standard interactions with Snow and her shepherd husband.

Though the couple had forgiven Zelena for appropriating their son for her time travel spell, they hadn't forgotten. Exchanges between them could still be terse, borderline insulting even. There was a lingering suspicion between them that Zelena supposed would never go away, nor would she expect it to with their history what it was. In retrospect, she was cognizant as to how reprehensible her past actions were. And yet no regret accompanied recollection of them, for if she hadn't opened that time portal Regina would never have lost Robin, which meant Regina would never have fallen in love with a woman who encouraged her at every turn to nurture the broken relationship between her and her imprisoned half-sister. Perhaps that was why Snow seemed willing to wink at Neal's abduction; that and Regina had spent the intervening years reinforcing the truth that Neal was never in any danger. Zelena was willing to admit her monstrous nature, but directly harming children was a line even she wouldn't cross.

Considering the bitter circumstances of Granny's death, though, Zelena would not have been surprised if that latent bitterness leaked into Snow's response. But it hadn't and she was glad of it.

Nodding her affirmation at Snow's comment, she returned affectionate yet sorrowful eyes to the well-beloved dead. As she allowed her eyes to roam over a face now frozen in eternal repose, she could hear that patented brand of Lucas snark in the back of her mind, berating her for looking so dreary when she'd lived a good life and went out the way she would have chosen anyway: protecting Ruby.

"She was a right old bitch," Zelena said, lips quirking up despite her grief. "But she was ours, wasn't she?"

Esperanza gave a wet laugh at the jest while Snow's eyes crinkled with muted humor. Zelena supposed the woman had finally grown used to her more colorful exchanges with the Lucas matriarch.

"That she was," Snow said as she gingerly stroked Granny's hair. "Though we know what she'd say if she could have heard that."
Zelena adjusted her stance to imitate Granny's imposing glare after a shoulder roll. Voice lowering, she narrowed her eyes, hands on her hips. "Funny coming from you, Copper Top, when witch ain't very far away."

"It's scary how accurate that impression is," David said, his lips edging up just a hair. The tightness of his jaw revealed an anger that was simmering just beneath the surface. Zelena did not need to ask to know it wasn't directed at her but at the heartless son of a bitch who had taken Granny from them.

"Well," she said, kneeling down to clutch one of Granny's aged hands in her own, "I've had ample opportunity to study. According to her," she nodded toward Granny absentmindedly, "the only person who frustrated her more than me was Ruby."

"I can see why she felt that way," Snow said, then shrugged. "No offense."

Zelena shrugged. "None taken. I am not an easy person to care for, and I hate that I sounded like Rumple just now."

"Don't be," said the very same man from behind the group, as if mention of him was a summons he couldn't ignore. His sudden appearance startled everyone, and as a group they swirled to meet what could easily have been a surprise attack had his voice not telegraphed his arrival.

Hand stretched out on reflex, Zelena mentally prepared a spell as David's hand sought the grip of his sword and Snow moved her body over Granny's corpse to protect the fallen hero from defilement. Rumple held his hands up in a disarming gesture meant to show he posed no threat while Belle – who had fought bravely with the defense – mosied up at his side, bloody daggers in hand.

"No need to be frightened," he said. "I've come to lend what aid I can."

Whereas David released his sword, Zelena kept her magic at the ready. She didn't trust the Dark One any more than a plump canary did a starving cat.

When Emma Swan received True Love's kiss from her dashing pirate paramour, the Dark One curse by all rights should have ended. What most did not know was that True Love's kiss did not eradicate the foul magic fueling the Dark One, but merely constrained it wholly to the dagger without a human vessel to amplify it. With the darkness thus contained, the matter was reduced to finding a way of destroying the pernicious weapon housing it or at the very least concealing it beyond reach so that no other hand could touch it. But Rumplestiltskin would not allow that to happen. Oh, no. He, as ever, needed his crutch with a desperation that drove him to steal the dagger while it was in transit from the vault in Regina's office. It had been temporarily stored inside the Mills family mausoleum where it would be more thoroughly protected until a permanent solution presented itself.

Unfortunately, Rumple was an opportunist and selfish to the core. Unlike the rest of the townsfolk, Zelena had never let go of her suspicion where he was concerned. Nor was she likely to any time in the near future. She thought Regina foolish to have softened her stance on the man who was largely responsible for the creation of the Evil Queen. In any given situation, Rumple would always choose the path of resolution that worked in his favor. The current one, dire as it was, would be no different. So whatever the reason for Rumple appearing at this late hour in the game, Zelena was inclined to remain skeptical.

Ignoring Belle, with whom she had no quarrel, Zelena snarled at the gall Rumple was displaying. "Fine time to do that, eh? Now that we've won, and that at too high a cost. You would have been useful half an hour ago. Where were you then? Hiding in your pawn shop? You always were a coward, Rumple!"
"Hey! That's not fair!" Belle's brow furled in offense.

Zelena flit apologetic eyes over to the woman she had learned to respect for her unflinching dignity, remarkable intelligence, and the unwavering compassion with which she treated others. What Belle saw in Rumplestiltskin mystified her. Once she had said something similar while in her sister's presence, to which Regina responded most surprisingly.

"I don't get it either," Regina had said, pensive expression on her face, "and yet I can't criticize Belle for her poor taste when I am the beneficiary of an undeserved devotion. At my worst, I was not much better than Rumple, and yet Ruby loves me despite the monster inside me. That's the miracle of love, Zelena. It sees past things reason cannot."

"Well, that sounds perfectly insane to me," Zelena had said with a huff. "Remind me to never fall in love, won't you?"

Regina just laughed at her, though, and no more was said as they went about their business. But in time Zelena became a mother, and she understood then what her sister was trying to tell her. There was nothing in the world Frankie could do to stop her mother from loving her with everything she had to give. Belle, she realized, was just a woman in love; it just so happened to be the man she loved was one didn't deserve it. Then again, as Regina had once said, love is not about deserving.

Still, since Rumple's loyalties could never quite be pinned down, Zelena wasn't about to take any chances. Too much was at stake.

"It's alright, Belle." Rumple allowed his hands to fall, not a bit perturbed by Zelena's cynical response. After claspdng them behind his back, he turned out to survey Main Street, which was littered with the dead and wounded. "Quite the contrary to your accusation, I wasn't hiding," he said, serpentine eyes peering out into the inky darkness. He seemed tired, but Zelena didn't care much about his state of health on days when a genocidal maniac wasn't trying to wipe out the town. "I was merely biding my time for the hour of need. This battle is not yet over, you see, and winning it will require all I have left to give."

At that, Rumple pointed out into the distance, where just beyond where the street light failed a faint line of movement could be seen. When Snow gasped, he turned to Zelena, smirking in that condescending way of his that made her want to knock the gold right out of his teeth.

He sent a mock laugh in her direction. "Did you really think it was over? That Belmordan would give up so quickly with only the Savior, the Queen and her prize puppy as his trophies? No. What our enemy truly desires cannot be purchased with such paltry return on investment. He was playing a long game and none of you guessed its end. Now he has isolated Regina and Emma away from the defense and taken his flesh and blood to fulfill her destiny. The bulk of his forces will advance soon enough, and should his gambit succeed, there will be no stopping him."

When no one said anything, too shocked to respond, he returned to watch the horizon over which his supposed threat awaited. "This is the hour of decision. This is the line in the sand. We are the last hope not only for this world, but for all the worlds that stand between us and Olympus. Should we fail, the universe will be bathed in flame, and who knows if anything will survive the cataclysm?"

With a weary glance, back, he heaved a sigh. "I know that I have fostered much distrust over the years. I have done much evil in my life, though my objectives were noble. Misguided but noble. It may not seem like it, but I care about this town, and I do care about some of its denizens. In the past I have withheld my powers for my own gain, but this is not a time for selfishness. If we are to survive this, we must set aside our differences. Hate me all you want later, but trust me now when I say Belmordan will leave nothing to chance. His army will come, no longer a swell of the ocean, but the inexorable tides of a tsunami."
Zelena crossed her arms over her chest, eyeing Rumple suspiciously. "And I suppose you're the levee to break the waves?" She wanted to believe him, she really did, but experience had taught her that he did nothing without an agenda. Ulterior motives were behind every gesture of help extended by Rumplestiltskin.

"Even I cannot stop what is coming," he said ominously. "The best we can hope for is to delay the tide long enough for Regina and Emma to stop their Master."

The frank delivery of those words chilled Zelena to the marrow. A shiver worked through her already chilled body at the look of resignation in eyes that had seen more death and human misery than almost any. It was as if he knew defending the town was an act of futility but lacked the fortitude to voice so dreary a reality. Zelena was surprised to think he might feel such hopelessness yet still be willing to stand and fight. Rumple was not one known for bravery in the face of impossible odds.

Just then a shout echoed from far down the street, careening from building to building, a resounding command that Zelena recognized as a call to arms. Another shout followed and a great rumbling chant followed in its wake, the same as the one upon the soldier's lips when she'd arrived to battle, fashionably late and just in time.

"O thánatos érchetai. O thánatos érchetai. O thánatos érchetai."

The martial litany drowned out the sound of her heartbeat. Boots began to thud against the concrete. Metal clanged together, setting a rhythm to the chanting. The army was on the move. Ten seconds later they appeared in the low light of the street lamps. On they came, shoulder-to-shoulder, rank after rank, company after company of men – a sea of humanity that funneled into the corridor between buildings and which spanned the breadth of the street and overflowed onto the sidewalks.

Zelena's throat constricted painfully. Rumple was right. How were they supposed to hold out against so many? It was like an ant trying to fend off an elephant.

And then David heaved a deep breath. Blue eyes remarkably clear with determination, he drew his sword with a flourish. Here, Zelena thought, was a king, not a shepherd.

"Well," he said to those gathered around Granny's body, "if we're gonna die, I say we take as many of them with us as we can."

All at once a lust for battle swelled up in her chest. That old flame for destruction was fanned, and it licked at her heart and mind until she was consumed with the desire to shed the blood of scores.

"Now you're speaking my language," she said, sinister grin spreading over her lips. The joy of war sang in her veins. "I'm ready to do my part if you are, Charming."

David nodded at her before offering his hand to Snow. "I am. For my home and my family." He then helped Snow to her feet. Once she was steady, bow in hand and ready to fight, he turned to the massed defenders of Storybrooke, still huddled in the square and awaiting orders. "People of Storybrooke! The enemy is renewing the attack. As you no doubt can see, we are vastly outnumbered. But we can't let that stop us from trying! We are all that stands between the world outside our borders and total annihilation. I'm not asking anything of you that I'm not asking of myself. We have to fight, and die if we must, to give the Savior a chance to defeat the man who is behind this unprovoked attack. It's the only chance we have. So fight, my friends! Fight for all that you love!"

Zelena straightened her spine, the stirring words having struck a chord even with her. She watched
David swirl around and advance to a position not fifty yards away from the enemy, features set in
stone but blue eyes blazing. The people followed him without question, drawing on his strength to
supplement their own bravery. It was clear to Zelena in that moment who Emma took after most in
the critical moments when life and death hung in the balance. After that little speech, she might have
have followed David into hell itself.

As the first line of the enemy force plunged into the defenses hastily mustered at the head of the
square, Zelena felt red-hot hatred well up in her heart for the heathens who dared to threaten her
home and the people she was only now beginning to realize were her people. She turned to face the
street and with her gaze leveled upon the endless rows pressing down toward them, ever close, just
seconds away now, she reached deep down inside her vast stores of magic. As she had never dared
attempt before, she severed any restraints holding it back.

Warmth rushed through her body, down her arms and legs, into her fingers and toes, and it felt as if
her hair were standing on end with the surging power demanding to be let out. Rumple had once told
her she had the potential to be the most powerful sorceress to ever live and now she understood why.
The power inside of her was as frightening as it was addicting. It encompassed her, engulfed her as if
to bond to every cell within her body, a living, breathing part of her that she hadn't known was there
to tap into. The seductive pull of it overwhelmed her, and she felt herself sinking into the darkness.

The cacophony of combat filled the air, and as the first shouts of the newly wounded and dying
reached her ears, she summoned her magic. Green hellfire rained down upon the enemy as her blue
eyes danced with malefic joy.

"Death to the invaders!" she shouted, and watched the fire fall with twisted glee. Hands held to the
sky, she reveled in the swathes of soldiers being lit up like Christmas decorations. Green flames leapt
up breeches and scorched down their tunics, devouring flesh and searing lungs. The screams were
music to ears long attuned to the terrible noise of human suffering.

As another line filtered into the square, Zelena summoned a small vortex and sent it plowing through
the masses at the rear. Just as before, men went flying in every direction, some losing equipment in
the tempest of supernatural wind and some losing more, limbs and heads and eye balls that could not
withstand the pressure differentials the tornado produced. It was glorious, Zelena thought in the dark
parts of her mind, to be unleashed once again. The Wicked Witch had returned in force and she
basked in the murderous passion that accompanied being totally unhinged. Too many years had
passed since she got to have so much fun.

Minutes passed by like seconds as she lost herself in the familiar exuberance of killing. Slaughter was
an old pastime, and she wore it like a second skin. She grinned as the Dire Wolves clipped ankles
and tore out throats while darting to-and-fro through the enemy ranks, then laughed when Esperanza
cut down a handful of men in succession with breathtaking speed and grace, and cackled with
maniacal glee as Rumple extinguished a dozen lives with one spell. Arrows rained down from
rooftops courtesy of the Merry Men, and she gave them heart salute they eagerly returned.

Zelena, not about to be outdone, went to work once more. Some enemies she torched with green fire,
others she pulled apart at the joints with surgically wielded magic. Others she simply fried their
brains inside their skulls as if eggs cracked into a scorching hot skillet. Describing the effect all this
death had on her would be impossible except to say it was pure, unadulterated ecstasy.

*Magic is one hell of a drug,* she thought to herself, and the smile plastered upon her lips never faded
as scores fell to her powers.

But the waves of oncoming soldiers proved endless. Hundreds filtered down the street into the
square and hundreds died, but still the methodically advancing sea of humanity stretched on down
Main Street until disappearing into the night. They had to number in the thousands. Tens of thousands, even. Too many to count, infinite like stars dotting a vast midnight sky.

Hopelessness set in with the realization that she lacked the energy to maintain the assault against such multitudes. Rumple was telling the truth after all. The fate of Storybrooke rested in the hands of Regina, Ruby, and Emma, and who knew where the hell they were or even if they were still alive.

Just the possibility that her sister was dead spurred Zelena to dip into her last reserves. Now she really let herself go, submersing in that unquenchable need for rampant destruction that had once been the foundation of her existence. If Regina was dead, then Zelena would join her sister soon enough. Just not before sending scores more of the invaders to an agonizing demise.

Teeth grinding, jaw taut, she brought herself to her full height. The black of her dress gleamed in the moonlight. Thin wisps of fiery hair spilled over her shoulders, having slipped loose from the bun she'd hastily arranged them in due to her exertions. A sneer curled her lips as her blue eyes dilated from the heady combination of magic-induced delirium and uncontrollable rage.

A brief respite in combat proceeded as the defense cleared up the latest wave of soldiers to enter the square. Before needing to launch herself into the fray once more, Zelena mentally prepared the fail-safe, an orb enchanted to activate upon her death, she'd put in place to warn Walsh when it was time to evacuate the children across the town line. Hopefully the stubborn man would refrain from entertaining ideas of intervention. This was no time for the former Wizard of Oz to attempt a heroic rescue in a vain bid to make amends for his past failures, especially when the lives of her daughter and nieces were at stake.

Thoughts of Francesca brought the beginnings of tears to her eyes. She batted them away with her hand, frustrated at feeling weak but unable to resist the tug in her heart where her precious little girl resided. Regina had told her that motherhood would change everything, and oh how Zelena had scoffed. Turned out her sister, though younger, was in many ways the wiser daughter of Cora, for the moment that child was laid into her arms her entire perspective shifted. With the airy-light grip of tiny fingers around her own, life instantly became sweeter, the world more colorful, music more beautiful, and the presence of her innate magic more vivid.

Here is someone I'd die for, she had thought as newborn Frankie wiggled her tiny toes and scrunched up her perfect little nose. Here is someone I'd kill for, someone I would burn the world to ashes for. And that still held true. The world may not burn, but Storybrooke certainly would, if only to buy time for what family remained alive to escape to safety.

Another line of men entered the square, and as they pressed into the weary townsfolk, a great groan issued forth. The defense was nearly spent. Rumplestiltskin, the only other magician of note present, was showing his age, his chest heaving for breath between lobs of molten fire and beams of purple energy that skewed columns of men six deep. It would not be long before the Dark One failed, and when he did, a breakthrough would surely occur. Once that happened, there was no stopping the inevitable. Storybrooke would fall within an hour.

"Time to cause some more mayhem," she said, knowing this was the last gambit. If Belmordan was not stopped, death would find her shortly. Though she'd spoken to no one in particular, she heard Esperanza goad her on with a cry of, "Kill them bastards! Kill them all!" Zelena grinned. She didn't know her cousin as well as she would have liked, but was beginning to appreciate the woman's feistiness.

With the last of her power at her finger tips, Zelena went to work. Upon noticing the left side of the defensive line buckle, she targeted the enemy squad opposite. She destroyed them with a lance of gale wind that sheared their heads from their necks. They collapsed in tandem, blood spilling out onto the
soaked street. Townspeople filled the gap and the fight resumed as another wave of troops replaced the lost. This went on for what seemed like an eternity. Countless men felled by blade and magic, only to be replenished by yet another company of Belmordan's infinite legions.

Perhaps a hundred or more men had been cut down by her magic before she felt herself growing weary. It was increasingly hard to hold up her arms, and her head was swimming from the gross taxing of her magic. But she could not afford to fail now, not when the line of defense was perilously thin, not when Esperanza was stained waist high with blood and surrounded by a half a dozen men and Snow White and her gallant Prince Charming were fending off at least fifteen, not when Belle was fighting two at a time with a cut cheek and a gash to her right arm while Rumple labored to keep the hordes at bay. Panic loomed on the horizon of her mind. The end was drawing near. Her mental finger hovered over the trigger of the failsafe. Still she fought on, too tired to run and too mean to quit. She was the Wicked Witch of the West and would die a death befitting her name.

Despite her desire to die in a blaze of glory, her body was not quite so eager to keep up with her reckless abandon. She wavered in place after unleashing a brutal ball of verdant flame that engulfed twenty troops, legs barely holding her upright. Her head pounded. A scream rang out from a familiar voice, and Zelena gasped upon seeing Esperanza fighting from her knees, a sword through her shoulder as she thrust her rapier upward through one man's throat. Another fireball from Zelena's hand sent the attackers sprawling back, either terrified or turned into human torches. A wave of nausea hit her then, and she pitched forward before righting herself, only to lose balance upon correction, sending her careening backward.

The absurd thought crossed her mind as she fell that it would a dreadful thing for her to die on her back having lived most of her childhood on her knees.

Chapter End Notes

The Price of Destiny had a chapter from Zelena's perspective in it, so I wanted on in this one, too. Plus, I adore Zelena. And Bex. Sue me, okay?
The Battle of Storybrooke, Pt. 3

Chapter Summary

The conclusion of the battle. It always looks darkest before the dawn...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Quite unexpectedly, a strong set of arms caught Zelena around the waist before she contacted the ground.

"Looks like we got here just in time." The voice of her rescuer was one she would recognize anywhere. She only had one nephew after all.

"Henry?" she asked, turning to look back over her shoulder only to see said nephew standing tall and strong.

"Hey, Aunt Z," Henry said with a crooked grin. "Mind if we join in the fun?"

The question was a bit inappropriate considering the dreary circumstance, as was his good mood. Couldn't he see people were dying everywhere around them? Honestly, were she not already addled from the careless abuse to her stores of magic, she might have asked him how he could be so blithe when such an attitude was more consistent with his mother and aunt. But she was far too shocked and out of sorts right now to chastise him.

Instead, she turned in her nephew's arms, pressing away from him but still holding onto his upper arms. "Who's we?" she asked, brow arching. In response, Henry glanced over to the right. When Zelena followed his eyes, she saw that two strangers were standing close by. One was a tall man with an elfin face and jet black hair, while the other was a woman of immense beauty whose jade eyes were practically shining with excitement at the prospect of getting her hands dirty. "Who the hell are you two, then?" The rude greeting was purposeful. She was too tired and scared to filter herself, though she would never admit to being either.

"My name is Morgana," said the woman over the din of fighting, and Zelena startled at hearing that name. But not nearly so much as when the man nonchalantly added, "And I am Merlin."

"Bloody hell!" The oath escaped her lips before she could stop it. It wasn't every day that she found herself in the presence of two figures whose legend existed not only on Earth but in Oz as well the Enchanted Forest. Eyes wide, she gestured at them, forgetting for a moment the battle raging behind her. She gestured at them wildly. "Merlin and Morgana of Arthurian legend?" The latter presented like a peacock while the former blushed to the tips of his large ears.

"The very same," Morgana said, her accent light but noticeable. "I can see you are a bit buggered by our existence, but might I suggest we have this discussion later?"

"Excellent idea," said Merlin, aged yet sparkling eyes flitting over Zelena's shoulder.

She remembered then why she was out in the Town Square in the middle of the bloody evening, sweating like a pig in the chilly autumn air. Considering what was happening, she could see no fault
"Right, then," she said, then turned back to face the melee.

To her horror, the defensive lines had further thinned and her friends were all dancing at the edge of death. On the left Hook was busy cutting down men with both blade and his eponymous appendage, looking dapper as could be in spite of the note of desperation in his eyes that could only be related to Emma's disappearance. Nearby to Zelena's right, Snow had expended her arrows and was exchanging parries of her sword with an opponent while Charming pushed against the press of bodies inching ever closer with a shield he had picked up, presumably the same Emma had discarded earlier. Meanwhile in the center Belle fought on next to her husband, surprisingly skillful for a dainty bookworm, though she sported a new cut to her left thigh which had her limping noticeably; Rumple, for his part, looked frightfully weak as if his magic was nearly expended in the struggle to fend off ceaseless attacks.

But then Zelena caught sight of Esperanza, who was still performing her ballet of carnage with awe-inspiring grace even though only one arm remained strong enough to wield a rapier. Zelena flushed angrily upon noticing her cousin's shirt had been cut open almost to the waist. Her black sports bra was on full display above the hints of a taut olive-toned stomach bearing a long gash that ran from the base of her left rib cage all the way to her navel. No doubt some heathen had loathsome designs on the pretty woman and used a dagger or knife to separate her from her shirt. The idea of some brute winning free of the scrum to fulfill those rapacious intentions infuriated Zelena past the point of sense. Her face grew hot with rage, which fueled a final, half-panicked and half-maddened surge of magic.

"Oh, to hell with that shite!" She took off in the direction of her besieged family member.

As she neared Esperanza, her assumption was confirmed by the soldiers' blatant threats of sexual violence against the bitch who had dared to raise her sword against their master. Esperanza made no reply, busy as she was staying alive against odds that would have seen nearly any other person dead already. That her cousin was still fighting spoke volumes about her skill with the blade, but even the best fighter could not hold out forever.

"Gonna enjoy poking this one in both holes after the rest of you boys had your fill," one of them said, a scruffy looking brute whose IQ could probably be measured on the Richter Scale. His comrades yelled their fervent agreements.

Zelena saw red. All thoughts of Henry, Morgana, and Merlin were erased as she took pleasure in ripping apart the lecherous savages who dared to allow such repulsive thoughts to pass through their primitive minds. She bathed herself in their blood, exulted in their garbled cries, and committed every strangled plea for mercy to memory before dispatching them by snapping their necks with a flick of her wrist or by making their pea-sized brains explode via spoken spell and then delighting in the spewing of gray matter and blood from ears and noses.

After paralyzing the soldiers crowding around Esperanza, she made an example of the one who'd lent voice to confirm her suspicions. With her foes, unable to move their legs and their fellows cut off by the inert shield of flesh they represented, she knelt right there in the midst of the fray and then cut the fleshly heart out of the man while he yet lived. As the light faded from his bulging eyes, she raised the still-convulsing organ towards the sky. With one word from her lips, it exploded, raining blood and tissue onto the shocked visages of the surrounding soldiers.

It didn't occur to her until later that she became a savage herself in that moment, just of a different sort than the men Belmordan cut loose on Storybrooke. In the heat of battle there was no time to analyze one's actions but eventually when recalling those events she would justify her brutality – at
least to herself – by falling back on one of the first lessons she'd ever learned in life: to defeat a monster one sometimes was required to become one. That was a sacrifice for most sane individuals, but the thing of it was that it really didn't bother Zelena one bit and never would. That she not only crossed the line but rather dramatically obliterated it in the defense of her kin was counted to her as something to be proud of. As it turned out, she had never quite disassociated herself from the darkness inherent to their line so much as Regina did. The Wicked Witch may have become domesticated but all it ever took to turn a tamed dog feral were the right circumstances or motivations. Zelena had stopped worrying about whether Regina would ever accepted that, but she knew Ruby understood. Sometimes, when the circumstances were right and victory seemed impossible, that inner beast needed to be unleashed.

The carnage that followed her little spectacle was one that would rival the greatest effusions of blood in the history books of any world. Death visited to Storybooke in such vast quantities that the blood of the slain soaked the asphalt until it was difficult to maintain footing without slipping. Limbs twitched beside the groaning men they had once been attached to. Heads rolled underfoot, tripping those who had the misfortune of taking a step in the wrong direction. Screams filled the air to join a chorus of magical whirring set to the sharp, irregular rhythm of clanging steel, taken all together to compose the Grand Orchestra of Butchery, the *magnum opus* of hell on earth. Taken as a whole, it was a grotesque affair that would be forever seared into Zelena’s brain.

When a notably cacophonous spell rattled her eardrums, she swirled in place to catch the aftermath of Morgana reducing a pack of a dozen men into a pile of lifeless limbs. It was a marvelous sight. The woman was a work of art in motion, every movement calculated and precise to deliver killing blows to invading cretins who filtered in through her vast array of magical tricks. That she was dressed as if just coming from any mundane day at work, which she had to be fair, only made the portrait she was painting all the more striking. Morgana was a witch not to be trifled, and Zelena found herself struck with a rather childish sort of admiration for the legendary woman.

But as amazing as Morgana’s feats of magic were, they were paltry compared to what Zelena saw next. She gaped like a floundering fish upon catching sight of Merlin, who just off Morgana’s left shoulder, shimmered radiantly with a power so godlike that the air around him warped. As if gravity bent toward, the light of the rising moon swirled inexorably into the singularity of unfathomable magic housed within his thin frame. One word from his lips felled a dozen and a wave of his hand sent a score flying away only to be flattened against unyielding brick buildings or broken upon the street after traversing a hundred yards or more in the air. When a deceptively strong hand clenched into a fist, men were crushed into so much dust, and when arms lifted skyward and then were brought back down, entire companies of soldiers were suspended an entire story in height only to thereafter be smashed into flesh pancakes upon the pavement. This, she knew, was the most powerful man to ever live.

She felt utterly insignificant in comparison, as if she were a pauper in the presence of a deity even though she knew him to be only a man. It was the strangest feeling to have reverence and fear in such equal measure warring for dominance within her. One begged her to fall to her knees and worship with a joyful heart while the other desired only to fall to her face prostrate in submission to a being who could snuff her out with a single breath. Zelena settled somewhere in between.

Still the invaders advanced. Where a hundred fell, two came filtering down the street to replace them. Endless waves of men entered the corridor formed by the numerous buildings lining Main Street. Zelena trembled at the sight of the vast gilded columns of golden men marching in lockstep, armed to the teeth and betraying no emotion save cold determination to eradicate everything living that stood against them. Coated with blood, limbs twitching from exhaustion, she felt her heart grow cold.

Even with Merlin's power, it was clear that this was a battle that could not be won. But then
something unbelievable happened. When it seemed at last that the defenses would finally crumble in
the face of overwhelming numbers, the enemy entire army froze in place. A great groan filled the air
as their eyes glazed over and then began flitting to and fro, reminding Zelena of a person caught fast
in the grips of a seizure. This went on for some breathless seconds before their pupils constricted and
they sighed in concert as if released from some indescribable pain.

"Halt men!" a booming voice called a moment later, deeply accented in the way of the
Mediterranean languages. Not long after, Zelena saw a burly man shoulder his way through the
ranks as he continued to bark orders. "Stay your arms! Stand down, I say! Sheath your swords and
lower your shields! The battle is over! We are free!" He emerged a moment into the space between
the townsfolk of Storybrooke and the soldiers that had been set to obliterate them. Every breath
stilled and everybody tensed. He removed his helmet after a moment of enduring intense stares,
revealing a handsome albeit square face characterized by a patrician nose, close cropped salt and
pepper hair and a neatly trimmed beard.

"My name is General Arnen Orien," he said, feature pinched in regret and discomfort. "I command
this army. We have no desire to continue this conflict."

"Why should we believe you?" David asked, looking rightfully dubious. His sword remained in his
hand, blade coated red. As might be expected considering their shameless bromance, Hook lingered
at David's shoulder, his raven hair sticking every which way with a grim set to his dark brows. "You
invaded our land without provocation," Charming went on, "killed our people, threatened our homes
and our families."

General Orien ducked his head shamefully. "We undeniably did all of those things and more upon
other worlds aside from your own. My complicity is a stain that will never be washed away. All I
can do to assure you of my intentions is to give you my word of honor that our will has not been our
own since our worlds were visited by the scourge you know as Belmordan."

"Making excuses won't fly, mate. Not when the dead cry out for justice," said Hook, looking on the
verge of violence as he gestured to the slain laying all around the square. There was hardly a space
between them on the side facing Main Street.

"If justice is what you seek, I cannot supply it," said the General, evenly but firmly. "Belmordan took
our hearts and used them to enslave our will to his own. We were powerless to resist his commands,
and those who fought his control were quickly dispatched. With each world he conquered he added
to his puppet army. Can the blame for such wanton carnage be laid at our feet when we lacked
mastery over our own strings?"

"I...I can't argue there," Hook countered, his anger draining rapidly away. "Once I was a servant of
darkness and I did horrible things that stain my conscience to this day. I'm sorry to hear what
happened to you."

Much to Zelena's annoyance, she too was not unmoved by the General's explanation, since she had
done the same thing as Belmordan to countless others. Regina's old heart collection, impressive as it
was, could not match for size the hordes of flying monkeys she had once commanded. Under her
thrall, those poor souls had been made to do horrific things that Zelena spent a great deal of time and
effort trying to forget. That gnawing, insatiable guilt was the curse of a conscience, one she
occasionally regretted taking on.

Orien, looking relieved at Hook's perhaps too-gracious response, gave a deep bow. "I am grateful for
your understanding. I do not expect forgiveness, but that is at least something. Certainly it is more
kindness than we ever received our former master."
Zelena tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Speaking of him..." She was not ready to speak his name, fearing irrationally that he was some sort of boogie man that might appear out of thin air if she did so. Hell, maybe the army being released from his control was a plot. She didn't think so, as she had another theory, but it never hurt to be thorough. "What do you think happened to free you?" she asked. Her eyes narrowed into thin slits as she approached Orien, wanting to observe his reaction for tells.

"Something must have forcibly severed the magic binding us to him," Orien said, giving no indication she could detect that he was lying. "Otherwise our servitude would never have ended. For the first time in twenty long years, his presence is no longer in my mind. I am free. We are free."

His response confirmed her theory. Relief mixed with joy lifted her countenance. "They did it!" Her eyes widened as the implication really settled in. "My God. They actually did it!"

"Who did what?" asked Esperanza, hand clutching tightly at her wounded shoulder.

Zelena ambled over to her cousin, smile spreading over her lips. Esperanza did not flinch when she pressed her hand to the wound and healed it, only held her eyes until she deigned to elaborate.

"It's rather obvious," she said, eyeing the rest of her comrades, some of whom she might even refer to as her friends. Merlin and Morgana seemed to be on her wavelength already, but the rest of the lot were in the dark. Well, she would enlighten them. "Regina, Emma, and Ruby defeated Belmordan. He's dead. That's why his control over the soldiers broke so suddenly. I've not learned how to remotely influence a heart under my possession, but if my understanding of magic is in any way applicable, killing the sorcerer controlling them would certainly set them at liberty."

Merlin nodded in confirmation. "She's right. He's dead. I felt it when he passed."

Again, her eyes narrowed in suspicion, this time directed at the famous sorcerer. "How is it possible that you 'felt' his death?"

"We had a bond of sorts. He is..." Merlin paused, a frown forming, "was...my cousin. Our fathers were brothers. That, and we were both creatures of the same primordial magicks. I could sense him disappear from the common well upon which we drew."

Zelena's joy at their victory took flight on the wings of a raven. Anger filled the void. Heedless of how stupid it was, she stormed over in a barely controlled fit of ire to the almighty Sorcerer. With her typical lack of tact, she stepped up into his personal space, blue eyes venomous. "Why didn't you stop him then? If he was your family, he was your responsibility! Not ours."

"I'd watch my tone if I were you," said Morgana, stepping between Merlin and Zelena. And while Henry looked caught between taking sides, Morgana's jade eyes flashed a warning as she sized Zelena up for threat potential.

Zelena puffed out her chest, meeting the penetrating gaze of the mythical woman she'd once thought to only exist within the pages of dusty tomes. Although she was impressed by Morgana, she was too riled up to be afraid.

"Or what?" she asked, lips curling in offense. "You'll turn me into a newt? Perhaps you've partaken of too much of this world's entertainment and think pouring a bucket of water over my head will melt me? Please. I do not doubt you are a powerful sorceress, but don't make the mistake of underestimating me. Many have done so before. Fatally I might add."

Recognizing the threat for what it was, Morgana began to step forward only to be stopped by
Merlin’s hand on her shoulder. Eyes gentle, he said, "Don't, Morgana. She's just baiting you to get a reaction. Let her vent."

Indignant, Morgana whirled on Merlin. "She dared to lay the blame for all of this onto you and you want me to stop?" She poked at his chest with her finger as she spoke. "You seem content to permit this novice, " she glanced back at Zelena as if at an insignificant whelp, "to besmirch your honor. If I didn't know better, I'd think your spine evaporated when we crossed the town line."

Merlin heaved out a longsuffering sigh. "She has a point, though, doesn't she? There was a time I might have stopped Gryff from taking this road. I didn't. Arthur was dead, Camelot in ruins, and I was weak. I spared him out of some misplaced sense of familial loyalty, a mistake for which many worlds have suffered. That's a truth I have to accept no matter who happens to be pointing it out."

"Silly, boy." Morgana's eyes softened as she reached out to cup his cheek. "You always have to place the weight of the whole world on your shoulders. When are you going to get it through that thick skull that you don't have to bear your burdens alone anymore?"

Merlin nuzzled his cheek into her hand, and the tenderness of Morgana's touch did much to relax the tension in his shoulders. It even dispelled a fraction of Zelena's anger so that she could shove away the desire to throttle the bean-pole into next week.

Merlin then reached for the hand pressed against his cheek, took into his own and then brought it to his lips where he placed a reverent kiss upon the knuckles. "Believe it or not I'm getting there," he said, smiling wryly as he sandwiched Morgana's hand between his larger ones and began to absently play with her fingers. "You just have to be patient with me. I'm a slow learner if you'll recall."

Morgana scoffed amiably, meeting his smile with her own. "Don't I know it. I thought you'd never get the hints I was throwing your way after we reunited in this new age. It was like we were back in Camelot again and I was still so young and full of optimism while you bumbled about, totally ignorant of the torch I carried for you. For such a keenly intuitive person, you can be painfully oblivious."

Merlin groaned. "Are you never going to let me live that down? For the hundredth time, I'm sorry I'm such an idiot. But to be fair, you should have known that what with Arthur calling me one every other sentence."

Morgana laughed at that, gentle lines around her eyes betraying how much she had been that of late, which was a bit incongruent with the cold, powerful witch Zelena read about as a child. Even Oz had a version of the legend of Camelot and its fall, and Morgana had been her favorite character. As an innate magician whose own family didn't understand her, she identified with the woman. Both lost beloved family members at a young age and both were betrayed by father figures they'd thought loved them only to then be tempted by the promise of revenge.

But there was none of that Morgana in the woman before Zelena except during the battle that had so recently raged upon the bloodied streets of Storybrooke. And in that brief moment when Zelena laid all the blame for Belmordan's destruction at Merlin's feet. She hadn't expected such tenderness to follow when the version of Camelot's mythology from Oz did not ascribe any type of romantic sentiment between Morgana and Merlin. Quite the contrary, actually. In all the stories she read, they were bitter rivals.

"Well, my brother was a prat, as you often pointed out," said Morgana, still amused.

A far away expression came over Merlin's features and he gave a sad little sigh. "Yeah, he was." He swallowed thickly, eyes misting over. "I miss him."
"So do I," said Morgana. "We'll see him again soon enough."

They shared a secretive look of promise then as the din of shuffling feet and the low, ceaseless moan of the wounded and dying played in the background. The citizens of Storybrooke had won a great victory but it came at a terrible price. Quick mental assessment judged half of those who stood against Belmordan's army as casualties, a sickening majority of those dead, some notable citizens counted among them.

In the foreground, Zelena could see Aurora and Mulan kneeling at Philip's side, the latter having to hold up the former because her husband had been slain in combat. One of Merida's younger brothers was lost and another wounded, yet the brave warrior and fellow copper-top was busy tending to the wounded while brushing away stray tears. Two of the Merry Men also fell, Little John who perished and Will Scarlet who was grievously wounded and whose wife Anastasia was being supported by a distraught Robin Hood. Zelena imagined the man was particularly anguished as John had been his best friend and Will his half-brother. The losses were staggering.

But as Zelena swept over the carnage, she caught sight of a familiar gingham blue out of the corner of her eye. Merlin and Morgana and culpability for Belmordan's insanity dissipated from consideration as her heart briefly faltered. The ground suddenly felt unstable beneath her legs, her knees wobbly and weak as a dreadful fear uncoiled through her insides that robbed her of the ability to think rationally. Blind fury mixed with breathless panic as she stared in anguished disbelief. But then she saw the object of her attention stand from where she'd been crouching to help an injured man bind his wounded shoulder and the horrific moment passed.

"Dorothy Gale!" she cried as she thundered over the twenty feet separating her from the love of her life. "Just what in the bloody blazes are you doing here? You're supposed to be safe back in Oz with Glinda!"

Dorothy winced at the shrill sound of Zelena's voice but seemed otherwise unapologetic as she wiped her hands on her skirts, staining them a rusty red. Two sets of steely blue eyes met, neither giving an inch.

"I wanted to surprise you," Dorothy said. "I was planning on coming back next week, but when I heard about Ruby being home, I begged the Council of Directions to help me return right away. Thankfully the new West was in a good mood and was kind enough to lend her power, else I wouldn't have made it in time to help."

Zelena sneered. "Why that little, pea-brained upstart! I'll have her head the next time I visit."

Dorothy's lips crooked up then, letting Zelena know she was aware of the reason behind the threats. "Now, now, don't be petty," she said. "I wasn't about to take no for an answer, and you know how she idolizes you. Besides, I'm fine, which is the real reason you're all flustered. Not that I don't find your concern really cute."

When Zelena huffed, Dorothy's smile widened and she slinked forward to pull Zelena into her arms. Zelena only gave slight protest before allowing herself the luxury of melting into her lover's embrace. She quite needed the reassurance of a solid frame and strong arms to confirm that Dorothy was, as stated, unharmed.

A year had passed since Dorothy Gale abruptly reentered her life. Zelena was on a family trip to Oz, her first in years, along with her sister and her sister's nosy and too-good-for-her-own-good wife when she encountered Dorothy in the Emerald City. In the interim Glinda had installed the displaced farm girl as the new Champion of Oz. During the week spent in her former homeland, Ruby cozied up to Dorothy as if they were old acquaintances. Soon enough the pair were thick as thieves, much
to Zelena's displeasure and Regina's infinite amusement. No chance was missed to rub Zelena's nose in how Dorothy would likely be a fixture in their lives forever since Ruby took such a shine to her. And although Zelena audibly cursed at that suggestion, which made Regina all the merrier, the prediction proved to be accurate. For at Ruby's insistence, Dorothy came back with them to Storybrooke.

"I've missed Earth since coming back to Oz," was Dorothy's officially stated reason, but Zelena knew the truth that Dorothy was smitten by Ruby's too-pretty smile and overt friendliness, and that furthermore she couldn't resist the chance to goad Zelena through continued presence in her life.

The first month Dorothy spent in Storybrooke they passed in mutual loathing. But as time wore on, they interacted more and more, which was all Ruby's fault as she insisted upon inviting her new friend to dinner with the family and to hang out on play dates between the girls and Frankie that Zelena was unable to escape because she lacked the spine to say no to her daughter. Dorothy, as it turned out, was a charming young woman beneath the austere, tough-as-nails demeanor she wore like armor. Dorothy was also very, very gay, which was made clear by the way she would sneak glimpses at Ruby's shapely ass when she thought no one was looking. A dangerous proposition considering to whom Ruby was happily married.

There was one particular instance that came to mind…

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*I was summer at the time and a good quarter of the town had gathered at the beach for a picnic organized by the Sheriff's Department. Forth By The Force, they had dubbed it. Being an apparent American tradition, there was beer and hotdogs and hamburgers aplenty, along with warm weather sporting events organized to drum up charity for local causes and the various municipalities.*

*The Sheriff's Department had sponsored a volleyball tournament, in which all of their employees competed, along with other freelancers who signed up. Ruby was on a team with Belle and Mulan against Emma Swan, Ella, and Aurora. They had dubbed the showdown Team Brunette vs. Team Blondie, and were taking it a little too seriously, Zelena thought. But that was Ruby and Emma. When pitted against one another, they got super-competitive.*

*I'd be more discreet with my leering if I were you," Zelena said upon catching Dorothy appreciating Ruby's choice of a string bikini top and sinful daisy dukes. The ogling was absentminded, as if Dorothy was unaware of what she was doing or simply unable to help herself.*

*Incidentally, Dorothy had taken a post temping for the Sheriff while figuring out her place in Storybrooke and whether she wanted her stay there to be more than just a visit. Zelena didn't need to ask whether part of the reason she accepted the job was to be close to Ruby. And while part of her relished the thought of watching Dorothy get too close to Ruby only to inevitably get stung upon incurring Regina's wrath, another more sensitive side – which kept cropping up more and more frequently since becoming a mother – sympathized with Dorothy's plight. It wasn't fun harboring an unrequited crush.*

*That said, while Ruby was admittedly beautiful and kind and funny and loyal, all traits that made her very easy to fall for, Regina would not see Dorothy's natural attraction as what it was: harmless fancy that would eventually pass. Reformed the Evil Queen may be but where her wife was concerned she would only see a threat that needed to be eliminated with extreme prejudice.*

*Something in Zelena softened then, as if a wall around her heart was removed without her even realizing. All because she'd seen the hopeless dream in Dorothy's eyes that so mirrored her own when she thought of her early days interacting with Glinda. Or was confronted by her sister's enviable life.*
Sometimes it hurt to see how grotesquely happy Regina was given all she’d done as Queen when Zelena still often felt like a misfit whose only ray of sunshine was her daughter. Although Frankie was a blindingly bright ray of light, she ached for someone to love the way Ruby loved her sister, so completely and unconditionally. Being on the outside peering in, as though she were an orphan left out in the cold watching with intense longing as a happy family fellowshipped over the dinner table, could be as infuriating as it was depressing.

When Dorothy started, wide-eyed and flushed with shame at being caught, Zelena gave her a tiny smile full of sympathy. "Ruby is a very pretty girl," she said, "and very easy to love. But my sister can get dangerously possessive over her. The last person that got caught gawking at Ruby's legs spent an entire day as a squirrel constantly running for his life from a suspiciously aggressive Pongo."

Dorothy gulped at what was sure to be a terrifying mental image that provoked. "I'm sorry. I didn’t mean to stare, it's just..." She trailed off, that hopeless expression turning into self-loathing.

"She's everything you ever wished for but can never have?" Dorothy's stricken grimace told Zelena her assumption was painfully accurate. She reached over and gave Dorothy's hand a sympathetic pat. "I've been where you are, believe it or not. It's how I used to look at Glinda." Dorothy gasped in surprise at that. "Didn't think I swung that way, did you? Neither did I until I met her. Guess that ignorance of our true selves runs in the family."

"What do you mean?" Dorothy's question was posed gently but rapt with interest.

Normally Zelena would use the opportunity to skewer the girl for what was clearly perceived as perverse desires by labeling her own as just that. But her mean streak was apparently taking a day off, so instead she gestured to over to Regina, looking elegant but beautiful in a purple sundress while sitting cross-legged on a large blanket. Both Sophie and Amie were in her lap, and she was enthusiastically helping the girls cheer on their Mama.

"It means that Regina never took her attraction to women seriously until Ruby," she explained, heart constricting painfully at the veritable fount of joy and love pouring out of her sister. "Previously all of her dalliances of any consequence were with men. But Ruby is a different breed, pun intended. She's special and I don't just mean her being a werewolf. Where most gave a brokenhearted former villain a wide berth, Ruby took it upon herself to be a friend at a time Regina most needed one. In the process they fell madly in love and that, as they say, is history."

Zelena could see the longing in Dorothy's eyes at the idea Regina and Ruby started out as friends and knew she had to be blunt if the girl had any chance of surviving a life in Storybrooke. "Maybe that might have happened to you had she met you first," she added. "But she didn't. She's Regina's wife now and they have a decade of love behind them, True Love at that, and two precious girls to show for it. I won't judge you for feelings that you can't help, Dorothy, because God knows I have them, too. Regina, however, will not be so gracious."

Dorothy sighed, then pinched the bridge of her nose. "Look, I get that she's off limits. I'm not gonna do anything, if that's what you're afraid of. However little you think of me, I'm not a homewrecker. She's just so wonderful...special like you said. She has the biggest heart of anyone I know. I mean, she was the first person I felt comfortable enough with to tell that I'm...that I'm...well, you know."

"That you're gay?" Zelena's supplied completion of Dorothy's thought was met with a forlorn nod. "Why on earth haven't you told anyone else? Glinda even?" The question was because of her surprise that Dorothy hadn't confided in the White Witch of the South who just so happened to be a raging lesbian. The only complaint Zelena had against Glinda was that she was simply too virtuous to act on what the prim and proper woman deemed as primitive sexual urges. That austere purity
was part of what drove Zelena wild with lust, made her want to ravish her fellow witch until that antiquated, puritanical viewpoint shattered into a million pieces beneath her fingers. But even though Glinda insisted upon self-repression that put duty above all else, she openly defended those whose sexual preferences landed somewhere on the fringes of acceptability.

"After my first trip to Oz, I spent some time in an insane asylum," said Dorothy. Her features shuttered off as she spoke, as if reliving the memory was too painful to be accompanied by emotion. "People on Earth don't like to hear that there are other worlds besides their own, especially not from a crazy teenager who claimed to have visited one. Anyway, I met a girl there, a pretty thing with blonde curls. Called herself Tip. She was the first girl I ever fell in love with. First girl I ever kissed. The nurses caught us one day hugging a little too intimately under an old apple tree in the courtyard. Tip spent a month in isolation and I got a dozen rounds of shock therapy for our 'perversity'. They didn't like gays much in Kansas when I was a girl. Still don't. I guess that experience made me reluctant to share."

Zelena's brows scrunched with sympathy for Dorothy and disgust at what she was made to endure. "People are cruel, Dorothy," she said, "and they hate that which they don't understand. They're all worthless dolts who think violence will solve any problem." Dorothy gave a little chuckle at that. "They are! There is nothing wrong with you, Dorothy Gale. Nothing at all. Go ask Glinda when you're back in Oz. She'll say the same."

For a moment Dorothy didn't respond, just sat there staring at Zelena with a newfound respect that honestly made Zelena a little uncomfortable. She squirmed under the heat of those penetrating blue eyes.

"Thanks," Dorothy said, her half-grateful, half-teasing smile breaking the spell. "Never expected to get a gay pep talk from my former nemesis, the Wicked Witch herself."

The backhanded compliment made Zelena preen. Regina may hunch over with shame at the mention of the Evil Queen, she thought, but she was proud of her past.

"Well, my pretty," she said, feeling playful all of the sudden, "I'm full of delicious surprises. Stick around and maybe you'll get to unwrap a few." She then gave a suggestive wink, which made Dorothy blush prettily, rather like a schoolgirl who just got her first 'check yes or no' note.

To Zelena's eternal gratitude, Dorothy did stick around. As it turned out, that little conversation thawed the ice between them enough that their mutual loathing and unsubtle distrust began to transition into something more positive. Tentative tolerance gave way to the makings of friendship only to finally swell into increasingly dangerous waves of sexual tension that eventually got too pervasive to ignore. And though Zelena still often found Dorothy to be impudent and pig-headed, they were qualities she rather cherished. Except, that is, when they were getting Dorothy in trouble or putting her in unnecessary danger, such as now.

"I'll show you cute if you ever pull a stunt like this again," Zelena then said in reply to Dorothy's comment.

Dorothy pulled back chuckling so she could press a gentle kiss to Zelena's lips. She tasted of sweat and life, which to Zelena was impossibly sweet.

"If that's a threat, it's a bad one," Dorothy said, eyes twinkling with amusement. "I'd kinda like to see you cuter than you are right now, though, all full of righteous indignation because you were scared for me. Because you love me."
Zelena scoffed but remained willingly trapped by her lover's lean but muscular arms. "You just can't take anything seriously, can you?"

Dorothy's expression turned sentimental. "Not when you're looking at me that way."

"In what way?"

"As if I'm half of your world and just for a minute it was about to tumble off into the nether."

Zelena frowned at Dorothy's flippant tone. "Maybe that's true, eh? Maybe my heart stopped for a split second when I saw your skirts amidst the dead and dying. Maybe I got a glimpse of how it would feel if I were to lose you like Regina did Ruby to that bastard Joshua Woods' insane vendetta. It was a peek into the fiery depths of hell, I tell you! I'd surely go mad if something happened to you, because I do love you and you are half of my world. So please don't make me have endure that feeling ever again!"

Zelena dipped her chin to hide the tears that were abruptly gathering at her lids and threatening to fall. She hated crying when she was alone. To do so in public was an intolerable humiliation.

"I'm sorry, Lena," Dorothy said, sounding properly chastised. Zelena didn't correct the pet name because for one she was too glad Dorothy was okay to be truly angry and two, she was secretly growing fond of it. And besides, she couldn't really gripe at Dorothy's preferred designation for her when Frankie called her mother's girlfriend Dory. "Hey," Dorothy then tipped Zelena's chin up, fixing her with apologetic eyes. "I am. I didn't mean to scare you. But there was just no way in hell I was gonna stay in Oz when my friends might need me. And then I got here and saw that my home was about to be destroyed and the woman I love along with it. That's a fight I will never walk away from. You have to know that by now."

Zelena gave a forbearing sigh. Dorothy was right. She did know the kind of person her lover was and wouldn't change it for anything. A Dorothy who wasn't willing to die for what she loved and believed in wasn't Dorothy at all.

"I could lie and say I don't, but I do," she said, resigned to accepting her girlfriend for who she was just as Dorothy accepted her. "You're a warrior, my darling, and do I love that about you. I don't expect you to change nor would I wish it. I would just like for you to exercise more caution in the future, if not for my sake then for Frankie's. She's gotten attached to you, you know. Same as her mother."

Dorothy removed her finger from Zelena's chin then slid the same hand over Zelena's cheek. "I'm pretty attached to you two myself," she said as she rubbed a lazy pattern with her thumb. "And for my two favorite girls, I will try to not be so reckless from now on."

"That's all I ask. Thank you." Leaning into the comforting ministrations, Zelena felt relief wash over her. But then part of Dorothy's sentence from a moment ago struck with her and she could hardly contain the happiness that was suffusing her chest because of it. She tugged at her bottom lip with her teeth. "By the way, did you really mean it?" When Dorothy's brows arched in confusion, Zelena elaborated, "That Storybrooke is your home."

"Of course it is." Dorothy's tone was matter-of-fact, as if it should be clear by now to Zelena as to where her heart lie. "My home is wherever you are. Has been for a long time now."

"Dorothy..."

The declaration was almost too much for Zelena to bear. Dorothy had once told her, before they
became a couple that is, that Oz was the only place she could see herself living out her days. With all the death and destruction all around her now, with Regina and Ruby still missing, and with Dorothy making this noble sacrifice on her behalf, she felt awful to be so happy. Even so, a tear of joy escaped, which Dorothy caught with the pad of her thumb.

"Don't do this to yourself," Dorothy then said as if reading Zelena's mind through her eyes. "I know everything is a mess right now but trust me when I say it will be okay. Ruby and Regina will be okay. I believe that with all of my heart." Zelena gave her a tearful nod, which Dorothy also correctly interpreted. "Oh, honey. Don't feel guilty over me not thinking of Oz as home anymore. I don't. I still love it and the people there so much, but I'm not the same woman who once told you I wanted to live there for the rest of my life. Falling in love with you changed me, made brave enough to open myself up to the possibility of happiness and love, and while the power you so quickly gained over me was scary at first, you haven't once abused it without my permission. I'm a better woman now for loving you and my priorities have shifted. Being the Champion of Oz isn't enough for me anymore. I want to make a family here in Storybrooke with you and Frankie. That's why I told Glinda that the people of Oz would need another Champion, or would at least need to learn to accept that their current one will be living permanently in another world."

It was the most beautiful thing anyone had ever said or done for her. Choking back a sob, Zelena rested her forehead against Dorothy's, their eyes speaking the volumes of love written daily within their hearts. But just as they were leaning in to kiss, a burst of magic erupted behind them, filling the square with a brilliant golden light that illuminated the square as if it were noon instead the middle of the night.

Zelena turned in Dorothy's arms, eyes squinting against the blinding light. Though she had an inkling as to the source of the magic, her own power flared up so she would be ready to defend her town and her family which was now officially one member larger.

In the center of the sphere of magic she could make out five shapes. Three were standing, one of which was holding another while the last was prone upon the ground. As the golden hues of energy faded, the figures became recognizable as all women save one, and soon enough clothing could be made out as well as faces.

Zelena gasped. Regina and Emma stood just behind Ruby's shoulders while Belmordan lay motionless, a pool of blood issuing forth from beneath his chest. Just as she and Merlin had conjectured, the evil man who had been on the cusp of razing Storybrooke to the ground was dead. Good riddance, Zelena thought. But her pleasure in Belmordan's demise evaporated at the sight of Ruby, untold sorrow upon her blotchy, tear-streaked face and in whose arms lay a tall, bronze-skinned woman in a purple chiton the shade of a dark primula.

"Oh, God." Zelena's exclamation came out with a whoosh of breath. Something awful had happened and she was almost afraid to find out what.

Chapter End Notes

I thought Zelena/Dorothy was just too juicy to pass up. This is where they should have went with Dorothy's character IMO, instead of shoehorning Ruby into it because, hey!, Dorothy likes dogs and Ruby is one! BEST IDEA EVER! *high fives across the writer's room* Seriously, though, the Wicked Witch and Dorothy falling for each other...woulda shipped it for sure.
An Akward Family Reunion

Chapter Summary

Regina, Ruby, and Emma return to the surface.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Regina squinted to see through the golden fog of Emma's magic. They had spent at least ten minutes in Maleficent's cavern, mostly silent save for the few words of comfort one or the other offered to Ruby. Would that there was all the time in the world to allow her to grieve. Sadly there were other considerations that required attention, namely the battle for Storybrooke from whence they'd been removed via Belmordan's magic. Constrained by her duty to the town and the rest of her loved ones, she asked Emma to return them to the surface. By then, Ruby had regained some semblance of composure, so there wasn't much needed to convince the Savior to accommodate the request.

The inconsequential effort required to transport them back to the surface was rather surprising considering how much Emma had exerted herself to defeat Belmordan. Since shattering the barrier keeping her contained, the Savior was operating on a whole new level. Her magic seemed more potent, divine almost as if God Himself had chosen Emma as the instrument through which to mete out justice upon a man whose evil had consumed many words and untold lives. Were Emma not the honorable, lionhearted arbiter of goodness she was, her newly unleashed powers would have been terrifying.

Before Ruby was ready to allow Emma to transport them, she had stooped back down to scoop her dead mother into her arms. Regina still found it hard to comprehend that Artemis and Belmordan were not just distant relatives as Ruby had been told but were in fact her parents. Well, technically speaking they had been Eleni's parents, but seeing as Ruby was Eleni, that also meant they were hers even though her current body had two completely different progenitors. Ruby didn't seem to have a problem accepting all of that, though, whereas Regina was frankly having problems accepting all she'd learned during her out-of-body experience regarding her past.

Discovering one had been reincarnated was not an every day occurrence, and for a woman like Regina who required constant control for her peace of mind, finding out there was entire other lifetime of memories she had been blocked from was a difficult pill to swallow. Her previous incarnation as Elaine had settled into residence within the vault of her memories without threatening her sanity, but they were nonetheless meshing uncomfortably with those of her current life. She struggled against the messy webs that were forming, hoping to untangle them into something manageable lest the conflict drive her bonkers.

All the while she had Ruby's mental and emotional health to worry about, which exasperated the stress on her already precariously taxed mind. Maintaining her grip on reality was a chore that gave her sympathetic perspective on victims of the first Dark Curse who'd had to navigate decades of extra time occupying the same space as their newly restored old lives. If this was how they'd felt after it broke, well, it was a miracle the town didn't descend into further chaos than it did. Still, she kept it together through sheer grit and determination, not only because she was adept at compartmentalizing but also due to another layer being added atop her personality in which protecting Ruby was an
imperative that superseded all else.

Ruby, on the other hand, seemed to be at peace with her former life, as if those suddenly restored memories slid perfectly into place without disjointing the incomplete puzzle that had existed before. Regina was quite used to the deftness with which Ruby adapted to change. She had learned long ago that her wife was not an easy person to rattle, as the wolf kept her grounded around the edges where the human mind might start to fray or even outright snap.

Enviable as that adaptability was, Regina was presently grateful for it. The last thing Ruby needed right now was having to deal with an existential crisis on top of everything else. It was going to be hard enough on her to bury Granny, not to mention the two additional piles of grief she was going to have to work through, and all that in addition to reconciling herself with whatever relationship she chose to establish with the man who had fathered the body she currently inhabited. Lesser individuals would have crumpled under the pressure of so much upheaval. Not Ruby, though. And while that made Regina so proud of her infinitely brave and strong angel, it also hurt to realize that strength was built through repeated exposure to tragedy.

Even during the Curse when they'd barely been acquaintances, she'd thought it was sad someone so beautiful had to endure so much pain. As Queen, she was fairly well informed of Red's life. Her network of spies in the Enchanted Forest that kept her informed on Snow White also made her privy to fascinating details about the outlaw's various cohorts. Red had been of particular interest for a myriad of reasons, not the least of which was the attraction she'd felt to the werewolf during their introduction on the mountain pass bordering George's kingdom. After that encounter, she'd kept close tabs on the girl, which extended on into Storybrooke and Ruby Lucas' colorful existence.

Now, her personal investment in Ruby's well-being, not only of body but of heart and mind and soul as well, only intensified those hurtful pangs that appeared whenever bright green eyes dimmed with inexplicable sadness. Ruby's pain was now her pain, especially since they shared one heart. That meant they were both in for a rough couple of days seeing as Ruby would soon have to bury the only parental figure she'd ever known.

Like the trooper she was, though, Ruby stood tall and brave with Artemis in her arms. It took everything in Regina to squash her urge to smother her wife with comfort and affection that would not be well received at the moment. Ruby's posture was currently screaming that she needed space, so she kept an arms length out of respect. Ruby needed to deal with this in her own way, and without judgment.

In the aftermath of Joshua Woods, Regina more than once made the mistake of pressing Ruby too hard too soon when she wasn't ready to talk. She nearly got her head bit off for her trouble. She'd also had a nasty tendency to mother hen, which Ruby didn't appreciate when feeling surly and resistant to being comforted. It took time to learn Ruby's tells so she could recognize when her wife's body language was pleading to her, "Please, I need you to hold me!" as accurately as the one that shouted a warning, "Touch me at your own peril!" The more adept she got at deciphering those unspoken signals, the faster and more smoothly their mutual healing progressed. As an added bonus, things around the house got a lot less loud, too, since when Ruby felt cornered she often lashed out by provoking screaming matches that left both of them full of regrets.

No doubt Regina would still make some missteps in the near future. Being married to an extraordinarily complicated woman who liked to think she was simple was a recipe for conflict. But no matter how bitterly they fought or how far away from her Ruby might withdraw from time to time, they would survive the strain. This latest crucible, intensely devastating as it was, would not break them. Their marriage was not perfect, but it was strong. Two lifetimes strong. And that was all the proof Regina needed to keep the faith.
With that in mind, she stayed far enough away from Ruby so as to not be considered hovering but close enough to offer whatever silent support she could. She could tell by the way Ruby subconsciously shifted and leaned in her direction that her effort was appreciated.

"It's going to be okay," she said when Ruby caught her eyes over her right shoulder. "We'll get through this together."

Gratitude and love underpinned the sad smile Ruby returned. "I know. I love you."

Regina could face anything so long as she knew that was true. "I love you, too."

And then they were engulfed with the Savior's brand new color of magic, a warm golden hue that bathed the cavern in soft amber tones that surged in brilliant intensity until their surroundings were completely obscured. As the blanket of energy faded, Storybrooke came into view, and with it a scene out of some post-Apocalyptic novel skewed more toward horror than science fiction. Regina blanched and swayed in place. Her town had been reduced to the scene of a grand massacre on a scale that reminded her more of pitched battle between armies of tens of thousands than a scraped together defense consisting of poorly armed citizens, many of whom had never seen combat even back in the Old World. And yet the enemy dead outnumbered those of Storybrooke by at least ten-to-one.

That untold scores of enemy soldiers remained standing had Regina confused as to why they had surrendered and laid down their arms. A conservative estimate of half the defenders were casualties, at least a third of those dead, and with numbers so dwindled it was unlikely they could have held out for long. Not even the combined might of the Dark One, who Regina could see working alongside Belle to give relief to the wounded, and the Wicked Witch, who was embracing her girlfriend while staring at Ruby with a deeply troubled expression on her face, could have stemmed the tide that surely would have crushed any resistance on the next proper assault.

But Regina was too tired and too sad and too worried about Ruby to care how they won this war. Victory was already tarnished by their losses. There was no need to further diminish what amounted to a major miracle of warfare.

Suddenly, Zelena caught Regina's eyes and when they met, her elder sibling's concern for Ruby transformed into a joyous relief. Her sister wrenched out of Dorothy's grasp with a cry, then ran headlong toward Regina shouting her name.

"Zelena..." Regina barely had the name out of her lips before her sibling's larger frame crashed into her, nearly knocking her back on her rear. The hug she got was nearly crushing but she endured it with a watery smile that couldn't be suppressed. She hadn't expected to be so glad to see her sister, but now that they were together again, her own emotions began to mirror Zelena's. Clearly the bond they shared now ran deeper than ever before, having been strengthened by how close they came to losing each other.

"Oh, my God, Regina!" Zelena mouthed her exclamation against Regina's shoulder before raising up to place a series of kisses to Regina's temple. The PDA was unexpected, especially Zelena knew how reticent Regina was about showing affection in public, yet strangely welcome. It felt nice to know she was so loved by her only immediate blood kin outside of her children. "I was so worried when you disappeared," Zelena then said after pulling back so they were face-to-face. "What the hell happened?"

Regina arched a brow, taking in the blood spatter upon her sister's dirty, sweat-stained face. "What the hell happened to you? Looks like you've bathed my town in blood then decided to have a roll around in it yourself."
"You first, Sis," Zelena said, smirking at Regina's snarky response. "I'm the elder sibling and I asked first."

Regina rolled her eyes. Their relationship may have improved drastically since Zelena first came to town but they were still as combative as ever, which meant Regina was tempted to be obstinate. In the interest of not starting an argument to sully the moment, she acquiesced.

"Fine. The short version is that Belmordan magicked us to Maleficent's cave where, unbeknownst to me, his mate, Artemis, was interred...alive at that."

Two shocked voices cut in, one belonging to Snow who said, "Artemis?! You mean Hercules' aunt? The Greek Goddess?" Meanwhile Charming was grousing, "How could you not know that there was something else in Maleficent's cave?"

"Yes, Snow, the very same," Regina said. "And I didn't know the prison was there when I cast the Dark Curse. Although I now suspect it was what caused Storybrooke to be created here on this spot in Maine. A source of power capable of holding a legitimate deity prisoner for all eternity would act as a natural magnet for the Curse."

"And it just so happened that this prisoner was freed when you arrived down there?" Zelena's question was pointed but more in curiosity than accusation. One of the things Regina held in common with her sister was an interest in all things magic.

Cutting her eyes over to Ruby, Regina saw her wife briefly snap out of the almost numb stupor she was sinking into and then glance at Regina, lip tucked between her teeth. One curt nod followed after which a bleak pall of sadness seemed begin gathering over her head. Her eyes began to dim all over again as she clutched Artemis against her with something akin to desperation.

Regina was tempted to simply magic the dead woman away from Ruby to relieve her wife of the burden but decided against it since she wasn't keen to sleep on the couch tonight. Besides, it seemed having Artemis close was helping, so she was inclined to permit the unhealthy clinging for now. Eventually, though, Ruby was going to have to let go, and sooner rather than later.

"Not exactly," Regina said, feeling no better that Ruby had no objections. Relaying the relevant information to their loved ones was a logical and necessary decision, but her worry over Ruby's state made her hesitant to pile reliving those events onto what were already dangerously high levels of stress. Ruby was coping with all of the death, but only just barely. Regina did not want to be the one to push her wife over the precarious edge.

"Being close to the tomb triggered something in Ruby," she answered after a moment of indecision. In the end, getting the truth out with expedience felt a better choice than leaving the questions to crop up later. Best to tear the band-aid off quickly. Still, as the discussion proceeded, she kept a close eye on Ruby, searching for tells of an impending breakdown. "I don't know what, exactly, but she was the one who freed Artemis, and I think it was quite involuntary."

"Yeah," said Emma, sounding a little creeped out by what she'd witnessed. "She was doing her best impression of Linda Blair...started speaking another language and hovered in the air. I got throwback chills to when I watched The Exorcist the first time."

"She was speaking Greek," supplied Regina.

Emma gave a little huff of annoyance. "It sure was to me! Anyway, doesn't matter what language the words were when they made the cave wall glow. Legit, too. It was like that scene from Lord of the Rings at the Door to Moria." At the mention of the movie scene, Regina snorted with amusement.
Emma glared back at her. "What?"

Regina shook her head. "Nothing bad. It's just I had the same thought when I watched it happen."

"Great minds, I guess."

Emma's teasing smirk had Regina rolling her eyes again. But before she could throw in a witty retort, a baritone voice sounded from over her shoulder, one she instantly recognized.

"Hey, Moms."

"Henry?" Heart swelling, Regina swirled to face her son. Concern for Ruby momentarily forgotten, her face lit up with happiness. She hadn't expected to see him for another two months, yet here he was in the flesh, a sword in his hand and blood on his shirt, looking more princely than scholarly.

The sight nearly sent Regina into full on panic mode. Her son had been fighting in the battle and she didn't even know it. "Henry Daniel Mills! What on earth are you doing here? And what possessed you to pick up that sword? You could have gotten yourself killed!"

Henry's brows scrunched together as if she should already know the answer to those questions. "I'm here because you called me earlier this afternoon," he said. "Remember? You were taking Ruby to the hospital."

Drawing in a deep breath, Regina scrubbed at her face, weary all of sudden. In the insanity that followed, the illness that precipitated all of this madness slipped her mind. Honestly, it seemed like that was weeks ago.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I honestly forgot you were coming. But that doesn't mean I'm not still upset about you needlessly risking your life."

Henry seemed to find her response humorous. "I expected nothing less. It's good to see you, Mom."

And with that, he pulled Regina into a hug that suffused her entire being with warmth and contentment. For as long as she was able she luxuriated in breathing in his scent as a comforting reminder that he was alive and unharmed. When she pulled away, she grasped his face with hands that were suddenly tremulous. Her smile, though, was firm and full.

"It's good to see you, too, my Little Prince."

The clearing of a throat from nearby caught Regina's attention away from Henry and she turned as Emma approached.

"Hey, kid," the Savior said, and the beaming smile that appeared on Henry's face was all the encouragement Regina needed to release him.

The desire to hog her son's attention was not a new sensation but it was one she knew was not rooted in any kind of selfless affection. She still hated sharing him even though Henry adored the woman who had given birth to him just as much as he did the one who raised him. That Emma had proven herself to be a good mother over the years made little difference when their special bond could still unsettle her when she was feeling particularly weak or needy. For the most part, though, she had learned to live with sharing Henry with his other mother, and if it had to be anyone, she was glad it was Emma. Not many other women would have been so accommodating or forgiving after discovering her son's adoptive mother was literally the Evil Queen.

Heart full but also a little sad, Regina stepped aside to allow a second mother-son reunion to take
place. But before Henry and Emma could even break apart from their embrace, Regina saw two
strangers meander over to their group only to stop a yard or so behind Henry. One was a woman
with jet black hair and jade green eyes while the other was a tall, lanky man with an angular but
handsome face and large ears.

"And just who the hell are you two?" she asked, brow raised. Her question caused Henry and Emma
to spring apart and she caught Ruby stiffen up out of the corner of her eye.

Upon catching sight of the newcomers, her son winced at her lack of tact before sweeping his arm in
their direction. "Moms," he said, "this is Professor Morgan Ambrose. The one I kept telling you guys
about."

The introduced man gave a slight albeit dignified bow. "Pleased to meet you both, Mrs. Mills and
Miss Swan."

Henry then gestured to the woman. "And this is Ms. Kate McGraw, his colleague."

"Hello," said Kate, who acted and dressed far less formally.

Regina offered her hand to both and was pleased that they took it with genuine smiles. "Hello, I'm
Regina Mills – Henry's mother."

"Other mother." Emma's interjection, while accurate, was unwelcome.

Regina felt the vein in her forehead begin to throb. She only forcibly choked down her aggravation
out of a need to be civil in front of people who were clearly important to her son. Embarrassing him
by exposing them to their normal affectionate bickering was not an ideal first impression.

"Yes, yes," she said, trying to modulate her tone to that of polite correction and mostly succeeding. "I
adopted Henry when he was a baby. Emma here is his biological mother."

Emma scowled petulantly. "Don't get all pissy with me. I was just making sure they got an accurate
lay of the land."

The desire for civility didn't last very long. Exasperated now beyond reason, Regina gave an
exaggerated huff and then turned to her wife. Hands on her hips, she said, "You know what, Ruby? I
take back every good thing I've ever said about her. She's just as annoying as she was the day she
showed up on my porch!"

"You're just mad 'cause I saved the day. Again," Emma said, looking far too smug for Regina's
liking

Regina visibly bristled visibly at the brazen counter-punch. "Listen, here, Swan..."

"Ladies! Please! Jesus. Hasn't there been enough strife for one day? You're friends and both adults.
Act like it."

Ruby's raised voice cut off Regina's dig, which was disappointing because she'd been about to
describe how satisfying it would be to pretend Emma was a dartboard for the next five minutes. She
glanced over to see that while she wasn't paying attention, Ruby had gently placed Artemis' corpse
upon the ground a few feet away from the group, right next to Granny, so as to not make anyone
more uncomfortable than they already were.

*Of course she would do that,* Regina thought, a bit annoyed that Ruby was being so considerate of
everyone else when she and Emma were being obnoxious assholes over nothing important.
This wasn't the first time Ruby had played referee between the two, of course. Normally Regina would push Ruby to the limits of her patience while feeling so testy, but noting that her wife was looking a little pissed and a whole lot exhausted muted her aggressiveness. Plus, Ruby was regarding the newcomers with wariness that was concerning, which prompted Regina to further dial back the knob on her vitriol.

Emma, though, had the decency to appear thoroughly chastised and quite a bit mortified to have to picked a fight with Regina in front of Henry's professors. Ambrose and McGraw seemed to be amused by their antics, as if they'd been clued in that the verbal sparring was part and parcel of the relationship between the young man's two disparately tempered mothers.

"Sorry, Rubes," Emma said, casting properly apologetic eyes to Ruby and then to Regina. "And I'm sorry, Regina."

Ruby stared expectantly at Regina and when no reply came gave a longsuffering sigh. "Seriously, Regina?"

"What? I'm not going to apologize for stating the truth." Just because she was willing to play nice with blondie did not mean she would admit to being wrong. Emma's goading had provoked her less than appropriate response. How was that her fault?

"Regina, please. For me?" Ruby's shameless begging was irresistible on any ordinary day. But right now it was particularly effective.

Over the space of one day, Ruby had got violently ill, disappeared right before the town was invaded, which was followed by a huge battle in the square that left hundreds dead – including Ruby's grandmother – and culminated their discovery of a past life in which they'd loved and lost each other. What's worse, for Ruby that past life ran painfully parallel to the present one. In both, she was born to a mother and a father she never knew until being reunited at the worst possible time and in the worst possible circumstances just to find out they were awful people unworthy of her love. And then in keeping with what appeared to be her destiny, she'd lost them before she even got to know them.

With so much destruction, pain, and loss in general running rampant in Storybrooke, and in the face of Ruby's much more personal tragedies, the pride Regina was so fiercely clinging to was comparatively petty and utterly inconsequential. Embarrassed at her poor behavior, she decided the best course of action was to follow Elsa's famous advice and, in the best interests of her True Love, let it go.

"Oh, fine. I apologize, Emma. Better?" Ruby didn't look particularly pleased with Regina's lackluster performance but nodded acceptance all the same, which worked for Regina because, if only for Ruby's sake, she'd meant it. "Now," she then said, "as I was about to ask before Miss Swan decided to be rude..."

Emma scoffed. "I was being rude...?"

"Might want to haul it back in there, love, before the waters that just calmed get stirred back up," said Hook, who had just arrived and who stepped behind Emma to enfold her into his arms. That Emma did not resist spoke to how her own traumatic day was finally catching up to her.

Since Hook's advice was both well timed and sage, Regina quirked her lips up at him. "Good form, Captain Guy-liner." When Kate laughed out loud at the quip, Regina gave her a look. "Something funny, Miss McGraw?"
Nonplussed, Kate's eyes danced merrily. "Not at all. I'm just happy to meet such an interesting family. Henry talked about you all the whole drive over."

"All good things, I hope," said Ruby, speaking to Kate, although her eyes never left off studying Ambrose.

Rather than say anything, Regina allowed the conversation that followed to fade into the background. All of her attention was on the newcomers. While Kate's reactions to Ruby appeared fairly innocuous, Ambrose seemed to be watching Ruby's every move. There was something about the way he stared at her that had Regina's hackles rising. She didn't have to wait long for revelation to clarify that sixth sense feeling, for Henry soon injected a truth bomb into the conversation that changed everything. Again.

"They weren't always Kate and Morgan, you know. A long time ago, they were Merlin and Morgana."

Ruby's gasp cut off any reply from Regina, who was at once more interested in the wide-eyed recognition from her wife that pronouncement affected. "Ruby? What's the matter?" But Ruby didn't hear her.

"Is it really you, Papa?" she asked, voice tiny and almost childlike.

At the seemingly absurd question from Ruby to Merlin, a flash of vivid images from Regina's new set of memories cut through her brain like lightning. Suddenly it dawned on her that Ruby's question was not all that absurd after all. If Morgan Ambrose really was Merlin the Sorcerer of lore, then he was, indeed, the man who had raised Ruby — or rather Eleni — from the time she was only hours old.

Regina wondered how she was ever going to make sense of being two people at once, which again prompted sympathy for the people she'd condemned to the same struggle with the Dark Curse. Ruby once said that at first it felt like she was constantly juggling her personalities, and that her actions and thoughts and words were generally most affected by whichever one currently held sway. She had learned with time to manage the disparate memory sets, but there were still times she skewed hard toward one pole or the other. The explanation made a lot of sense to Regina because sometimes she felt like she was married to three women at once.

At times Ruby could be flamboyant and aggressive and a little bit lewd with her dress and speech, just like she'd been during the Dark Curse. That more assertive mode of behavior most often surfaced around the full moon when the wolf was at her strongest. In the days that immediately followed the waning of Wolf's Time oppressive magical influence, she reverted into the otherwise plain, simple, meek selections Red would have made. The rest of the time, which comprised the majority, she wound up somewhere in the middle, not quite as brazen as her cursed self but also not nearly as unassuming as she'd been in the Enchanted Forest.

To anyone else the attitude shifts would have been jarring but Regina was a woman who herself was multifaceted. Not only was she the modern mayor and mother, but lurking within the shadows of her psyche was a malefic entity whose desire for wanton destruction was only balanced by the hopeful nature of the loving young girl she'd been before her mother all but sold her innocence to the highest bidder. When Ruby proposed marriage, she made sure to highlight not only her acceptance of those different facets of Regina's personality, but her appreciation for each of them. Only someone who struggled within themselves as she did could ever love her the way Ruby did, and more than any other reason, that was why she'd said yes.

Ambrose did not respond to Ruby except to furrow his brows in confusion. His mouth opened and closed several times as if he was attempting to formulate a proper response to her out-of-left-field
"Papa, it's me. It's Eleni," Ruby said while the great master sorcerer floundered as though a mere pupil. "I mean, I was Eleni before...you know...I died."

That pronouncement at last struck a chord in Merlin, who gasped audibly, then shot a glance to Henry. "I thought you said she wasn't..."

"I did," Henry said, looking just as shocked. "What is she talking about Mom?"

Regina heaved out a deep breath. "It's complicated, sweetheart."

"Make it simple for me then."

How was she supposed to do that when she could barely wrap her own mind around her new reality? How does one condense a whole other lifetime into a simple explanation in such awkward circumstances having just been through the proverbial wringer? Her mind was already taxed to the limits with thoughts of how much work it would be to clean up Storybrooke, not to mention having to organize reconstruction of the utilities that had been destroyed and buildings damaged while also dealing with the fallout of so much death being visited upon so many disparate families, including her own. Contemplating getting Ruby through the next week was enough of a load on her overwrought brain without also having to complete the mental gymnastics required to simplify the concept of reincarnation to her son. And even though Regina knew Henry, of all people, would catch on quickly, she floundered for a moment as to how best to respond.

Thankfully Ruby cut in before people began to think she was doing her worst impression of a large mouth bass.

"We've done this before in another life, your Mom and I," Ruby said, as if the idea didn't trouble her in the slightest.

"If that's what you want to call it, sure," said Ruby. "When I unlocked Artemis' prison, something happened to me. I won't go into details but my soul took a trip that my body didn't accompany it on. After I got back, Artemis was freed, and the first thing she said was my name. Well...the name I went by in my previous life. That triggered our memories to return."

"As unbelievable as it sounds, she's telling the truth," Regina said, picking up the tale. "I remembered meeting her when she was Eleni – that was her name then. I also remembered falling in love with her and that the True Love we shared resulted in a pregnancy." Several gasps went out at that, and Regina knew they were thinking back to when it happened in the present and the cost associated with that miracle. "As you might expect, she would have died had I not intervened. I struck a bargain with the Triple Goddess to exchange my life for hers. She and our child lived while I perished not long after she gave birth."

"And I'm still pissed about that," Ruby said, frowning at Regina.

"Yes, well, you'll get over it, darling." Regina gave her wife a needling smile that had Ruby huffing out her annoyance while simultaneously fighting against a smile.

"Anyway," Ruby said, still trying not to smile but failing now, "to keep things concise, in that life I was raised by tall, scrawny wizard with impossibly blue eyes and the biggest, cutest ears I've ever seen. I called him Papa but the rest of the world only knew him as Merlin."
A solitary tear ran down Merlin's cheek as Ruby spoke, and when she ceased, he took a step forward, daring to allow an awestruck hope to play all over his face. "Is it really you, my little Eleni?"

"It's me, Papa," said Ruby, showing that grin of hers that could lift the most downtrodden heart. Tears of her own slipped slowly down her ruddy cheeks, but the dull, emotionless malaise she'd began to enter earlier was gone. These were happy tears.

Chapter End Notes

When the BBC show Merlin was airing, I was a hardcore Mergana shipper. I remain unrepentant about that.
In the wake of victory, more connections are made, revelations are uncovered, and goodbyes said.

Merlin made no immediate reply, seemingly caught between tortured disbelief and joyous acceptance as Ruby made doe eyes at him. The cause of his tentative response was obvious.

Regina herself had felt transcendent upon restoration of the precious memories from that other life only for that joy to be tempered by the agony of watching Eleni wither away. With her spirit trapped in Avalon awaiting rebirth, she had been unable to turn a blind eye to the tragedy unfurling before her. Until the moment Eleni breathed her last breath, that existence was nothing less than unending torture.

Meanwhile Merlin was forced to experience all of it in the flesh. His beautiful daughter, who although adopted was loved as his very own, died a horrifically and even his vast, godlike powers were not enough to save her. If the roles were switched up and Regina made to endure such agony through her own children, she is certain she would have gone utterly mad.

But Merlin wasn't her. Waifish in build as he was, he was harder than any steel forged by the hands of men. To last as long as he had and remain sane, he had to be. Take Belmordan, for instance, whose unnaturally life span combined with innate magical prowess resulted in unchecked megalomania. Merlin was anything but that if his apparent humility was any reliable indicator. What's more, after millennia of experiences walking the worlds as a wanderer and pilgrim without a home, he was bound to be wise beyond comprehension. All things considered it wasn't terribly surprising that he was handling the news so relatively well.

"I know my name is different now," Ruby then said when she noticed Merlin's hesitance, "but I'm still the same headstrong girl who used to beg you to make dragons out of the flames in the fireplace. And remember how I used to beg you for stories about your adventures with Arthur in Camelot before bedtime? And how I got into so much trouble for wandering off through the woods in winter because my friend in the little village nearby claimed it was haunted and dared me to go in at night? 'Cause I do."

Merlin gasped, the personal anecdotes that no one else would know having done the trick. "Eleni...it is you." Happiness that only a fellow parent could understand spread across his lips, and without another word, he opened his arms in invitation.

Ruby sprang forward with a cry and launched herself into Merlin's waiting embrace with such reckless abandon that he wavered in place when she collided with him. To Regina's relief, he did not falter. Once steady, he wrapped the trembling woman up with such tenderness that Regina felt her own tears prickle at her lids.

"I'm so sorry, Papa!" Ruby cried as Merlin held her tight. "I never meant to hurt you. Never! I just...the pain...I missed her so much, and I couldn't take it anymore."

"I know, my sweet, I know," Merlin cooed, rubbing her back with parental affection. "There, there
now. It's alright. I'm here now."

Silence fell over the small crowd as he continued with his comforting reassurances that none dared to break lest the moment be ruined. When Ruby at last quieted, she pulled away to look him in the eye. Cheeks splotchy and eyes glistening, she whispered so that Regina could only barely hear.

"Can you forgive me?"

The smile Merlin gave her was overflowing with compassion, understanding, and unconditional love. "There is nothing to forgive," he said, brushing a stray strand of hair away from her face. "You're my daughter. My light in the darkness. I could never begrudge you for yearning to reunite with your love, even if that took you away from me for a thousand years. Your happiness is all that ever mattered to me. I'm so glad you found it once again." At that, he glanced at Regina. "Thank you, Elaine, for taking care of her for me. Twice."

"It's Regina now," she said, gentle with the correction, "and it was my pleasure. I told you long ago there's nothing I wouldn't do for her. Now you know how true that is."

"I do. You died for her. And now you're living for her. I couldn't ask for more."

Regina appreciated the sentiment, she really did, and were circumstances different she might have commented further on that. But there were matters still unexplained that she felt pressing enough to risk derailing what was an important moment for her wife.

"Anyway, before this touching reunion," Regina did not miss Ruby's frown at her abrupt topic change, "I was going to inquire as why the great Merlin suddenly decided to show up only after Belmordan had spirited away myself, my wife, and my friend? Seems awfully convenient."

"We came as soon as we could, Mom," Henry said, sounding defensive. "Getting through the barrier at the town line gave them trouble."

Regina's brows furrowed deeply at that information. "It shouldn't have. It's supposed to be permeable in both directions to magically tagged residents. Your presence should have guaranteed immediate safe passage."

"Sadly, it did not," Merlin said as he stepped away from Ruby, who kept close by as if afraid he would disappear if she looked away for a second. "I suspect Gryff added his own enchantment in anticipation of my intervention. I was alerted the moment he entered this world, and he had to have known I would come regardless of Henry's invitation."

Regina thought about that for a moment before nodding. "That...actually makes sense. I am curious, however, as to just how you knew he arrived in Storybrooke?"

Zelena made an irritated noise in response to the inquiry. "Get this, Sis. The great Merlin is Belmordan's cousin."

Speechless, Regina's eyes widened in shock. That was a turn she couldn't have predicted in a million years. Although she supposed she should have, what with the perverse pleasure fate derived from setting family against each other.

"Is that true? Are you related to him?"

Ruby's injection into the conversation was so full of awe and expectation that the implications finally dawned on Regina. Her chest started to ache at possibility that Ruby might get her hopes up over some part of her ancient father's line still existing only to have them callously dashed.
"Sweetheart, maybe this isn't the best time..." Regina began, warning in her tone.

Merlin held up a hand to stop Regina's attempt to proactively protect her wife. "No, it's alright," he said. "She has the right to know." To Ruby he said, "And yes. He was my cousin. Our fathers were brothers."

Ruby frowned oddly. "Meaning what? That we're actually cousins?"

"By blood, yes. You are my first cousin, once removed. In my heart, though, you will always be my daughter."

"Wait just a second," Regina injects, irate now that she was putting the jumbled pieces of the distant past together. "Let me get this straight. You are Belmordan's cousin, so I assume you knew him before he became...that." She cut accusing eyes over at the aforementioned bastard's corpse. "And yet you did nothing to stop him? Just sat around and waited for him to invade my town, slaughter my people, murder Granny, and then then almost kill my wife right in front of me?! You could have prevented all of this from happening, Merlin. So why the hell didn't you?"

Before Merlin could get a word in edgewise, Zelena's hand shot up into the air. Countenance a picture of confusion, she said, "Wait a bloody minute here. I've kept quiet til now, but what the hell are you two on about? I was told this Belmordan fellow was ancient – a thousand years old if I remember correctly. Yet you're telling me Ruby is his daughter whom Merlin adopted when she was an infant? I thought she was born in the Enchanted Forest..."

Folding his arms over his chest, Merlin arched a brow at Regina. "Shall I explain or you?"

Regina sighed as she gestured toward the greatest sorcerer in all of history – and, she thought, the greatest screw up. "You do it. They'll be more likely to believe it from someone of your legendary stature." She said the last bit as more of an insult than a compliment.

She watched the faces of her family and friends as Merlin laid the bald truth out for them. That Regina and Ruby were not just Regina and Ruby, but that they had once walked the earth a thousand years before as Elaine and Eleni. That their True Love was so powerful it bound them together not only in body but in spirit and reached through time and space to insert them into the world over and over again until they reached a perfect union. Disbelief was the most common expression. Only Zelena seemed to be considering the possibility as plausible.

When Regina prompted her sister with a questioning glance, the fiery-haired witch shrugged. "When we first met as children, I remember thinking your eyes had an aged quality to them, as if your youthful frame housed an odd old soul. It didn't make much sense to me back then. But now? Reincarnation would explain a lot, actually. Like why you two," she pointed between Regina and Ruby, "often make me want to gag with all the lovey dovey, touchy feely, smoochy smoochy business."

Rather than retort acerbically, Regina painted on false appreciation for her sister's blatant sarcasm. "Obviously you missed your calling. You should quit the hospital and take up a new career as a card creator for Hallmark."

A bark of laughter accompanied Zelena's more genuine grin. "Hah! Not a bad suggestion. Love ya, Little Sis."

"Back at you, Greenie," Regina said, her expression softening with affection.

"While this whole sibling dynamic is sweet and all, I'm actually confused as well," said Morgana,
looking between Regina and Merlin. "You mean to tell me that this woman actually is my half-sister?"

"What?" Zelena screeched, and Regina winced at the shrillness of her sister's disbelief.

"Yeah...about that," Merlin said, looking sheepish. "I may have forgot to mention that my charge's mate was Elaine. Sorry?"

Morgana shot Merlin a withering glare that Regina thought might have melted lesser men. "Sorry? Oh, you're sorry, are you? Well...that just makes everything okay, doesn't it? Never mind that I'd thought to never see a living, breathing member of my bloodline again. You know how important family is to me!" Pausing, she crossed her arms over her chest. "Honestly, how could you, Merlin?"

The greatest sorcerer to ever live flushed sheepishly as he raised his hands to plead for mercy. "In my defense, it didn't really cross my mind til just now. It was a long time ago I last saw her, Morgana."

Clearly unsatisfied, Morgana's eyes narrowed into slits, and she pointed an accusatory finger at the lanky wizard. "Then you should have told me when Henry showed you their portraits in his album!"

Merlin sighed, as if suddenly weary. "You're right. I should have told you instead of assuming their resemblance was simply a latent genetic expression or was merely random coincidence at play and thus unimportant. I'm sorry. I seem to be repeating old mistakes with you."

"Yes, you do," Morgana said with a huff, looking a tad suspicious. "Should I be worried about a poisoning in the near future?"

Merlin spluttered indignantly. "Gods, no! I care about you, and you know how that tore me up. I would never..."

Chuckling, Morgana's scowl curved into a mischievous grin. "Relax. I was only teasing." As Merlin stuck his tongue out childishly, causing a fit of giggles from Morgana, she approached a bewildered Ruby. "So this is your beloved daughter? The one you blab endlessly about when out of the reach of prying ears?"

"He does?" Ruby asked shyly.

"Oh, heavens yes. It's always Eleni did this and Eleni did that with this one. I know every story from your youth from the time you fell out of the tallest tree in the Darkling Woods to the time your four-legged self bit the seat out of old farmer Gromier's britches because he was mean to his wife when she burnt his peach cobbler."

"I mean...I'm Ruby now. I have my memories back of that life, but I don't recall that last one."

"It was the first time you transformed," Merlin said. "You were thirteen and had been feverish for a week. I didn't know at the time what you would become. Woke up one morning and you were sprawled out in the floor with something lodged in your teeth. Turned out it was a torn out hunk of Gromier's pants. Funny enough, he quit sniping at Matilda after that."

Regina chuckled at the story, picturing it in her mind. "That's my Ruby, ever and always the unsung hero."

"Well, not really," Ruby grumbled in reply. "Here lately it seems I'm the damsel in distress."

Emma chose that moment to remind everyone she was in rare form. "Good thing you have a White Knight and Black Queen to come to your rescue then."
Ruby nodded her agreement. "You can say that again."

Cheshire grin in place, Emma winked at her best friend and deputy. "Good thing you have..."

"Jesus, Em," Ruby interrupted, shaking her head in amusement. "Is now really the best time for the corny jokes?"

"Just wanted to see that beautiful smile again," Emma said, and Ruby's entire countenance melted as she gave Emma what she wanted. "And there it is."

A tender silence fell over the little group, mostly just Emma and Ruby in their BFF bubble while everyone else gazed at their adorable affection for one another with stars in their eyes. Except for Regina, who was feeling a little defensive, and a little jealous.

"Now that we're all in better spirits," she said after the love-fest became unbearable, "or at least as much as possible given the circumstances, might I suggest we help with the clean-up? There are things yet to discuss, but people need our help."

No one objected to the suggestion, a relief to Regina because she needed a distraction from the conversation, and from the way Morgana was studying her. The supremely powerful witch was not the only one reeling from realizing they were half-sisters. Of course, as Elaine, Regina had not been given the privilege of meeting her mythical sibling.

By the time she came of age to leave the Isle of the Blessed, Morgana was already dead. At the hands of Merlin, of all things. She'd grown up hearing stories, of course, and had spent countless hours staring at the sole surviving portrait of Gorlois, Vivienne, and a very young Morgana her mother kept as a relic commemorating better days. To say she'd idolized her absent half-sister would be a gross understatement. She used to daydream about running away from her crazy mother to Camelot, where her sister lived as Uther Pendragon's ward, and that Morgana would embrace her, convince the king to foster her younger sister as he'd done her, and they would be a family. That she always knew that idyllic reunion would never be didn't stop her from wishing it could.

News of Morgana's death was what sent her spiraling into depression, and into a manic search for any information she could dig up about her lost sibling. A year passed before she ran into a former priestess who had served Morgause, Elaine's eldest half-sister, and discovered that Morgana occupied the office of High Priestess after their sister met her doom at the hands of the same man who would eventually slay the second member of their family. Regina could remember the hatred she'd felt for him, how she'd sworn revenge and that he'd not live to claim a third of Vivienne's daughters. Less than a fortnight later, she was pledging a vow to the Triple Goddess to see Merlin dead.

Meeting Morgana now was surreal, to say the least. Especially since they both seemed so different. Most of Elaine's rage did not survive the reincarnation. And that which reawakened after Daniel's death was assuaged by Henry until finally the pyre was doused by Ruby and their daughters. It seemed that Morgana, as well, had undergone some mellowing upon her reentry into the world. Still, it was a daunting prospect, getting to know the woman behind the legend and the sister beneath the impossibly high monument she'd built for Morgana in her heart and mind as Elaine.

Added to that anxiety, Regina was also hearkening back to that moment in the Dark Palace when she'd first encountered Zelena. Her stomach roiled at the idea of having to fight yet another sibling. Hopefully, she and Morgana would get off to a better first step. If the raven-haired sorceress' seemingly intimate relationship with the man who'd killed her in their past life was any indication, the chances were good of that happening. One could never be too cautious, though.
Breathing in deeply, Regina steeled herself for the task of sifting through the detritus of the battlefield and all the gruesome horror sure to be encountered. But as everyone else moved toward the multitude of dead and wounded to sort through, Ruby lingered, expression tumultuous, before turning to where she'd lovingly deposited Artemis' body.

Next to it was a sole corpse covered with a thin sheet, lying just outside a circular portion of the square free of the detritus of war. Regina recognized it as being the spot Belmordan had isolated Ruby away from everyone else, the place where all of the real heartbreak began. Eyes welling with tears locked on to familiar silver locks she knew to frame a face aged but still beautiful and relaxed as if in a peaceful repose rather than caught in the cold grip of death.

Regina moaned under her breath as a shudder passed through her frame. She would never hear another sassy retort or feel her chest suffuse with warmth upon receiving a dimpled smile. She would never again look into those piercing blue eyes and see the love of a grandmother for a granddaughter adopted in every way that matters into a heart more resilient than even her own. Granny had loved her like her own and treated her like family where others would have scorned her for past indiscretions. It was Granny that taught Regina recipes even Ruby wasn't allowed to know and commiserated with her in their mutual goal in life to protect Ruby and ensure her continual happiness. It was Granny that Regina ran to when she needed advice about parenting daughters, both of whom were werewolves. Granny was the one who came over every single Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve morning to slave over the stove with Regina, all so their family would have the best Holiday meal of any in Storybrooke. Granny was had been a better mother to Regina than Cora ever was, so it wasn't just Ruby grieving her loss as that of a parent.

Every cell in Regina's body ached with sorrow. She wanted to scream in agony because she'd lost someone else irreplaceable. But she couldn't. Not yet. Not when Ruby was so close to caving in on herself. Sure, it looked like Ruby was staying strong, but Regina knew her wife better than anyone. She could recognize the pinched set of Ruby's shoulders, read the minute quaking of hands clenched so tightly that virtually any man made object would have been crushed from the pressure, and could also see the soul-sucking pain in green eyes carefully concealed beneath a false composure that would fool anyone else but her.

Ruby was suffering silently, so Regina suffered silently also, following in her wife's wake with bitter tears rolling freely down her cheeks. She could feel Henry just behind her right shoulder, so she reached back for him, and when he took her hand with a firm strength belonging to a man instead of a boy, she drew from the offering to bolster her own resolve. Breaking down right now was not an option.

The square was already cast with a pall of acrid death in the aftermath of the battle, but it suddenly so much more morose, as if they had joined a funeral procession for three. The atmosphere was repressive to the point of suffocation. A gloomy mist rolled over the entire area in time with the marching of broody clouds overhead, as if nature itself was succumbing to the haunting spectacle of human grief. Sorrow that held their tongues in silence passed as a plague from person to person until all chatter died down. The only noise remaining in the square was the grisly business of tending to gaping wounds upon screaming patients and the grunting and shuffling of feet that accompanied hefting the dead to move them into the impromptu morgue of a city sidewalk.

By the time they reached Granny's body, the procession had grown to include those who loved Granny best. Snow and David, who stepped in the shadows Regina and Henry cast in the light from the moon and the soft lamps that illuminated the square, wore their devastation as differently as they did their shades of hair yet just as similarly as the length. Next to the Charmings was Emma, who took her cues from Ruby – that is, stoic on the outside but a jumbled mess of anger, grief, and regret on the inside. Regina realized that while she couldn't afford to lose it for Ruby's sake, Emma couldn't
for the sake of everyone else, which rankled her sense of fairness. Few gave a damn about the cumbersome burdens Emma carried upon her shoulders every single day for a decade and a half. New respect for Emma Swan swelled up in her heart and she purposed herself to rectifying any lingering harshness toward the woman who had, whether directly or indirectly, instigated every event that lead up to this dreadful moment.

Meanwhile, Esperanza trailed behind holding onto to Marco, Pinocchio's father and Granny's paramour, to keep the elder gentleman from keeling over. How Marco had come to be in the square, Regina wasn't sure, but she suspected her cousin in the matter. And speaking of her cousin, she noticed that Esperanza was favoring her shoulder and her blouse around said shoulder was soaked scarlet. There didn't seem to be any pain from the wound on her face, though, just sadness that Regina understood. Granny had given Esperanza a chance to make something of herself in Storybrooke by offering her a job, and the young woman had latched on to the opportunity with both hands. Another thing Esperanza had latched onto was Granny. In the short time Esperanza had lived in Storybrooke, the two became bosom buddies. It wasn't often they were seen in each others company without one or the other wearing a brilliant smile or laughing until they were out of breath and crying.

Just about everyone in town owed something to Granny and that was reflected by the long line of mourners who were filtering in behind those closest to the town matriarch. The woman truly was the embodiment of her moniker. For while Ruby was her flesh and blood, she was everybody's Granny.

Regina wiped at a second onslaught of tears as she turned back to watch Ruby carefully lower Artemis into place next to her slain grandmother. Kneeling down in the small space between them, she took their hands, much as she had done for Artemis and Belmordan down in Maleficent's cave.

"One of you I've loved for half an hour, the other four decades, but both with all of my heart," Ruby said, gazing down longingly upon still features set forever in their final state. Neither Artemis nor Granny appeared tormented in death, but rather as angels wrapped in eternal bliss with their faces serenely illuminated by the soft caress of moonlight and from some latent magic that had yet to permanently extinguish within their bodies. She raised Granny's hand to her mouth and placed a reverent kiss upon gracefully weathered knuckles. "You'll always be my Gran," she added, voice hitching. "You'll always be the woman who raised me, taught me right from wrong, instilled a work ethic in me that has made me successful at every job I've done. You taught me how to survive, how to wring out every drop of good from however much or little I've been given. You taught me how to love and how to be selfless in doing so. Everything I am is because of you.

"I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you. You sacrificed so much for me and I have never forgotten it. Never! And I never will. You will live forever not only in my heart but in the blood we share that now flows through your granddaughters. I see you in them both, you know. Amie has your dimples and Sophie has your eyes. I promise I'll do right by you with them. I won't let them grow up without knowing where they came from and that they were their Nana's pride and joy.

"But most of all, I just want to say that I love you. And I'll miss you, Gran. I'll miss you so much! I've not gone a day in sixty years without seeing you. How am I supposed to do this? Who am I supposed to bicker with when Regina won't take the bait, huh?"

Regina gave a wet chuckle at that, as did many of the reverent onlookers. She heard many similar sniffles.

"And you, Artemis," Ruby then said, repeating the gesture she'd given her grandmother. "You were only my mom for a little while but I already know you loved me more than my other one did. If that wasn't true, you wouldn't sacrificed yourself for me." She paused for a second to worry her lip, then
sniffled before resuming her monologue eulogy. "I don't think anyone would have guessed that you would save me like that. Belmordan didn't. I didn't. You escaped a thousand year imprisonment only to turn right around and lay down your life. And you did it without any thought for your own welfare just because you love me. In the end I was the thing you loved the most in all the world, more than power and more than your mate, and that's more than Anita would have ever felt for me.

"What you gave me was enough to make up for her failure, though. It may have been short-lived but your love for me filled a spot in my heart that was empty up til then, a spot only a mother's love can reach. And you did reach it. You filled it to overflowing, and thanks to you, I'll be able to pass that amazing love on to my own daughters. I wish you'd got to meet them. They would have loved you for sure. I mean, what little girl doesn't want to grow up as the spoiled rotten granddaughter of an actual Olympian goddess?"

Ruby was about to continue speaking when a roaring crack of thunder sounded, reverberating a deafening boom through the square. It was followed immediately by a streak of lightning as wide as two men and so blinding that Regina had to shield her eyes against the intensity. The ground shook on impact, which dislodged pieces of asphalt the size of a manhole cover in a perfect triangle. When the light had dimmed so that she could remove her hand and her eyes had readjusted to the dark, she saw two people standing in the small crater created by the lightning: a man of immense stature and a woman who was for all intents and purposes Artemis' identical copy. Identifying crown in place, Regina instantly recognized her, as did Ruby.

"Diana!"

Before Regina could even blink, Ruby was on her feet and sprinting toward the Olympian woman, who opened her arms wide and caught Ruby when she leapt into them. Diana's tender embrace was all it took to break down the barriers of Ruby's grief, and as she tucked her face into Diana's neck, she at last began to weep.
Chapter Summary

Regina meets the in-laws.

Burning envy infected Regina's introduction to her wife's Olympian aunt. Watching Ruby finally allow herself to grieve in the arms of another woman was a less than ideal scenario had they not just emerged from a fiery furnace that tested them to the brink of annihilation. Ruby was hers for Christ's sake. Wasn't she supposed to be the one her wife turned to in times such as these? But no! Diana just had to show up in all her flawless majesty and suddenly it was like the old ball and chain was invisible.

Seething internally, Regina nonetheless choked down the injustice to stay silent. If it meant Ruby got a head start processing her losses in a healthy, productive way, she could brood for a while on her petty jealousy. That, and she wasn't keen on a repeat of their first night back home after the events that transpired in Joshua Woods' basement.

Be that as it may, she warred against the temptation to hate Diana with every fiber of her being. Though she would deny it until she was blue in the face, she very much wanted to rake her nails down that sharp, aesthetically structured face and ruin that flawless bronze skin with a gigantic fireball. Perhaps a little disfigurement would sully Ruby's evidently pristine opinion of the goddess.

It was an adolescent thought, and objectively despicable, but she could not control these sorts of unwholesome urges. No matter how hard she tried to stay on the straight and narrow, she was never going to be the nice lady who saw the best in everyone like Snow or Ruby did. Not when all she could see in Diana was the potential for more hurt in Ruby's future. Regina was more cynical in her view of people than almost anyone she knew, and because of that she was afraid Diana would some day let Ruby down like every other person in her life had. Of course, she couldn't acknowledge her own failures in that regard when it would only cast more of a negative light on herself in comparison to an Olympian goddess who appeared Mary Poppins perfect – that is, practically in every way. Doing that would require an entirely rational self-analysis she simply wasn't capable of at the moment.

For Ruby's sake, she tried her best to act like everything was kosher and smile as if she was happy about this latest development. The half-truth in her effort was a reflection of a genuine gratitude that Ruby had blood relatives yet living, ones who seemed to actually care about her, though it could not quite contradict that she wanted to be the one whose arms Ruby ran into. It was of no current consequence that Diana's visit was likely to be temporary, that the goddess would surely return to Olympus sooner rather than later, and that she knew deep down in her bones no one in all of the universe could usurp her place of preeminence in Ruby's heart. All she knew was an alien woman she didn't know or trust was holding her wife and that her wife was clutching said woman's shoulders as if they were her only available lifeline. The inadvertent slight pissed her off to no end, not that anyone would know unless they really bothered to look. Regina was a veteran actress with many useful tricks up her sleeves, after all.

By the time Ruby settled down enough to be coherent, Regina's anger had mostly dissipated so that she could – and without jealously dictating her tone – welcome Diana and the enormous man who
accompanied her to Storybrooke. Ruby was especially enthusiastic as she proceeded to then introduce Diana, first to Regina and then to everyone else gathered. After exchanging pleasantries, the otherworldly visitors volunteered aide in tending to the wounded as well as the morbid but necessary process of gathering the dead. The help was appreciated but almost unbelievable considering the broad-chested giant with Diana turned out to be Zeus in the flesh.

With Ruby's permission, Regina took a break from the grim work in the square to transport Granny and Artemis' corpses into the secure bunker beneath her family mausoleum. She was unwilling risk them being lost in the shuffle of a morgue soon to be overflowing with bodies. To preserve the bodies, she encased them in magic much as she had Daniel after her died, and then said her own goodbyes to the women who had, in their own disparate ways, defined who Ruby was as a person.

Artemis had given life to Ruby's eternal soul and had sacrificed herself to save the daughter she'd never even got to hold in her arms. In doing so, she had selflessly saved Regina, too, as her life was inextricably and forever linked to Ruby's via their shared heart. For that alone, Regina offered her deepest thanks.

To Granny, though, all she could bear was to press a lingering kiss upon a brow already chilled from the frigid touch of death. With tears welling thick in her eyes and her throat constricting so that every breath was a struggle, she couldn't possibly hope to voice her sorrow. So she held Granny's gracefully weathered face with both hands and poured all of her thanks and love into that one kiss. Once she pulled back, she spared only one single glance to the fallen before magicking herself back to the square. Had she stayed a second longer, she would have lost it, and she couldn't afford to do that when Ruby and the girls were going to need her to be strong for the coming days.

The girls. What was she going to tell them? They idolized their great grandmother who baked cookies and cakes and pastries just for them even though she knew their mother didn't approve of them getting such sugary sweets. Granny, more than anyone save Ruby and perhaps Emma, was responsible for the copious amounts of spoiling Sophia and Amelia received. The look on Granny's face when those girls squealed with delight and ran to her with shouts of, "Nana! Nana!" made all of her aggravation evaporate. But their Nana was gone now and would never be coming back. No one they were so close to had died before, and the first had to be their only remaining grandparent? The unfairness of it all was too awful to comprehend.

Back in the square, Regina compartmentalized her complex emotions for another time. Everyone had agreed that all other considerations needed to be postponed until the area was relieved of the dead and the wounded were all safely delivered to triage at the ER. Thus, the group dispersed toward their various objectives.

She hadn't realized how tense she was until the muscles in her shoulders and jaw coiled even tight when Zeus joined her. They walked side-by-side while Ruby hung on Diana's arm just ahead. He was a towering figure whose physicality dwarfed her, the very definition of godlike physicality with rippling muscles, bronzed flesh, and chiseled features. There was silence between them initially as they ambled toward the mounds of writhing and decaying flesh clogging up the entrance to the square. But as they neared, as if sensing Regina's distrust, he drew her aside to offer reassurances that neither he nor Diana had any intention of insinuating themselves into Ruby's life where their presence was unwelcome.

"She is our kin, and nearer today than yesterday," he said when she relaxed a smidgen. His voice was like compressed thunder that made her insides tremble. "What transpired has transformed her in more ways than one. She is more Olympian now than human."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Regina asked, disturbed by this newest revelation.
Zeus glanced down at her, partially in pity but also with reassurance. "When my granddaughter touched the Lunar Stone, her ancient Olympian blood stirred. And then when she set Artemis free, the power that had since lain dormant sprang to life in earnest."

Not liking one bit how that sounded, Regina scowled at the daunting god. "What, exactly, does that mean?" she asked sharply, concern for Ruby overriding all others. "And how do you know what happened in Maleficent's cave when you weren't there?"

Zeus offered her a placating smile, which caused the lightning shaped scar adorning his face to crackle with white magic. Her scowl faded at the onset of astonishment she only barely controlled. It wouldn't do to give the imposing deity any more cause for haughtiness when his bearing positively reeked of it, and that without him even being aware. A side-effect, she bet, of such longevity paired with power that she could not begin to wrap her brain around.

"From the heights of Mount Olympus, I am able to peer wherever I wish," Zeus answered evenly, having either not detected her reaction to his quaint yet impressive display of magic, or having rather chosen to ignore it. "Much in the same vein as Heimdall the Gatekeeper of Asgard, from thence my gaze can span the cosmos and penetrate every corner of Yggdrasil. As for what that means for my granddaughter," he said this with heightened inflection so as to remind Regina of his claim on Ruby, which was unnecessary as she was painfully aware she had competition now for her wife's attentions, "she is now Olympian, as I have said, which means she is immortal. Consequently so are you by virtue of your common heart. Your children have inherited this blessing all well." When Regina's eyes widened upon the full meaning of those words sinking in, Zeus immediately translated her fears. "Do not be dismayed. It is a blessing rather than a curse."

Regina's face turned red with indignation. Didn't he know the implications for her family? Her family that lived in a town full of mortals...

"How can you say that?" she spat out angrily. "If what you just said is true, I'm going to watch all of the people I love die while I stay young! Including my son!"

"Not all," he said, unperturbed, glancing toward the entry to the square at which most of the fighting took place.

Regina followed his eyes over to where Ruby was introducing her divine aunt to Belle and Rumple. The librarian was, as expected, fawning all over Diana. Just great. Another member of the swiftly expanding fan club. No doubt a billion questions were buzzing through Belle's overactive gray matter, many of which she would almost certainly pose to Diana when the opportunity presented itself. Which it would. Belle's insatiable thirst for knowledge was one of her key qualities, and one Rumple facilitated at every turn.

Speaking of Rumple, his interactions with Diana were most interesting. Whereas Belle's face was glowing like she'd just won the lottery, Rumple was perfectly composed. Eerily so, even. Regina suspected the reason was that he already knew of the existence of the Olympians. It wouldn't surprise her at all if he'd met some. Such as Até. If the myths were anything to go by, those two would get along famously. Regina shuddered at the thought of Rumple teaming up with the goddess of mischief.

"Your mate and your children will share eternity with you," Zeus said, reengaging Regina's attention. "Upon Mt. Olympus, death is an option chosen only by the violent and the brokenhearted. When the time comes, there will be a home waiting for you there with your family. And do not concern yourself over those so well beloved who will pass from the circles of this world. Olympus is home to any and all of the dearly departed who are counted worthy of ascension. I can already tell you that you will not miss any of your friends for very long."
Regina harrumphed, doubting the assertion very much. "Forgive me if I'm skeptical. I don't know you from Adam."

Tilting his head in a way that was remarkably like Ruby, Zeus gave her a single, tight nod. "Understandable. Adam was a selfish man whose choices led to the ruination of all he cherished. And while I have my faults, I pride myself on honesty. I would not lie to you about this. You are family."

Regina scoffed. "And have been for all of one day."

"Not for me," said Zeus. "I knew who your Ruby was the moment she was born, just as I knew who you were when you initially encountered her upon an icy mountain pass in your former world."

Regina's eyes flashed with warning. That her very first interaction with Ruby was being monitored immediately put her on edge. She was also naturally inclined to distrust anyone who claimed to have been benevolently invested in Ruby's life for so long without making himself known to her. Someone else had done that as well, and far too recently for Regina to blindly accept anything that was being said. She showed her unease by adopting an aggressive stance with her hands balled into fists at her side.

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" she asked tersely. "To make me trust you? You're not the first person to insinuate himself into Ruby's life with an agenda."

A stark white brow arched at her combative tone. "Who says I have an agenda?"

"Everyone has an agenda! The only question is whether it is noble or evil."

"Well, if that's true, you ought to know my intentions toward my granddaughter are not evil. If they were, wouldn't you recognize it? Being that you know so much about that particular subject."

The barb hit home with a too much force. "How dare you..."

"No, how dare you!" Zeus roared, his voice booming so loudly Regina briefly faltered. When Ruby and Diana, alarmed at his outburst, set to approach, she held them off with a stern hand. This was a battle she needing to fight on her own. "I came here in peace," the enormous god carried on, "not only to secure my deceased daughter's remains, but to open a line of communication with my grandchild. At any time of my choosing, I could have meddled in her life to suit my so-called agenda. I refrained, however, believing in my heart that fate would deliver me to this day. A day of loss and a day of gain. I want a relationship with my grandchild. If that is a nefarious agenda, then I am guilty as charged."

Regina sighed, pinching her nose in frustration, not only at Zeus but at herself. She had let her own issues cloud her perception. Thus far, the Olympians had done nothing to warrant her suspicion, and her continual refusal to back down only made her look like a judgmental harpy.

Her irritation bled from her as if air from a faulty pneumatic valve. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have accused you. It's just..."

"You are delicately navigating a razor's edge," Zeus injected, sounding remarkable calm from someone who had seemed on the verge of a conniption directed solely at her. In fact, his entire countenance was the picture of tranquility. In awe of that degree of control over his rage, Regina was tempted to seek advice, but held her tongue in lieu of hearing him out. "And rightfully so," he went on, shrugging as if to shake off the insignificant vestiges of his irritation with her. "You have also suffered much this day. Do not fear. I am not angered. If anything, I am comforted to know you
would risk my wrath on her behalf. Precious few have ever been able to claim the same."

"I'd do much worse than that," Regina said, timbre low and dire. "You weren't wrong to point out my familiarity with evil. I'm not above being just that if it means keeping her safe and alive. Or extracting vengeance upon those who dare to harm her. She's my whole world, her and my children. There's nothing I won't do to protect them."

Zeus shot her a secretive smile that piqued her curiosity. "Which is precisely why I sent the storm that day in Albion. The one that steered you ever-so-gently toward a certain tavern where a certain young woman was employed."

Eyes bulging, Regina stammered to reply. "Wait. You created the storm that was responsible for us meeting when I was Elaine? Why?"

"I did," he said, regarding her affectionately. "As for why, well, I knew of no other soul who could ever care for or guard my precious Eleni as you could then. Nor can anyone now. I trust you with her well being. I always have and always will."

Regina was at a loss. That day was indisputably the best of her life as Elaine. And she owed that to Zeus? All because he had seen something in her that made her worthy of his grandchild. To say she was honored didn't cut it. She was eternally indebted. Were it not for his interference, she might never have wandered into that dingy little tavern in the middle of nowhere and got a transcendental religious experience for her troubles.

Shaking her head in awe, she struggled to put her appreciation into words and failed. "I-I...I don't know what to say."

"Say only that you will continue to perform your sworn duty toward her for the rest of eternity. With that, you will have secured my unceasing gratitude along with whatever support I can offer at any time in which you find yourself in need."

Chest swelling with warmth that relieved the ball of tension that had taken up residence since parting from Granny's grossly inert form, Regina offered a tiny smile. "I would do that even without the promise of such remarkable benefits."

"Splendid!" Zeus crowed, eyes twinkling with sparks of electricity. He then gestured toward where Ruby and Diana stood, watching them with barely concealed panic. "Then what say you and I lend our hands to repair this lovely little town you created. I really must congratulate you on it. I should, I think, very much like to visit from time to time. Perhaps I may even invest some of my wealth into the local economy. I'd also be interested to hear your vision for the near future. Tell me, do you have any plans for infrastructure expansion?"

"Well," Regina said, leaning close with an impish smirk, "now you're speaking my language. As it just so happens, I have many exciting plans on the docket for Storybrooke. But first I have to ask: how big is an Olympian wallet?"

The laugh that erupted from Zeus was every bit as big as the thunder he wielded as an instrument of fear and intimidation. Strangely enough, she would soon learn to love that sound.

The next day, with the bodies removed from the square, Regina organized a clean up effort in the evening. Ruby stayed at home with the kids for her peace of mind, so she was joined by the Charmings and her mythological in-laws among other notables. As they toiled away the night, she found herself succumbing to the charms of her new family.
The goddess Diana was an exceptionally meek woman who simply adored Ruby, which earned her a lot of brownie points. Anyone who did right by Ruby was okay in Regina's book, however little she cared for the individual personally. At first, she'd regarding Diana as nothing more than an irritating obstacle to be removed, but that changed quickly. Regina could not hold on to her grudge for long when Diana was so easy to get along with.

Laid back and free with her smiles, the goddess had a temperament that reminded Regina of her father on a good day when her mother was away from the estate. Her voice was smooth and calming, a subtly applied balm that could soothe the most ruffled feathers, and she rarely ever raised it beyond conversational levels. Diana also displayed remarkable insight into people. A single piercing gaze was usually enough for her to suss out a person's character to a great degree of accuracy. Which made the fact that she treated Regina with the utmost respect all the more uncomfortable; after being so unfairly standoffish and then rudely voicing her suspicions to the father the goddess clearly revered, she did not deserve the warm regard. In summary, there wasn't much to abhor, much to Regina's disgust.

Another mark in Diana's favor was her intimate knowledge of arcane magical theory even the Dark Ones did not possess. She casually spoke of spells Regina wouldn't have dreamed of as being possible as though they were pedestrian accomplishments. Spirit magic, for instance, was Diana's area of expertise. In the Enchanted Forest, daring to attempt the study of that art was verboten, as it was deemed to unstable for any mortal sorcerer to wield. It was their common interest in the magical arts that thawed the ice on Regina's end.

As for the God of Thunder, Regina found him to be as even more than she had anticipated after their brief exchanges the previous night. For one, his strength was unmatched, as Storybrooke's resident demigod Hercules found out in person when he challenged his father to a competition to see who could lift the largest piece of rubble. Herc lost. Badly. To rub salt in the wound, Megara witnessed the showdown and found her paramour's defeat a source of immense amusement.

Zeus was also a personality of extremes. He was every bit as boisterous in his joy as he was terrible in his anger. With one cutting look, he could send frissons of fear shooting through the most hardened of hearts, and with a single smile and a word of encouragement he could raise the spirits of a dozen exhausted laborers, inspiring them to return to their tasks with renewed vigor. Zeus would also prove to be surprisingly generous with that laugh of his, as she got to hear it several times seeing as Emma remained in rare form from the day before.

After another ridiculous joke, Regina made a mental note to herself to appropriate sedatives for the Savior in the wake of the next major battle. Only when Snow playfully swatted her arm did she realize, and with less chagrin than she should have felt, that she'd spoken her thoughts aloud. The hilarity of Emma's expression in combination with Regina's droll response produced another booming laugh from Zeus that shook the entire square.

"What?" she said. "Is it wrong of me to want to spare myself further abuse from a woman who rates fart jokes as highbrow comedy?"

After that, everyone was in stitches.
Information Overload

Chapter Summary

The crew head to the Sheriff’s Station where a surprise awaits them. Later, Regina bends Merlin's ear and learns some shocking info.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With the aid of the Olympian gods, the wounded were seen to with astonishing efficiency after the battle. An hour later the dead were arranged according to which side they were aligned. The surviving were left to dispose of their fallen comrades under heavy guard. When they completed their unenviable business, Merlin offered to enhance a bean portal to return them to a world of their choosing from whence they might disseminate to their own homes in time. As much as Regina wanted the punished for their involvement in the needless slaughter of two hundred and twelve of her citizens, she agreed to let them go. It was not a popular decision.

Arguments broke out that she had to resolve with cold logic. Storybrooke lacked the facilities to house a dozen detainees. How were they supposed to incarcerate over seven thousand soldiers without displacing hundreds of families? That those soldiers also just so happened to be highly trained and capable wreaking havoc in small squads of three or four infinitely complicated matters. What would happen if, say, twenty got loose and decided to fight their way to freedom? How many more citizens would die before they were stopped? Not to mention guarding them would require manpower on the levels of a state government, and even then Regina didn't think it would be enough. None of the town's leadership was happy, but in the end the sheer practicality of her rationale won out.

Meanwhile the dead of Storybrooke were immediately conveyed to the morgue for preparation before their final trip to Storybrooke Cemetery. There they would be honored in a ceremony Regina would have to plan in the coming days. Thankfully she had the foresight to appropriate more land for the cemetery nearly a year before. It was soon to be hit with a large influx of residents. She did not envy the work-load about to be thrust upon Victor Frankenstein, who, in addition to being the town's sole licensed surgeon, was also the only certified mortician. In a way, it served him right though for being a dependable asshole.

As for Granny and Artemis, they had been taken care of personally by Regina. The stasis spell would preserve them indefinitely, and her application was so well done both Diana and Zeus praised her skill. As per Ruby's wishes, Granny would remain in the Mills' family vault where the family could visit her any time they wished until such time she wished to have her grandmother buried more traditionally – if she did, that was. Regina was fairly confident it would, though when was another matter entirely.

However, the Olympians announced plans to return Artemis' corpse to the place of her birth. According to Zeus, tradition dictated Artemis be interred next to her mother within the vaults carved deep into the bowels of Mt. Olympus within the Temple of Hestia. Ruby did not take the news well. Thankfully Diana was able to gently explain the necessity of the transfer in a way that satisfied her. Regina not so much. There was something Diana wasn't saying, but rather than confront the goddes,
she filed her suspicions away for later.

After that the clean-up was handled, or at least what couldn't wait til morning. They labored until nearly midnight, when Regina invited her rapidly expanding clan back to the Sheriff’s station for coffee. Only Zelena and Ruby did not accompany the party. They had all been worried about their kids, and though Zelena hadn't liked being excluded, she kept her obstinance limited out of her own concern for her daughter and nieces currently under the care of an absentminded, self-aggrandizing man who liked to fancy himself a supremely powerful wizard. Ruby did not put up a fight at all. She was as eager as Regina to see the girls.

Of course, there was also the consideration that Ruby was emotional mess again by the time work was finished for the night. As she was helping Diana hoist an overturned statue back onto it's base, she overheard someone whine that they'd never again enjoy a slice of Granny's famous apple pie with some of her special hand-ground coffee. Regina came running the instant she heard Ruby’s mournful cries. The thoughtless cretin who'd been responsible for her wife's renewed sorrow remained in the land of the living solely because Ruby had only caught the mention due to her hyper-sensitive ears, thus she was only aware of a general direction from whence the conversation originated. Otherwise, Regina would have dispensed some hasty justice upon the callous prick.

As it was, she put her foot down when Ruby tried to brush off her tears and insist she was alright to carry on. Since Ruby had also been hinting over the past half hour that someone should checking in on Francesca, Sophia, and Amelia, Regina figured it was a perfect opportunity to give her wife some isolation to process her trauma away from prying eyes.

By the time a halt was called to the clean up, everyone was utterly exhausted. Other than a welcome break to recuperate, the trip to the station also served as an opportunity to check in on the prized prisoner whose actions had precipitated the invasion and subsequent battle of Storybrooke. Thomas Hatter was owed a little hurt for what he'd done to Ruby, and Regina was determined to make good on her promise to gloat over his bloating corpse.

Additionally, the station would afford a prime location in which she and Merlin might resume their discussion on his role in the entire Belmordan fiasco. Regina had a few new questions to add to the agenda besides the sorcerer's failures regarding the niece he'd once raised as his own daughter. Such as why he'd insinuated himself into her son's life. And of course, there were also the Olympians to deal with, who as of yet remained tight-lipped about their motivations for visiting Storybrooke only once the battle was already decided.

Zeus himself had stated he had a watch on Ruby her entire life, both of them had actually admitted as such, and it was readily apparent the incredibly powerful beings possessed the means to travel between worlds at will. Why then hadn't they intervened to spare Ruby so much agony? Whatever excuse they offered would likely prove woefully insufficient to Regina's overly critical mind.

"At least Merlin had the decency to show up while the fight was on," she murmured bitterly. Her brief spell of amiability fled as she led the ragtag, battle weary group into the Station.

"What was that, honey?" Snow asked, having heard Regina from where she replaced Ruby hanging off of Diana's arm. Her raven head was resting against a bronzed shoulder left bare in a white chiton. How the goddess wasn't cold in the chilled Maine air was a mystery to Regina, but Diana appeared perfectly content, though she wore an expression of disappointment that told Regina she'd overheard the snide comment.

That, as well as how it seemed every single person who met Diana instantly became enamored of her, had Regina grinding her teeth. Of course, she would be the exception, cynic that she was. Which was unfortunate because the last thing she needed right now was friction between herself and
someone with whom her wife was already forming irrevocable bonds of kinship.

_Honestly_, she thought, _if the woman was any more annoyingly perfect I'd be tempted to give her the Raiders of the Lost Ark treatment_. She pictured it in her mind then, summoning up the Ark of the Covenant, then cracking it open for the singular privilege of watching with unrestrained glee as its primordial magicks melted the statuesque Olympian's flesh from her bones. Hell, maybe she'd even cackle until her throat was raw and her stomach ached and all that was left of Diana was a steaming puddle of goo upon the earth.

When one of Diana's perfectly sculpted brows lifted upon catching Regina staring daggers at her, she blanched, concerned whether the goddess' powers might include telepathy.

"Nothing," she sighed, not feeling even a little bad for having committed mental murder. Ignoring everyone, she pushed into the station and stopped dead in her tracks.

As if fate's favorite game was soccer and the ball was Regina's life, the very first thing she noticed was that Thomas Hatter's cell was glaringly empty. "Leroy!" Her screeching exclamation had Leroy lifting his head from Ruby's desk. Bleary eyed and three sheets to wind, he muttered the name of a certain undeniably adorable nun who was once a garishly pink fairy. Had Regina's temper been a rocket, it would be well on the way to Mars. "You useless, slovenly, inebriate, vertically challenged imbecile!" she yelled, feeling the vein in her forehead furiously throb with every beat of her heart. "You were supposed to watch the prisoner, not daydream about defiling Sister Astrid!"

"What the hell, Leroy?!" Having also come in, Emma stepped up beside Regina, scowling so deeply the crease between her brows resembled the Grand Canyon for referential scale. "You had one job. Just one! And it wasn't even hard!"

"Sorry, sister," the dwarf grumbled, swiping at a line of drool that was still connected to Ruby's desk. Regina could imagine Ruby suppressing her gag reflex in her mind's eye and could already tell her wife would be scourging her entire desktop at least ten times before using it again. "All that noise outside, the screaming and yelling and _dying_...the bottle kept calling. I'm weak. Sue me. But it ain't my fault! I shoulda been out there crackin' skulls, not holed up in here like a...like a...."

"Like a dwarf in a mine?" Snow posed from next to Ruby looking supremely disappointed. Even the fairest of them all was judging her old compatriot for his latest failure. This was one Leroy wouldn't live down for a very long time. If Snow didn't make sure of it, Regina surely would.

Thomas Hatter's escape soured the victory even more than it already was. Too high a price had been paid for that insufferably smug prick to escape justice. And although Ruby didn't really seem bothered when told about the man's role in her torments, Regina cared far more than she should, and she was a woman famous for her steel trap memory and her unparalleled ability to hold a grudge. Whatever rat-hole Thomas Hatter crawled into and whatever world that rat-hole was located in, some day she would find it. When she did she would show him no mercy. A year may pass or two or ten before that day, but one way or another the slimy son of a bitch was going to die at her hand. Very, very slowly.

"Well," Regina said to Leroy after explaining the significance of Thomas' escape to Ruby, "since you're useless in every conceivable way, do us all a favor and get the hell out. The grown-ups need to have a chat."

Leroy looked ready to bluster out a profanity laden protest, but Regina shot a glare at him that obliterated his resolve more quickly than a block of C4 would the girls' Barbie Hotel. Suitably cowed, he scurried out more rodent-like than dwarf.
With Leroy removed from the premises, the rest of the group filtered into the bullpen. To save Ruby the trouble of cleansing her desk of the dwarf's drool, Regina magicked it clean and then gestured for her wife's divine relatives to take a seat across from her. Zeus accommodated her silent request with a respectful nod, while Diana obliged her with a polite smile that had an edge to it. Regina, still simmering internally over having to share Ruby's attention with the woman, returned it in kind.

Emma, meanwhile, perched on the corner of Ruby's desk as if she belonged there, while Esperanza stood casually at the Savior's side. Regina's cousin was clutching absentmindedly at the wound in her shoulder refused to allow anyone to treat, having stated in no uncertain terms that she would take care of the wound herself when her energies were sufficiently recovered. Apparently stubborn haughtiness was genetic. David and Snow, on the other hand, remained nearby on one side of Regina whereas Merlin, Morgana, and Henry took up position on the other.

"So, there are some things I'd like to discuss before we call it a night," Regina breached the brief silence that had settled over the group. She zeroed in on Merlin. "Firstly, I'm interested to hear why you have insinuated yourself into my son's life. It can't have been a coincidence that Henry made your acquaintance his very first semester."

"Mom, it's not like that..." Henry began, but his highly esteemed professor interrupted his defense with a raised hand.

"It's alright, Henry," Merlin said. "Your mother has every right to be suspicious." To Regina, he directed in a calm, steady tone, "Let me assure you, Elaine, it was pure coincidence that I met Henry." Many brows quirked up at his usage of her former identity, though everyone present had heard their initial discussion of the matter in the square. "I have no control over who enrolls in my courses. Beyond that, it was his inherent curiosity and keen perception that prompted me to befriend him. Henry was the best student I ever had. I count myself fortunate to have made his acquaintance. You should be proud of him."

That Merlin sounded sincere didn't register on Regina's radar when all she heard was a criticism of her parenting. Bristling visibly, she sneered, "I am very proud of my son, sir. And I am no longer Elaine. That name died when I did. I'm Regina now. Best you remember both of those facts in the future."

"Very well, Regina," said Merlin, having the decency to blush receptively at the chastisement. "However, my point stands. I have no ulterior motives here beyond a desire to rekindle a relationship with my child..."

"Adopted child," Regina corrected sharply, not caring how hypocritical she was being. It hadn't escaped her attention that she adopted Henry. She was just upset and in mother bear mode and doing a poor job handling both.

Already on defense for Henry's sake, she was now doubly so. Ruby already had one father wanting to integrate himself into her life, and that one she knew couldn't be trusted. Merlin had certainly been nothing but good and honorable toward her son, and to her recollection of her time as Elaine, he'd been a loving, doting father to her soul mate. Even so, Regina wouldn't stand for anyone manipulating her wife. Not after Belmordan's chicanery and Spencer's nefarious plotting.

"Just so," Merlin said, ignoring her biting tone, "and yet she is my daughter in every way that matters. Which makes Henry my grandson of a sort, and your daughters my granddaughters. That should tell you much of my intentions."

It didn't. People hurt their families all the time. Regina was a case in point. She'd been abused by her own mother and turned that abuse back onto the source. Hell, she'd murdered her father to achieve a
revenge that would prove to be entirely unsatisfactory. But she didn't have time to elaborate on her
disagreement before Emma decided to jump into the fray.

"Good Christ above," the Savior exclaimed, "just when I thought this family couldn't get any
weirder."

Henry laughed conspiratorially. "Right? It's so awesome though! My gramma is Snow White, one of
my gramps is Prince Charming and the other is fuc..." Henry veered off when his mother's eyes
lasered in on him at the expletive about to fall from his lips. He quickly amended, "Freaking Merlin."

Regina sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. Did no one share her concerns about Ruby being
introduced to so much, so fast, having just endured what she had in the past month?

"Awesome as it may be," she said, drawing all attention back to her, "all of this is overwhelming to
me, and I haven't just lost two mother figures within minutes of one another." No one seemed to pick
up on her point, prompting Regina to growl with frustration. "Let me just be frank then. All of this
new family crawling out of the woodwork is too much for Ruby to deal with right now. So please,
for her sake, let her grieve a while before approaching her to be more involved in her life." She then
shot a pointed glance at Zeus and Diana. "And that goes for you two as well. She needs time to
adjust, time to heal. If you care for her as you all say you do, give that to her. And just so there is no
misunderstanding here, I'm not making a request."

"Neither of us have any intention of putting further stress on Ruby," Diana said, looking somewhat
offended. Regina had no lies to tell; that pleased her more than it should. "If she should require us,
we will be there for her. If not, we are content to keep our distance and let her come to us on her
terms."

Regina frowned, having caught on to the subtext. "Does that mean you plan to stick around?"

"Not indefinitely," Zeus said, to her relief. "We must eventually return Artemis to her home and lay
her to rest until such time she is prepared to reinhabit her body."

Regina's eyes widened in astonishment. "Excuse me? 'Reinhabit her body.' Do you mean to say she's
not really dead?" That drew a shocked gasp from everyone.

"Physically, she is. Her spirit, however, remains very much alive," Zeus said, then went on to calmly
explain what he meant. "Eons ago, long before the advent of humans upon the various worlds of
Yggdrasil, we of the Pantheon developed a process of regenerating our fleshly vessels even after
death. Via this method, our eternal spirits may return to the fleshly world should we decide to do so.
Though there are exceptions, this boon is normally shared only with our offspring and their many
sons and daughters.

"That said, many of our offspring who perished are not allowed to reintegrate because they belong to
my brother, Hades, who refuses to relinquish his hold upon any of his own line. You see, the benefit
to him derived from imprisoning our spirits within his Underworld is not insignificant. In fact, much
of his power is siphoned from captive Olympians, and as by unbreakable oath I am bound to the
lands of the living, there is nothing I can do amend this atrocity.

"However, a number of the departed choose to remain spirits of their own free will. Upon reflection
of their lives in the afterlife, some feel unworthy to trod the physical world again while others feel
their work is done, that they have no more to accomplish in life. The former inhabit a realm known
as the Asphodel Meadows while the latter ascend to a higher plane of existence, a realm of pure
serenity and bliss that the Asgardians refer to as Valhalla and which you mortals often refer to as
Paradise. We call it Elysium. All have this option, though it is rarely exercised. The attractions of the
flesh are undeniable." He paused to draw a deep breath. "Thus, Artemis's corpse must be prepared for her decision, whatever that may be."

"Does that mean Ruby would have the same choice?" Regina asked, floored by what she had just heard. In all of her studies, she had never come across a hint of the processes Zeus described. Then again, the Olympians were a famously mysterious race whose secrets were well guarded.

"What are you speaking of?" Esperanza asked, sable brows drawn so tightly they were almost touching. "How could Ruby share in this choice. Unless she is..." Trailing off, her expression shifted into amazement. "Oh! I knew something was different about her after her little visit to the Selenian Valley!"

"What are you talking about, Espy?" Emma asked, thoroughly confused, as were her parents.

Esperanza ignored the question. Zeroing in on Regina, her eyes narrowed into slits. She was, Regina knew, carefully observing her for any hint of deception. "Ruby isn't human anymore, is she?"

Knowing there will be no lying her way out of this, Regina nodded. Esperanza was nearly as adept at detecting falsehoods as the Savior's infamous and often inconveniently absent super power.

"No, she is not," she said, resigned to yet another enormous revelation about her family being aired like so much laundry. Feeling a migraine forming behind her left eye, she gestured aimlessly toward Zeus. "Care to fill them in?"

And he did, briefly explaining how Ruby touching the Lunar Stone had activated her latent Olympian DNA, which slowly began unfurling until she was poisoned, at which time it began to kick in with a gusto. The opening of Artemis' living tomb was the final step in the process of essentially rewriting her entire genetic code. The news was received in various degrees of disbelief that eventually dissolved into an almost mournful recognition of just how much had changed for Ruby since her journey to the Enchanted Forest. It had been a nauseating roller coaster ride, that was for sure.

"This change will be available to her offspring, of course," Zeus concluded to an awestruck crowd. "That is, should they choose to join our ranks."

Remembering their earlier conversation, Regina chimed in. "So the girls aren't Olympians like you suggested?"

"They are," said the God of Thunder, his head tilted slightly as he spoke, "only as much as Ruby was before touching the stone. There is a gentler way of bestowing them with their rightful heritage than my grandchild endured. If they so wish at any time in the future, I should be glad to personally guide them through it. But as I said, that choice remains theirs."

Regina huffed her displeasure. First all of this happened to Ruby, and now her kids? It was too much too fast.

"And it'll stay that way," she said, resolved to keep everyone else out of the equation. When her children came to that crossroads, they'd be deciding which path to take without the outside influence of others who might be steering them toward one or the other for selfish or questionable reasons. Like Rumple, who had always harbored a fascination for them and had ingratiated himself to them as best he could.

"So, Ruby is a goddess now?" Emma asked with open wonderment. "A goddess who can die and 'reinhabit' her body at will?"
Zeus nodded succinctly. "Correct."

Clapping her hands, Emma beamed with excitement. "Holy shit that's cool!"

"Right on, Ma!" Henry added, equally enthused by his Ruby's new status.

As if he needs more reason to think Ruby hung the moon, Regina thought, sort of bemused but mostly annoyed. Honestly, sometimes she wondered if her son preferred his step-mother to the mother who raised him. Such considerations always hearkened to the calamitous period when Emma was newly arrived to town and jockeying for a position in Henry's life. Regina had changed a lot since then, but it's not easy to forever bind up those old wounds.

"Yes, yes," she said, aggravation bleeding into her tone along with a need to change the subject back to the one at hand. "Fascinating as that is, my primary concern here is that my family's wishes be respected. So long as that remains the case, we will have no problems."

In response, Diana inclined her head and responded with a smile Regina thought a little too beatific. "Then we shall have no problems."

We'll see about that, Regina replied internally, then rose from her chair. She didn't have the energy for any more talk. "Well, with that out of the way..." She adjusted her slightly askew clothing as she adopted her mayoral tone and posture. "I, for one, am ready to go home. I'm tired and I need to take care of my girls. All three of them."

"Yeah," said Emma, "I should get home, too. Killian will be wondering what's taking so long."

Regina looked to each and every occupant of the station. Each of them nodded their agreement that it was time to call it a night.

"Well, then," she said. "Shall we reconvene tomorrow afternoon in my office to discuss plans for repairing my town?"

"Our town," Emma gently corrected, smiling.

The corner of Regina's lips turned up at the good humor in her friend's green eyes. The woman could be a handful at the best of times and drive Regina batty at worst, but she wouldn't trade Emma's friendship, or her vast array of skills, for anything.

"Yes, Emma, our town." To her son, she then said, "Henry, are you coming home with me or going with our resident golden retriever?" She didn't miss Emma's eye-roll and scoff combination as Henry informed her he wanted to give her a night alone with Ruby.

"I know she'll be happy to see me," he added when she insisted Ruby wouldn't mind, "but you're right about her needing some space right now. So just tell her I love her and I'll visit tomorrow afternoon while you guys are having your meeting. Sound good?"

Heedless of her audience, Regina gathered her son into a crushing embrace that he eagerly returned. Kissing his temple, she softly said, "That sounds wonderful. Thank you, sweetheart. I love you."

Henry just squeezed her a little tighter. "You're welcome, Mom. Love you, too, by the way."

After parting, everyone went their separate ways. At Regina's insistence, Zeus, Diana, Merlin, and Morgana accompanied Esperanza to the B&B. Ruby was technically the new proprietor, having inherited it and the Diner according to Granny's will, which Regina had personally drawn up and seen registered with the courthouse. But she figured as Ruby's spouse, it was well within her
purview to make an executive decision when her wife was unavailable.

As for Regina, she magicked herself to the hospital to pick up her car, then headed toward Mifflin Street, weary down to the marrow of her bones.

Chapter End Notes

Everything still making sense? I sure hope so. Only two more chapters to go. Three years this story has been in development. It's been one a hell of a ride, and I'll be glad when it's finally over.
Chapter Summary

Regina chats with Romulus and Ruby struggles with her losses.

Three massive Dire Wolves were perched upon Regina's front porch when she arrived home. Directly in front of the door sat Romulus upon his haunches, shoulders broad as he watched her waltz up the paved path linking the porch to the driveway. He was flanked by the wolves she recognized from past interactions as Octavia, the alpha female of the pack, and Julius, the beta male who had explained the Dire's arrival in Storybrooke back at the bean portal.

"Your Majesty," Romulus tilted his head respectfully in deference to her station – and, she thought, of her position within the pack. Via marriage, she was their co-alpha now and commanded their allegiance.

Following his lead, the others likewise showed their obeisance before loping away at a silent command from Romulus. She assumed they had other things to attend to, and now that she was present to protect her family, they could see to the rest of their pack. After all, it was not only the human combatants that took casualties in the battle. Under her breath, she wished them luck.

"It's good to see you, Romulus," she said after the other wolves disappeared into the darkness. "I assume you are still here in spite of Ruby's protestations of capability in protecting her own home."

Chuckling, Romulus gave her a wolfish grin. "How well you know her, my Queen. She did, indeed, attempt to send us away. I gave leave to the rest of the pack to return to the forests save for Octavia and Julius. After the events of the day, I did not feel comfortable abandoning my post. I have failed the Great One too many times already."

Regina understood the sentiment even though she disagreed. "You haven't failed her, Romulus. If you did, so did I. Fact is, there wasn't much either of us could do to stop Belmordan. It pains me to admit it, but he made me feel like a novice. I've never encountered that sort of power before."

"That is because only Merlin was his peer. Entire kingdoms were razed by his magic. How the Savior managed to defeat him is a miracle in and of itself."

Regina agreed. She never would have guessed Emma's audacious gambit would work. "She appealed to his vanity. It was a master stroke, really. She challenged him to single melee combat. No magic involved. Just the two of them and their weapons. To seal the deal, she suggested he would be a coward to not accept. She backed him into a corner so he could not refuse without losing face. Honestly, though, I'm surprised he didn't cheat. Had he done so, he could have easily killed her."

"He wouldn't have stooped so low," Romulus said, confident in his opinion. "His hubris would have instantly dismissed any notion of his possible defeat. He probably believed the Savior had no chance to defeat him. Also, as lost to the light as he was, he retained a semblance of honor even I cannot deny."

Regina didn't bother to conceal her doubts about Belmordan's supposed honor. She'd watched the man kill a family member today for the sole purpose of forcing Ruby's subservience. There was no
"I find that hard to believe considering what he did to Granny," she said, hatred rolling off her tongue along with the syllables she spoke. She would never get over what that bastard did, nor would Ruby, and for that reason alone she was unwilling to entertain Romulus' assertions that Belmordan was not wholly without honor.

In response to her ire, Romulus minutely lowered his snout, though he remained resolute in his opinion. "Your suspicion is warranted," he said. "Nonetheless, I speak the truth. If he had no honor, he would not have offered a means to avoid bloodshed."

Regina scoffed derisively. "Are you seriously suggesting he would have abided by the terms of the bogus deal he offered Ruby?"

"I am. As I said, there is no disputing his evil, but to my knowledge Belmordan never once betrayed an oath. In exchange for cooperation, he bestowed generous bounties upon his servants. So long as they remained faithful, so did he. Much loyalty was purchased that way and much undesirable conflict avoided. To enemies, on the other hand, he extended no mercy."

Regina didn't like the parallels to her own *modus operandi* as the Evil Queen. She didn't like them at all. That said, she couldn't refute Romulus without sounding like she was willfully obtuse, so she wisely refrained from further comment.

"Interesting. I suppose we got to see both sides to him today." Pausing, she sighed wearily. If Romulus was indeed correct, that sliver of decency in Belmordan stayed his hand from simply obliterating the entire town. While it was something worth noting for future reference, the knowledge wouldn't help Ruby, or her for that matter, sleep any better tonight. "Well, whatever the case for his restraint, I'm just glad it's all over."

Romulus huffed in agreement. "As am I. Ruby has suffered much loss, as have we all, but now the healing can begin."

"Speaking of Ruby, how is she?" Regina asked, steering the conversation back to what was really important, her wife and children. She couldn't express how deeply worried she was about all three, though concern for Ruby was preeminent in her mind. Anguishing as the thought was, children were resilient and would rebound quickly from the loss of their beloved grandmother. Ruby, on the other hand, was unlikely to recover any time soon.

"She is bearing her grief bravely," Romulus' sadness over Ruby suffering yet another loss was almost palpable. "For the sake of the children, she smiles, but there is a sorrow in her eyes that her mask cannot conceal from those who know what to look for."

Regina swallowed thickly, averting her eyes lest she lose her composure. If the pain was still fresh for her, she couldn't imagine how Ruby was feeling. Especially considering the shocking way things went down in the town square.

"Losing Granny that way..." she trailed off to gather in a shaky breath. Even without closing her eyes to concentrate, she could still see Granny's heart in Belmordan's hand and hear her final words to the granddaughter she'd raised from infancy. The freshness, she knew, would fade in time, but there would be no forgetting one of the most horrific moments of her life. She shakes her head, unshed tears obscuring her vision. "I don't know how she's holding it together. God knows I didn't when my mother died, and we weren't any where near as close. Granny was more Ruby's mother than her grandmother. Their bond was so unique. Sometimes I envied it. Now, all I can think is how it has been so abruptly severed, and that will only going to prolong her grief."
"She will make it. She is strong," Romulus said with the utmost confidence.

Regina didn't disagree, but she was sick of Ruby having to prove it, even more so than she was having do so herself. In a contest of loss, they were pretty neck and neck. Not that it was a competition, of course, just that even if she was winning and however large the lead, her inclination would always be to put Ruby first. Some of that was residual guilt over the things she'd done that lead her to believe she deserved the torment visited upon her throughout her life. Mostly, though, she simply loved Ruby more than she loved herself. No doubt Ruby would say the same. That is what True Love was.

"I know she is. I just wish she didn't have to be," she said, frustration coloring her tone. She caught the Dire Wolf's amber eyes. "The world has taken too much from her, Romulus. When is it going to be satisfied she's given enough?"

"I wish I could say that ended today," he said. "But tomorrow is just as uncertain now as today was yesterday. What fate has in store for any of us next, who can say? One thing we can do, though, is to strike a new accord tonight. We can swear an oath, you and I, that as much as it lies is within our power, the world will not be allowed to take anything else from her. Not if we have anything to say about it."

"That's one deal I am happy to make," Regina said, suddenly grateful for the enormous talking dog sitting on her front porch. She extended her hand to Romulus and smiled when he placed a giant paw into her hand. She gave it a firm shake. "We have an accord, my friend."

Romulus gave her a wolfish smile. "Excellent! Now, I believe your mate and young ones are just inside sleeping on the couch. You should see to them now. The hour grows late."

"You're right. I'm also exhausted. I could use some quality snuggle time with my girls. That said, if you repeat that to anyone else, I'll deny I ever said it."

A low chuckle rumbled through his chest. "Understood. Good night, Your Majesty. It is a privilege to remain at your service."

"You may call me by my name here, Romulus. This is not the Old World. I'm not a Queen anymore, just like you're no longer in anyone's service. You and your pack are free to have the run of the forest with my full blessing."

The majestic wolf tilted his head gratefully. "I thank you for such kindness. All the same, I hold my oaths as unbreakable, too. Should you or Ruby require me or the pack at any time, she knows how to contact us."

"In that case, allow me to extend the same courtesy to you. If you have any needs whatsoever, let me know. This is your home now. I want you to feel welcome here. All of you. You're all part of the big furry family now, I suppose, whether you like it or not. Ruby isn't one to let go of people once she's got hold of them. Iron jaws, that one..."

A chuckle rumbled from deep in Romulus' chest. "Indeed," he said, then tilted his head appreciatively. "I'm honored. Thank you once again."

"No. Thank you, Romulus. For everything." She meant it and hoped he knew that.

Romulus had been there for Ruby when she needed him the most. He accepted her without question back in the Enchanted Forest, and risked his life for her when Belmordan tried to stop her and Emma from leaving. He uprooted his entire pack to stay by her side when he had known her less than half a
It was Romulus and his mate Octavia who stopped Ruby's illness and rescued the local wolf population by destroying the phylactery buried in the forest. He even killed his own brother in defense of the town she loved. Regina owed him more than she could ever repay.

Sensing her sincerity, Romulus gave her what might be construed as a bow if a wolf could actually do that. "You are most welcome...Regina." And with that, he gave her deliberate wink and then bounded off the porch in the direction his packmates had gone only minutes earlier.

Encouraged by the interaction, Regina made her way inside. She didn't have to search long to find her family. They were all huddled together on the couch in the living room, squeezed onto one end. One of the girls was tucked into their mother's side while the other was half sprawled across her lap, both of them fast asleep. Ruby was wide awake, staring out the great window overlooking Mifflin Street. The curtains were thrown open so she could see everything going on outside.

"Ruby?" She spoke in a whisper, knowing Ruby could hear it. Hell, in all likelihood Ruby had heard her heartbeat before she even opened the door. Unless she had zoned out during her vigil, which was confirmed when Ruby startled a tiny bit and her eyes shot frantically toward Regina as her body tensed to spring into action to defend her pups.

Ruby relaxed upon recognizing who had disturbed her catatonia. "Oh," she breathed, then brightened up a bit. "Hey! You're home."

"Sorry I took so long," Regina said, voice still modulated so as not to disturb the girls.

Ruby adjusted her volume accordingly. "It's okay. I needed to spend some alone time with them after everything that happened."

Regina grimaced at the indirect reference to the deaths in their family and wondered with some anger if that meant Ruby told the girls about Granny. "How are they?" she asked, deciding to be tactful instead of assuming.

"Shaken up by what happened, but otherwise okay." Brow furrowing with pain that was all psychological, Ruby grit her teeth and clamped her eyes shut. She took a shaky drag of air before adding, "I didn't tell them about Granny. I just couldn't. Not without you here."

Knowing Ruby hadn't said anything released the ball of tension that started building between Regina's shoulders. She wasn't ready to deal with telling the girls that their grandmother was dead. Not tonight, at least. Too much had went down already without heaping yet another helping of torture onto the pile. Because that's how it would feel having to watch her children struggle through initial stages of the grieving process. They would be hurting in ways they couldn't possibly comprehend and the worst part was Regina couldn't do anything to help them besides holding them tight and drying their tears.

Grateful for Ruby's consideration even though she was suffering, Regina gave her wife a tender smile. "That's perfectly fine, darling. We can tell them together tomorrow when we're better equipped to deal with the fallout. Alright?" When Ruby, clearly overwrought, only nodded in agreement, Regina indicated toward the sleeping children. "Why don't we get them to bed so we can talk. Or, if you like, we can retire ourselves and cuddle up under a mountain of blankets. Whatever you need tonight is fine by me."

"'Kay. The second one sounds good."

Ruby's voice sounded so small and defeated that Regina wanted to cry. But she couldn't. Like always, she had to stay strong for everyone else. The only difference to many of the other times she'd
had to stuff down her anguish was that for her family it wasn't an imposition. She done it gladly for Henry when he was a growing up, she'd happily done the same for Ruby on several occasions, and now, she had two more little hearts to protect besides her wife and son's. For a little while, her life was going to have to revolve exclusively around them, and that was fine with her. Before anything else, she was a wife and a mother; the town would have to survive without her for a few days or weeks.

With the plan settled between them, they went about the delicate process of disentangling two overly clingy children from Ruby. It took some doing, but Regina was able to pry Sophia away from Ruby's side and scooped her up without totally waking her. Sophia shifted one or twice, whimpered and murmured incomprehensible words before wrapping around Regina like a koala bear with her head tucked tightly into the crook of Regina's neck. With Sophia secured, she headed upstairs, leaving Ruby to gather Amelia into her strong arms and likewise transport their eldest daughter to the room she shared with her sister.

Regina almost dreaded tonight. In all likelihood, what little sleep Ruby would get was likely to be fitful and plagued by nightmares. If only her prescription sleep aids worked for werewolves…

"Good night, my angels. Sleep well. May dreams of dancing in the moonlight guide you toward the morning."

As Regina completed her nightly ritual tucking the girls in, Ruby hovered a step behind. She'd already kissed the kids and whispered her I love you's, but in the absence of something to occupy her mind, she was left to fend off images of Granny's heart being crushed and Artemis sacrificing herself to step in front of a blow not meant for her.

Ruby had been reliving those moments off and on since she got home, to varying degrees of intensity. Twice, she'd had to excuse herself to the bathroom to cry where she wouldn't been or heard, and then had to explain away her latent sniffles and red, puffy eyes to two overly perceptive little girls. Truthfully, her fundamental duties as a mother were all that prevented her from succumbing to those dark thoughts altogether. Had she done that, she would have been buried beneath a mountain of grief growing larger by the minute. Now that Regina was home, though, they were back again with renewed frenzy.

How Ruby got from her daughters' bedroom to her own was a mystery. All she knew was that one minute she was watching Regina tuck the covers under Sophie's chin how she liked them when she was hit by another replay of Granny's death. After it was over, she was sitting on the bed in her favorite red silk nightgown, while Regina, herself arrayed in a more modest silver one, was kneeling in front of her.

"There you are," Regina said, concern written all over her face. "Where'd you go? You've been spaced out for five minutes."

"I...I, uh..." she took a shuddering breath. "I was caught up in a memory. A bad one."

"Granny?" Ruby could only nod. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart. Is there anything I can do to help?"

She shook her head. There really wasn't anything Regina could do. Getting past being tortured by Joshua had been hard, to say the least, but that had been straight up trauma. This was grief, and of an intensity she hadn't experienced since she thought Regina might die after she got stabbed. This was a beast of a very different nature, and Ruby wasn't sure how she was going to cope with it, not to mention get through it. In the back of her mind, she knew she needed Regina now more than ever, but it was nearly impossible to see that through the thick, suffocating cloud of darkness enveloping
"Just hold me," she croaked, and went limp against Regina when she shuffled in between Ruby's legs.

They sat there for the longest time, Ruby boneless in Regina's arms, breathing unevenly and fighting against the urge to scream while Regina rubbed her back and combed through her hair and whispered loving comfort into her ear. Eventually, Regina's awkward position forced her to move. Ruby wasn't really ready to let go, but she did anyway. It would have been selfish to expect Regina to accommodate her inability to control her emotions at the expense of her knees.

When Regina rose and moved away toward the head of the bed, Ruby yawned so hard her jaw creaked. She hadn't realized until just then how drained she was.

"I think it's time for bed," Regina commented, throwing back the covers. She patted the bed in an invitation that was more an order. "Come on. Get in. You need to sleep if you can."

Ruby grimaced at the idea of sleep. She was exhausted, but every time she closed her eyes she saw an endless slide of horrific images. What awaited her in her dreams was likely far worse.

After her abduction, she would occasionally find herself slung back into that cold, disgusting basement, stripped naked, and dangling from chains. Her perspective was always vivid. She could smell the mold from the constant dampness, feel the bite of the chill on her skin, and even hear the passing by of an occasional car, close enough for her wolf ears to pick up but too far away to hear her screams. And the pain. God, the pain. It was like she was actually there, being tortured all over again. Those nights, she often woke up with strangled gasp, panting and sweating buckets.

The worst ones, though, were when it wasn't her shackled in Joshua's basement, but Regina. Powerless to intervene, she was forced to watch all the horrific abuse she suffered be inflicted upon Regina. Her eyes wouldn't obey her to close and no matter how tightly she pressed against her ears, her wife's shrill, manic screams battered her ear drums until her head felt like it was going to splinter apart. By the time she wrenched awake, screaming at the top of her lungs, she was begging for Joshua to stop, to hurt her instead, that she'd let him do whatever he wanted to her if he'd just let Regina go. He never listened.

With that in mind, the possibility of what she might see tonight had her ready to do anything necessary to stay awake.

"I'm not the only one who got put through the wringer today," she said, stalling in desperation. Dread swirled in the pit of her stomach, and it made her behave irrationally. Maybe, she thought, if she got Regina talking again, she wouldn't have to go to sleep. Ruby wasn't that lucky. Regina did not take the bait.

"Well, then, let's try together," Regina said. When Ruby remained stubbornly perched precariously on the lower edge of the mattress, she sighed and moved back over to Ruby's side and tipped Ruby's chin up with the right hand. With her olive skin gleaming from the soft, pale hues of the moon she looked like a goddess. Not an unusual thought for Ruby to have. When dressed to the nines, Regina was a total babe, but sans make-up with her hair loose and lots of gorgeous skin on display, she eclipsed any woman on any planet.

The love in her eyes, though...that was the defining feature tonight. Ruby couldn't look away. She was entranced, caught in the web being so deftly woven by a woman whose greatest power did not lie in her reality defying magic or in her unrivaled intellect but in the bewitching combination of her husky voice, her confident yet tender touch, and the irresistible siren song emanating from her heart.
If tempted by Regina's call, Odysseus would have gnawed through his ropes, forsaking his life simply for the chance to lay eyes on her.

Well, Ruby was not Odysseus. Far from it. She had succumbed long ago and no longer cared how easily she was ensnared. She was a willing slave. A voluntary servant. A devout worshiper. A hopeless addict. Regina's love was better than any drug, and she should know, she'd tried her fair share during the Curse.

Threading the fingers of the left hand through the hair at Ruby's temple, Regina caught Ruby's eyes, earnestly imploring her to listen. "Look, I know you're anything but keen to close your eyes right now. I feel the same. The shit we saw today is likely to haunt us for a long time to come. And we both have enough experience with trauma to know that nightmares are almost certainly waiting for us on the other side of consciousness. But we have to try. If not for ourselves, for our daughters. They need us to keep it together."

"I hear you. I really do. And I know you're right," Ruby said, grasping at the wrist of Regina's left hand. Words could not express how much she loved and needed this woman. If nothing else, she owed Regina the truth. "I'm just scared. I keep reliving what happened to Granny and Artemis over and over. At least when I'm awake I can snap myself out of it, or you can do it for me. But what if we both fall asleep and I'm right back there watching them die and there's no way for me to get out? What if I get stuck there? I...I don't know if I can take it..." By the time she finished speaking, she was trembling.

"When is the last time I slept through one of your nightmares?" Regina asked, the hand in Ruby's hair now running long strokes that followed the line of her ear all the way down to the base of her skull.

Ruby couldn't remember that happening any time in the last few years. Her nightmares had dramatically slowed in frequency, but when they did hit, Regina invariably woke her before the deadly climax. They did that for each other. It was how attuned they were to one another. Ruby used to chalk the phenomenon up to a function of their True Love. Now, though, she wondered if it wasn't a side-effect of their sharing a heart. She didn't know enough about the subject to say for sure, but she would need to ask Regina more about it soon. They really just needed to sit down and have a long discussion about the whole heart thing and the fact Regina had hidden it from her for so long. Tonight was not the time for such a conversation, though.

"I can't say for sure," Ruby said. "Three or four years ago? Maybe longer."

"Alright, then." Regina slipped her hand from from Ruby's hair and cupped her cheeks. "Here's what we're going to do. You're going to crawl under the covers, and I'm going to slide in behind you and hold you close to me. I swear, Ruby, I won't let go. And if I sense you having a bad dream, I'll wake you up immediately. You can do the same for me. Alright? Sound like a plan?"

Rather than respond, Ruby nodded weakly, then allowed Regina to help her up and guide her into bed. Once settled on her side facing the wall, she felt the mattress dip as Regina joined her, and a second later she was enveloped by the soothing warmth and the alluring scents she has come to associate with her wife. The fear that was gripping her turned loose under the powerful, commanding authority of Regina's presence and the security of her embrace.

Ruby breathed deeply and wiggled her hips and shoulders a few times to get extra comfy before allowing her eyes to slide shut. "Good night, hon. Love you."

"I love you, too, mi amada," said Regina, and then they both went silent.
To drown out the noise of battle, the screams, the cries, the awful noises made when steel meets flesh, Ruby concentrated on the sound Regina's heart. In the background she could vaguely make out the low hum of the air conditioning and the serenade of various insects from just outside their bedroom window. The steady thrumming of Regina's heart, though, dominated her aural field. Soon enough, she felt herself actually begin to relax.

Sleep, however, remained elusive. After about ten minutes, lying there, frustrated, thoughts of Granny and Artemis came back with a vengeance. The euphoria of Regina's all-natural spell had faded. Belmordan was holding the blade again, that maddened glint in his eyes, spearhead poised at her heart, heedless that she was his own flesh and blood reborn. She could hear the squelch of the blade as it ran through Artemis' chest. Then she smelled the blood. But it wasn't Artemis' blood. It was too familiar. And that heartbeat? It was unmistakable.

She'd grown up depending on that steady, regular rhythm. When she was little and couldn't sleep because of all the noises from the woods she was hearing that she shouldn't be, that heartbeat had been the only thing that could lull her away from the edges of panic. Granny's face had been so serene when she said her goodbye. Which lead Ruby to believe her grandmother had made her peace with her death long before Belmordan showed up. She wanted to scream at her, to beg her to stay, to plead with her to explain why she was so willing to die to spare Ruby from making a choice that, if she was objectively analyzing the situation, she knew would have destroyed her. More than anything, she wanted one last hug, one last kiss, to hear one last, "Get your scrawny ass in the kitchen, girl! Those pancakes aren't gonna cook themselves." But she couldn't have any of that. Granny was gone and she was never coming back. How was she supposed to make her peace with that?

Losing her mother the way she had changed Ruby forever, and Anita had been next to nothing to her. The woman had given her life, but beyond that, she'd been a footnote in Ruby's story, whereas Granny played the starring role – at least up til Regina stumbled into the Diner, a broken shell of a woman who'd just needed a friend. Dealing with this loss was going to take every ounce of Ruby's fortitude, and even then she wasn't sure she had what it took.

"Regina?" She only spoke because she could tell Regina was awake as well by her breathing patterns.

Regina was a light sleeper, but she took slow, deep breaths while under that Ruby had only ever heard from people like Emma who sleep like the dead. It was pretty strange. Light sleepers, in her experience, were shallow breathers – almost like they were on watch even during repose. When she was finally allowed to start sleeping over after a date, she had a really hard time reconciling herself to the contradicting evidence. The first couple of nights, she would shift position to sneak a few minutes watching Regina sleep thinking her lover was out like a light, only to be met with alert brown eyes when she glanced over. Eventually, Regina got used to her being there and adapted so that she could actually sleep through Ruby's frequent restlessness, but there were still times she'd wake up abruptly, concerned something was wrong when Ruby just needed to use the potty.

"Hmm?"

Regina's hummed response indicated she was getting close to falling asleep, which made Ruby feel bad. "It's nothing," she said. "Sorry I disturbed you."

In response to Ruby's tone, Regina's grip tightened around her waist. "Nonsense. Something is bothering you. What is it?"

"Will it ever get easier?" Ruby's tone was far more urgent than she would have liked, though she supposed it made sense because she was feeling incredibly angsty. She wanted the grief to take a
"Yes and no," Regina said sadly, her lovely low voice a little more gravelly than usual. "The pain will never go away, but in time you will be able to think about her without being paralyzed by grief. Eventually you'll even start to remember the good times more than the terrible way you lost her. At least, that's how it was for me. Your mileage may vary. My mother loved me in her own way, and my father tried his best to make up for her deficiencies. I mourned them both far long than I would have liked. But..." she paused and swallowed thickly. "Granny was special."

Ruby's heart lurched in her chest. Trapped in the haze of her anguish, she had lost sight of Regina's experience with losing a parent. For Regina it was even worse, as she'd killed both her mother and father. That one of those was inadvertent offered her no reprieve. She told Ruby once that she thought of her parents every day, and that in particular her guilt over her father's demise got worse after she had children of her own. Her unconditional love for Henry had enlightened her as to just how unforgivable her having committed patricide was. Then the girls came along, and she couldn't help but think of her mother, how their twisted relationship had sent them down a path the led to the daughter killing the mother, and how had been scared shitless that she would make the same mistakes Cora did.

And then there was the undeniable truth that Regina was grieving right along with Ruby. She might not have cared much for Artemis outside her role in Ruby's existence, but she most certainly had a vested interest in Granny. In a lot of ways, Granny was the mother Regina never got to have. Sure, they bickered like cats and dogs, but only because they were so much alike.

Honestly, Regina was more like Granny than Ruby most of the time, and that wasn't something that made her angry or jealous at all. More that it helped her come to terms with her attraction to Regina in the first place in as much as she realized she was conditioned to love sassy, hard-nosed, pig-headed, hot-tempered women.

Anyway, the relationship Regina and Granny built was something Ruby cherished. They were fellow cooking enthusiasts and gossip buddies and shared an enduring passion of criticizing everyone and everything that didn't operate exactly the way they thought things and people should operate. They were birds of a feather, and it was beautiful. Was being the operative word. Because Granny was dead. Ruby wasn't the only one who lost a mom today, and she felt ashamed of how easily she lost sight of that.

She wanted so badly to say something, to apologize for being a selfish horse's ass, but something told her not to. There was really no putting a finger on why she felt that way other than to guess. Maybe it was Regina's tone or the stiffness in her muscles as she held Ruby tight or was just a consequence of how well Ruby knew her wife. Whatever the case, she knew on instinct that the advice she'd been given was best accepted without further comment.

"Yes, she was," she said. "Promise you won't let me forget that?"

Regina's voice was tight with emotion when she replied. "Only if you promise the same for me."

"Deal." Ruby snuggled back against Regina's front and they shared a contented sigh. They fit together so perfectly. Like Yin and Yang, Ruby thought, her eyes suddenly growing heavy. "Thank you for putting up with me. I think I might can sleep now."

Regina yawned loudly, then nuzzled her nose into Ruby's hair before pressing a kiss against her exposed shoulder blade. "You're welcome, love. Go on and close your eyes then. I won't be long behind you."
"G'nite, baby," Ruby whispered as her lids slipped shut, and smiled when Regina murmured nonsense against her neck. Turned out she was wrong to suggest Ruby would fall asleep first. Within a minute tops, she was snoring in that soft, regale way of hers. Yes, Regina Mills snored, but even that she did elegantly, like the Queen she was. The thought brought another tender smile to Ruby's lips.

Rather than languish for hours, she slipped quickly into the welcoming nether and mercifully did not dream.
We're Gonna Make It

Chapter Summary

After a rough patch, Regina and Ruby start the long process of recovery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Granny's funeral was a somber affair by any available standard of comparison. Ruby had wanted to keep it a celebration of life befitting her rambunctious grandmother, but instead it turned into a parade of illegitimate grief, empty platitudes, and well-meaning condolences.

Hundreds showed up at the local funeral home, a quaint establishment built by one Mr. Sowerberry not long after the breaking of the second Dark Curse. The lines outside reached halfway around the block at times. It was a touching tribute to how beloved the deceased was. Hardly anyone in town didn't know Granny, and of those few held her with anything but the highest esteem. For three decades the woman had been a daily fixture in the lives of Storybrooke's citizens in a way few others were.

For all in intents and purposes, the Diner was the town's hub, the one place everyone frequented regardless of the many arbitrary distinctions that people use to marginalize one another. That gave Granny influence she probably hadn't even been aware of, and if she was, she hadn't cared to exploit it beyond making a lasting impact on her customers one slice of pie and one dimpled smile at a time. The woman had been respected for her direct, no nonsense, brutally honest approach to life as much as for her endearing penchant for sass and an unimpeachable character. In a way, she was everybody's Granny, and Regina found it intolerable she had not been told that before she was gone.

To maintain her own precarious emotional balance, Regina stayed close to Ruby almost the entire day. She had also wanted to keep an eye on her struggling wife. Try as she might, Ruby was not able to make it more than half an hour without either dissolving into tears or shutting down emotionally to keep from falling to pieces yet again in front of the entire town. There wasn't much of a choice, though, since virtually every single person who came to pay their respects had a story to tell about something Granny had said or done that made a difference in their lives. With everything else that had happened over the past month or so, it was just too much for Ruby to take.

By Ruby's own admission, the only reason she was able to make it at all was Regina's refusal to leave her side except for the handful phone calls she stepped away to make to check in on their daughters. And those calls were brief, as the girls were with Emma and Hook at their house until Henry took over babysitting duty so his mother and one-handed father-in-law could pay their own respects to Granny. Even during those five to ten minute breaks, Esperanza was there to take over for Regina. Or Zelena. Or both. The two had, without being asked, assumed the roles of Regina's personal support system for which she was infinitely grateful.

The fighting that took place in the town square solidified an adamant bond between the diametrically different women. Being two of five remaining members of Cora's bloodline meant they couldn't exactly avoid each other if their personalities had clashed, as Regina expected them to after Esperanza came to Storybrooke with Ruby and Emma. To her pleasant surprise, they got along well enough from the get go, though before the battle they were never as close as Regina was with her
half-sister. Whatever the cause of the momentous shift that occurred that day, neither were willing to discuss. It was evidently traumatic, though, as the slightest reference to it robbed Zelena of what little color her fair skin contained while Esperanza gazed at her cousin with an expression that vacillated between horrified and worshipful. Not one to question such a positive development, Regina never pressed for more information. When they were ready to talk about what happened, she knew they would tell her.

Until then, whatever went down to bring about the change, she was just happy her sister and cousin had found a common ground on which to build a meaningful relationship. Selfishly, she needed her family now more than ever. It was bad enough she was having to expend so much of her time and emotional resources caring for Ruby, who was falling apart more rapidly by the day, in addition to very real concerns for her children's mental health. Some days, it felt like she was about to be rent in two from the pressure to maintain the delicate equilibrium between a grieving wife and two terribly confused little girls. To keep her own head above water, she was willing to take whatever help she could get, but was relieved just the same that the help came from her kin.

Despite them pitching in as much as possible, both had their own issues to deal with. Esperanza was still healing and required rest that rarely granted herself. Stubborn woman that she was, she was still working her ass off at the diner. Someone had to cover for the loss of the establishment's owner, and with Ruby disinterested in taking over, and unable to do so even if was, the task fell to a natural leader. This meant that Esperanza, with her limited experience, was effectively running the diner – and doing a commendable job from what Regina had heard.

Meanwhile, Zelena had Dorothy and Francesca to occupy much of her free time that wasn't being monopolized by the hospital. Like Esperanza, Zelena was pulling overtime. Wounded from the battle, friend and foe alike, occupied every last bed, and there were surgeries scheduled almost twenty-four hours a day for at least the next three weeks. On top of all that, Whale was being a slave-driving asshole, and his antics resulted in a few noisy confrontations with an irate Zelena, which added a lot of unnecessary stress the already overtaxed doctors and nurses constantly on call. Most days, Zelena was only at home an hour or two a day, if that, so Regina insisted her frazzled sister curtail the nightly visits after work to be with her family as much as possible.

The Charmings picked up some of the slack, as did Emma and Hook, but they were also incredibly busy in the aftermath of a catastrophe that almost destroyed the town. The accumulated vacancies meant Regina was often left alone to keep her household functioning.

Dealing with Ruby proved equivalent to picking up broken glass with bare hands; that is, it was a delicate affair where one wrong move or a tiny slip could result in a nasty cut. Regina was getting tired of bandaging her wounded heart from her wife's vicious mood swings and unintentionally hurtful remarks. Thankfully, handling the children was not quite as complicated.

Neither Sophia nor Amelia could truly comprehend what was going on aside from their Nana going away forever making them sad. They'd cried when she and Ruby told them, as was expected, but most of their emotional outbursts since were influenced by the adults. Watching their family grieve was taking a toll on them, and as much as Regina understood the experience to be vital to their development as functional people, she tried to shield them as best she could – especially from the supermassive black hole that was Ruby's grief and her own lesser but oft-debilitating sorrow. The funeral, she decided, was a step too far for them at so tender an age. Ruby agreed wholeheartedly, so they made alternate arrangements with the girls' Auntie Em and Uncle Hook, who were more than willing to help out however they could.

The decision turned out to be a wise one. Regina could not have afforded any distractions with Ruby an unmitigated disaster during the entire service and most of the reception afterward. The progress
she had made during their brief talk the night post-battle all but evaporated with the morning light. In the days that followed, Ruby slipped into a cavernous depression that refused to relent save for sparks of life that emerged whenever Diana was around. Getting Ruby to help plan the funeral was like pulling hairs; Regina had to pose questions about Granny's wishes and preferences over and over before Ruby snapped out of the catatonia long enough to give a definitive answer. Ruby was pretty much out of it in general, and it was taking a toll on their relationship.

It was a macabre thought, Regina had been hoping Granny's memorial service would snap Ruby out of her stupor so that they could both finally start the healing process as a couple. And it did, just not in the way she was hoping. When she wasn't choking down irritation at having to indulge in inane small talk with folks who had come to pay their respects to the town's *de facto* matriarch, she was scrambling to keep Ruby afloat. During the viewing the day before, Ruby hadn't left the casket except to use the restroom, and even then, she was in and out and right back with her grandmother. It was worse during the funeral service. She'd sit in the front row while Archie delivered a touching eulogy, gripping Regina's hand so hard it went numb. The pew was not so lucky. Ruby broke it in two places with her other hand. The stream of tears cascading down her splotchy cheeks was incessant. Twice, she all but collapsed against Regina, only barely holding in a wail by clamping down over her mouth. It was horrible. Regina couldn't really even say her own goodbye with how busy she was taking care of her wife. Busy, and worried beyond belief.

To her relief, she didn't have to go through the ordeal alone, for as she was Ruby's rock, Henry became hers. Without her needing to ask, her son had picked up most of the chores that didn't get done around the house because of the crisis, watched over his sisters while she and Ruby went to make the funeral arrangements or when she couldn't leave Ruby alone when she was having trouble coping, and even helped Regina with the cooking the day of. She has never understood the tradition of eating after a funeral. When Daniel died, she'd been sick to her stomach for days, and she couldn't imagine it was going to be any easier saying goodbye to Granny. Nor could Henry for that matter, who wholeheartedly agreed with her assessment of the macabre ritual. Neither of them ate much beyond nibbling on fruit and veggies once the service was over. Ruby, as Regina had suspected, did not eat at all.

The voracious appetite that so defined her wife seemed to have fled in the aftermath of the latest in a long line of tragedies. By the second day after the funeral, Regina was way past concerned. Ruby didn't have any weight to lose on a good day, but she was shedding pounds at an alarming rate. When they'd gone to visit their newly discovered families – the Olympians, Merlin, and Morgana to be specific – on the third day, Ruby had to cinch her once skin tight jeans with a belt. Regina could actually see her ribs straining against taut skin, and she hadn't appreciated Regina pointing that out, either. Regina being Regina, of course, responded with her typical lack of restraint, which lead to a bit of a row that made the girls cry and had Henry on pins and needles around them for the next hour.

Thankfully, where Regina's nagging had no discernible effect, Diana proved to have the magic touch. Regina hated her for it.

"Come now, little one. Stop being so stubborn," the goddess had said, offering up the same apple slice Regina had unsuccessfully lobbied for Ruby to eat. "You're only hurting yourself. What would your grandmother say if she saw you in such a state?"

It was pretty much the verbatim argument Regina had been using for three days to no effect. Except from Diana's lips it was nectar instead of gruel. Ruby ate the damn apple. All of it. It was a small one, but even that was more in one sitting than she'd taken in since before Belmordan descended upon Storybrooke and left it in ruins. Honestly, Regina tried not to take it personally, but found herself feeling slighted anyway.
During the daylight hours, it was as if Ruby didn't even hear her when she spoke sometimes, let alone acknowledge her presence. Oh, but when the darkness descended and they were tucked away in their bedroom? Then, Regina wasn't invisible. Then, Ruby needed her. Every night she told herself that it was just because Ruby was in mourning, but when dawn broke over the horizon and she was invisible again the whole ugly cycle started anew. And she was beyond ready for it to be irrevocably broken.

In all the years they'd been together, she'd never felt their relationship under such strain. Occasionally in the throes of self-pity, she worried about whether she was losing Ruby to the inexorable pull of her awakened Olympian genetics. Perhaps now that she was a goddess, she no longer had use of a highly flawed, incredibly frail mortal wife. No doubt Aphrodite, if there was such an equivalent being on Mt. Olympus, could offer so much more to the granddaughter of the god of gods than a middle aged, deposed monarch with a nasty temper and a poisonous tongue. She was only able to dispel those dangerous notions by reminding herself that she was Ruby's True Love and that no matter how far away they drifted from one another, Ruby would never stray and she would always come back home. That was just who Ruby was; loyal to a fault with her love. The distance between them hurt all the same.

But then one night after a really bad fight, this was about two weeks after the funeral, Regina was in the kitchen making dinner. She was so angry and frustrated and wounded that she was trembling as she mixed the dirty mashed potatoes. Twice she almost lost hold of the blender, which would have made an awful mess. She could still hear Ruby's voice, more caustic and mean-spirited than she'd been in years, as she railed at Regina for being jealous of Diana, whom she'd stated in no uncertain terms was the one good thing she had left in her life.

"I guess the girls and I don't count in that equation anymore?" she'd retorted, breathing heavily and fighting back tears of hurt and anger.

When what she had said registered, Ruby blanched and stumbled back as if struck. "I-I...I didn't mean it that way..." she stuttered, eyes as big as saucers.

"Oh, I think you did," Regina sneered, too irate to listen to anything Ruby had to say. She'd simply had enough. "You were merely verbally expressing how you've been acting the past two weeks, as if the girls are a nuisance half the time and I'm useless to you beyond being your snot rag-slash-body pillow every night."

"Regina, I..."

"Save it, Ruby. I don't want to hear it. Not right now. Just...just go upstairs and actually be a mother for a while so I can fix dinner in peace." She'd been mean on purpose, figuring the low blow about Ruby failing as a mother would not only drive the point home but make her wife hurt a fraction of how much she was. It was petty and uncalled for, but she couldn't help herself. Lashing out cruelly like that when pushed too far was one bad habit she would probably never break.

"Okay," Ruby said, then nodded demurely, bottom lip caught between her teeth as tears of her own welled under her eyelids. But she did not protest or put up a fight. She just tucked her tail and ran like a scolded dog, which only made Regina even more incensed. She'd been trying to pick a fight, and Ruby's refusal to take the bait was infuriating.

Steaming mad, she stomped into the kitchen, slammed the door shut, and started violently snatching ingredients for the evening meal from the pantry and refrigerator. By the time she started on the potatoes, she was trembling. By the time she put the chicken into the oven, her cheeks were damp with tears. Coming unglued at every conceivable seam, she pressed her back into the corner of the cabinets and slid down to the floor, where she tucked her knees into her chest and wept.
uncontrollably. To keep the noise down, she covered her mouth with both hands, but the effort fell short with a werewolf living in the house.

Regina didn't hear Ruby come in. Didn't really sense her approach. She most certainly didn't expect Ruby to kneel down in front of her looking every bit as miserable as she felt. To her shame, she folded like a brittle leaf and sprang forward into Ruby's waiting embrace. They cried together right there in the kitchen floor until the well of tears ran dry and the timer on the chicken went off.

Reluctantly, Regina disentangled from Ruby to retrieve dinner lest it catch fire and burn down the house. After she placed it on the stove to cool, though, she felt Ruby slide behind her.

"I'm sorry for how I've been lately," Ruby said, voice hoarse and filled with self-contempt. "I've been a total asshole to everyone since Granny died, but you most of all. You deserve so much better than what I've been giving you."

"Yes, I do," Regina replied, shoulders tensing as she remembered how insignificant she had felt. It was as if her pain did not matter because it was somehow less relevant than Ruby's. Once again she was having to hide her emotional instability for the sake of someone else, and that transported her back in time to how she'd felt right after Daniel's death. A couple of times the accompanying rage got so strong she had to magick herself to some remote area to scream and throw fireballs at things until her fury was spent. The only differences were that Ruby's depression had a legitimate root that Regina sympathized with, and furthermore she was choosing to sacrifice her emotional health for Ruby instead of being forced. "That doesn't mean I don't get why you had such a hard time," she said, trying not to sound bitter. "Because I do. You've been through hell."

Ruby slid in behind Regina and wrapped her long arms around her waist. "That doesn't excuse me from taking it out on you. Or neglecting you and the girls. Especially in favor of someone I just met. Listen," she paused for a preparatory breath, "I know my connection with Diana bothers you. I wish I could explain it, but I can't. I just need to be close to her."

"Then why aren't you with her right now?" Regina asked, still battling uncertainty. "I mean, if that's where you want to be, you should go. I'm certainly not going to stop you."

For the second time, Ruby did not take the bait, nor did she move a muscle aside from tightening her hold. "That's just it. It's not where I want to be at all. Do I need her in my life? Yes, but I need you more. So much more." Regina did not trust herself enough to respond. Ruby was saying all the right things, the things she wanted so desperately to hear, but she was afraid to believe them. "Please, look at me," Ruby pleaded when Regina remained stiff and unyielding. "Regina, please!"

Finally after a minute of inner debate, Regina relented, hope winning out over her need for self-preservation. When she turned in Ruby's arms, she was met with her wife's earnest, tearful gaze. Green eyes that had been dulled so long were alive again. She almost gasped at the sight, it was so beautiful.

"I swear to you on all I hold dear," Ruby then said, "on my life if that's what it takes, there is no competition for my heart. You've got it, babe. All of it. You and our girls. My whole world is in this house."

"What about Diana?" Regina asked, still battling uncertainty.

"What about her?" Ruby frowned as if the question were ridiculous. It wasn't.

The flippant reaction irritated Regina, but with great effort she held her tongue. They were making progress at long last, and she was not going to allow her temper to be cause of its derailment.
"Well," Regina said, cautiously, "I just mean that she has probably gotten used to monopolizing your attention. I'm sure she won't be happy for it to wane."

Ruby shook her head in disagreement. "I don't think she will at all. But even if she does, too bad so sad. She's an immortal goddess who is probably tens of thousands of years old. Last I checked, that makes her a grown ass adult who should be mature enough to accept her place in my life." She shifted her stance and her hold so she could grasp Regina's hips with both hands. Her fingers dug in so that it was almost painful, a sensation Regina relished. "She might be my aunt, but you're my woman. I'm done putting anything ahead of you, Sophie, and Amie."

Fighting the surge of endorphins flooding her brain, Regina bit at her lip uncertainly. "Why the sudden change? I love you, Ruby, and I want to believe, but you must understand why I'm having trouble..."

Sighing, Ruby's head drooped shamefully. "Unfortunately I do. I hate it that you have cause to doubt me at all, but it's my fault." She paused to take a centering breath, then raised her head to catch Regina's eyes. There was no mistaking her openness. It was all there on display, all the hurt, and regret, and self-loathing Ruby had been carrying around since that horrific day in the town square. "As for why," she said, almost painfully honest, "something broke in me a few minutes ago when you pointed out what I'd said about Diana being the most important thing to me. You were right, I did mean it at the time. I couldn't see past my heartache. I was a fucking mess, Regina. I was lost and broken and drunk on grief and stranded in the darkness of depression all the time except when I was around her. She was an oasis in the desert for me. And I wish to God I could go back and change that, but I can't. All I can tell you is that the idea that I almost threw what we have away for temporary relief sobered me the hell up. What you said might have hurt me more than anything you have said to me in years, but it taught me a valuable lesson."

Regina's resolve crumbled. Staring into Ruby's eyes, seeing how determined she was to make things right, had her defenses going down. "Do you really mean all this?" she asked, sounding as vulnerable as she felt. "You're not gonna wake up in the morning and pretend I'm not there again? I don't want to be invisible anymore, Ruby. It hurts too much."

Ruby winced before looking away, so upset that tears were pooling rapidly beneath her eyelids. And as she swallowed heavily, her fingers dug even deeper into Regina's hips.

"Jesus Christ," she said in breathy tones, clearly disgusted at herself. "I'm so sorry I made you feel that way. God, I'm such a dick. Seriously, I thought I wasn't anything like...him. Maybe I was wrong, though. Maybe I'm just as selfish and deluded as he was. Maybe I really am a monster just waiting to be unleashed..."

"You're not," Regina interrupted, feeling Ruby slipping away from her. "Ruby, you're not." When Ruby's breath hitched and her eyes slid shut, Regina cupped her face between both hands. "Look at me, please." When Ruby complied, she said, "You are nothing like him, and I don't ever want to hear you compare yourself to him again. Ever. Whatever has happened between us these past few weeks is nothing that can't be fixed, because you're still you. You're Ruby, my love, my soul mate, my best friend. My very beating heart. You're the woman who cries every time Ethan Hawk has to chase White Fang away because he and Alex have to leave the Klondike after finding gold, who still thinks Legend is Tom Cruise's best movie, who dances around the house to the most godawful music, and who kisses my nose every morning because it tickles and makes me laugh. You're more beautiful and kind and loving and selfless than anyone I know. You are not...like...him. You hear me?"

Nodding hesitantly, Ruby took a shaky breath. The speech had worked, and Regina watched with
satisfaction as her wife recoiled out of the incredibly dangerous angst that had started to swallow her up.

"Yeah, I do," Ruby said, and when Regina raised a dubious brow, added a more emphatic, "I swear, I really do. I'm just beating myself up right now, and for good reason. I don't really understand why I treated you that way. I mean, I saw you, I just couldn't accept your comfort, for whatever reason. But you were never invisible, Regina. Never. Shit, you're the woman who walks into a room and everything stops, even the world on its axis. You couldn't be invisible if you tried. Especially not to me. You're my heart. I'm nothing without you."

With Ruby's face still sandwiched between her hands, Regina pulled her in close until their foreheads connected. She nuzzled their noses together, then said, 'That isn't true. You are not nothing without me, and that's okay. I don't want you to define yourself solely by us. I happen to adore your perky, individualistic self. I just want to be included is all. Even in the bad stuff. That's what marriage is."

Ruby nodded against Regina's forehead. "You will be. Starting today, things are gonna be different around here. For me mostly. You don't even have to take my word for it. Just watch. I'll prove it. I'm gonna sweep you off your feet all over again, Mrs. Mills."

Separating slightly, Regina looped her arms over Ruby's neck and then leaned in again until their lips were brushing together. "I'll hold you to that, Mrs. Mills," she said, and then tilted her head to the left and pulled Ruby into a light, languid kiss followed by a second and a third, and which then shifted into a long, savory exchange that had them pressed as tightly together as the immutable laws of physics would allow.

"Mommy, are guys done making up yet?"

Regina wrenched free of Ruby's lips at being interrupted by the youngest child. As Ruby giggled, face tucked into Regina's shoulder, she peered over at the door to find both of her children watching them with a mixture of disgust at the kissing and happiness that their parents were emerging from the frightening valley they'd been slogging through.

"Why?" she asked, fighting off humor herself. "Are you two in a hurry for something?"

"Duh, Mommy," said Amelia, brow cocked up just like Regina's. "It's been three whole hours since we ate. We're starving!" To punctuate the statement, her little tummy growled so loud even Regina could hear it from across the kitchen.

Ruby, unable to contain herself, burst out into laughter. Regina soon followed.

"It's not funny! I'm in crisis here," Amelia stomped irreverently as she quoted her Auntie Em's favorite dramatic phrase, which only made the adults laugh harder. Soon enough the girls were squealing with merriment, too, and as they cackled gleefully they ran headlong toward their mothers and launched themselves into waiting arms.

Peppered kisses all over their daughter's faces, Ruby caught Regina's gaze and gave her a saucy wink before snatching Amelia from Regina's arms and carrying her and Sophia over to the table to get them ready for dinner. Regina right knew then and there that everything was going to be alright.

Would there be more disagreements? More fights? More trials to test their love for one another? Most assuredly. But after weathering this almighty storm, she knew beyond the shadow of a doubt they could make it through anything. They had each other, after all. What else did they need?
It was late in the afternoon about two weeks later when Ruby and Regina finally saw the last of their legendary guests off. The Olympians were waiting for them at the cemetery, neither seeming particularly eager to leave. The looming urgent business in Olympus had forced their hand, though, and while Ruby understood that, she selfishly wished they could stay.

"If only Papa were here," she thought as Regina lead her through the wrought-iron gates marking the cemetery's boundary. She could use Merlin's immense strength and boundless compassion right about now.

Sadly, Merlin and Morgana had returned to Boston with Henry a week after the funeral with the promise to come back once finals were over. Both of the former residents of Albion had announced their plans to take sabbaticals from their teaching positions. Merlin had made it clear to Ruby that he was determined to reacquainted himself with the new version of the orphan girl he'd raised. Even if she'd been inclined to refuse him, she wouldn't have the heart to actually do so. His innate goodness and kindness were too endearing. That, and she needed him in her life more than she could really comprehend. He was the father she'd never had as Ruby, and her memories of him growing up as Eleni were simply not good enough.

Plus, he still hadn't told her what became of Alexis, her and Regina's daughter from their previous lives as Eleni and Elaine. Ruby got the feeling his avoidance of the subject meant something terrible had befallen her, and she would have pressed him to spill the beans if she hadn't been scared that more bad news would well and truly finish her off. Losing Granny and Artemis at the same time had nearly broken her. She couldn't have handled finding out Alexis met a violent end. So she'd filed away the topic for later, and convinced Regina to do the same, in lieu of not ruining what little time she had with her Papa before he had to leave Storybrooke.

Their parting had been a tearful one. Ruby had already entered the early throes of a depression that would threaten the most meaningful relationships in her life. She was clinging hard to the two people that gave her the most solace. Diana had been one and Merlin the other. That he hadn't wanted to go every bit as much as she wanted him to stay only made saying goodbye that much harder. But he'd promised he wouldn't stay away long, and that his stint as a humble history professor was to come to an end after the latest semester so he could refocus on his family.

That designation was not limited to Ruby, Regina and their children, either. Deny it as he might, there was something simmering between him and Morgana that was obvious to everyone who was not them. As much as Ruby wanted to monopolize her Papa's time, she was also rooting for them to get their heads out of their asses. After all of his sacrifices, Merlin deserved to be happy.

Morgana, meanwhile, was itching to hang out with her new sisters. Regina had told her eldest sibling that she and Zelena came as a package deal, which Morgana took extremely well. To the surprise of exactly no one, the legendary witch and the formerly wicked one got along swimmingly. With Regina added into the mix, the recipe was there for all sorts of hi-jinks. Ruby liked Morgana well enough outside of her sketchy history with Merlin, but she was reticent to fully trust a woman who was capable of such duplicity and violence. Hypocritical as that was considering to whom she was married, she simply didn't know the woman well enough to let her guard down. As a wife and mother, she had a duty to be on constant guard against threats, especially those wolves that clothed themselves as sheep, and though she didn't get that vibe from Morgana, she wasn't going to take any chances. Regina had accepted her sister almost immediately, but Ruby was going to have to be convinced. That said, she was glad for Regina to have found another branch member in a woefully lacking family tree and sincerely hoped the burgeoning relationship between her wife and Morgana worked out for them both.
Henry, bless him for being the responsible son that he was, had come back to Storybrooke several times on the weekends. He hadn't needed to explain his reasoning when even over the phone Ruby could hear his worry for his mom, and even more so for her, in his voice. Emma's surprise pregnancy, which she had announced the day after she passed the third trimester, had him even more stressed out about being away from home. Had so much not been riding on this semester and had he not been so close to finishing his degree, Ruby thought he might have considered dropping out. The kid had a heart bigger than Texas. Problem was that he let it get the better of his brain a little too often. Not at all unlike her. Or his grandmother Snow. But she loved him all the more for it, and was proud as hell to be his step-mom.

Regina missed Henry terribly, of course, but with him – and Merlin and Morgana – back in Boston, they had a lot of extra time to spend with Sophie and Amie. And as a couple. Ruby felt a bit guilty how glad she was to have been afforded the necessary privacy to grovel appropriately for how she'd treated all three of her girls. So she'd poured herself into getting back into shape as the kickass mom she used to be before the shitstorm that was Belmordan nearly wrecked everything. When she wasn't fixing her relationship with her daughters, she was romancing the everloving hell out of her wife. Candlelit dinners, rose petals on the bed, steaming baths, languid massages...she went the whole nine yards. And added a tenth for good measure.

They had always enjoyed an amazing sex life, but reconnecting after their scare was a marathon of epic proportions. Whenever Regina indicated she was even remotely in the mood, it was game on for Ruby. Morning, noon, or night, it didn't matter to her. That was one sword she was more than happy to fall upon as many times as it took. Once, she even got a phone call at the station – to keep from going stir crazy she'd gone back to work about a month after the funeral – and it was Regina, describing in deliberately sultry tones the precise location of her hand at that moment. "I was just wondering if you were too busy to help me out of this...sticky situation," Regina had then said.

"I'm headed there right now. Don't you dare finish without me." Regina didn't, though she sure was spread out like a buffet when Ruby got to her office, burst through the closed door and then locked it behind her. Lord, but did she ever have fun getting her money's worth. In the space of a half hour, she completely redefined the phrase, "all you can eat." That was the most memorable lunch break she ever had.

Mind-blowing sex aside, she and Regina also reconnected emotionally. Restarting the briefly abandoned tradition of date nights helped greatly in that regard. They went skating in Bangor a couple times, cuddled on the couch to watch movies several others, and generally spent as much time as possible getting reacquainted with being a couple outside of their responsibilities to their children, their extended family, and the town. It felt nice. Really nice. Without all that external pressure, they were able to rediscover an intimacy that reminded Ruby of the honeymoon period of their relationship when they were in a stupidly happy little bubble that nobody could burst. They fell in love all over again, which was as cliché of a description as possible, but it was what it was.

More than anything else, though, reestablishing their bond reminded Ruby why she loved Regina in the first place. Simply put, no one knew her, or understood her, or accepted her, or loved her like Regina did, and she knew without needing to ask that Regina felt the same. They were the radically
shaped pieces to a two-part puzzle. When apart or at odds, they were all sharp edges and crazy bendy shapes that neither could really make sense of. Together, though, they were a harmonious whole that formed a picture more beautiful than words could describe.

After almost falling apart due to the catastrophic pressures of death and destruction on every level of their lives, they were now stronger than ever. Especially since they didn't just have one lifetime together to draw upon. Their memories of being Eleni and Elaine fully restored only added to the depth of their mutual adoration. Those memories also reinforced the somewhat uncomfortable reality that rocky patches like they'd just gone through were not uncommon. That was amply obvious just by Ruby's experience during this life, but some of the fights they'd had in their previous one made most of their recent chasm seem tame in comparison. That was just what they were. Compatible in every way, but also equally as combustible.

Beyond mending her immediate family, Ruby also cherished deepening the ties with her Olympian relatives. Zeus and Diana came over as often as they could, which included a number of family dinners. Though at first Regina merely tolerated their frequent visitations, she managed to slowly let go of her grudge enough to get to know them as individuals. Ruby was glad of it. She'd hated the tension that permeated Regina's every pore whenever she and Diana were in a room together. It made her feel like she was doing something wrong wanting Diana in her life when she knew it wasn't. And Regina knew it, too, which is why she tried her hardest to put her best foot forward.

In the end, Ruby knew they would never be best friends. But they respected one another and were willing to get along for her sake. That was good enough. Ruby was no genius, but she knew when not to press her luck.

"Are you sure you have to go?" Ruby asked them, reluctance lacing every syllable.

She couldn't take her eyes off Diana, or the lifeless corpse held reverently in her grandfather's arms: Artemis, her mother – well, her first mother anyway – whose body would not decay until she'd made her final choice within the halls of her uncle Hades to either return to her corporeal form or move on to the paradise that awaited all gods and their children who tired of occupying fleshly bodies.

Three months gone by since she got all of her memories back and it was still out of this world, quite literally, for her to think that her current life was in fact a second incarnation. It was even more far out that in her first go around in the flesh she'd been born to a literal Olympian goddess. And not just any goddess but the daughter of Zeus, the King of the Gods, which made her royalty on a whole other level than by the association of being married to a former Queen. Weirdly enough, she and Regina now occupied positions and held titles that no mortal ever could. Which reminded her that she was no longer mortal. Her personality may still be mostly Ruby Lucas, but the combination of touching the Lunar Stone back in the Enchanted Forest and whatever happened to her during the final confrontation with Belmordan had reactivated her latent Olympian DNA. She was, in effect, now herself a goddess – another development she was having trouble wrapping her brain around.

That she'd loved Regina when she was Eleni was the only part of that series of stunning revelations she had zero problems accepting. No matter how many lives she lived, Regina was always going to be her woman. Always. They were, quite simply, made for one another. And that wasn't just Ruby's opinion. Zeus and Diana's explanation of how reincarnation was an integral function of True Love proved it. If, instead of only the two lives it took them, they'd had to live a thousand lifetimes before reaching their perfect state, they would always have found one another. Of course, Ruby would never be using that phrase when speaking of this topic to Regina. She quite liked sleeping in the ridiculously comfy bed she shared with her wife instead of downstairs on the couch that couldn't accommodate her long limbs or in one of the guest rooms so tantalizingly close to Regina that being banished there was worse than torture.
"I wish we could stay," Diana said, looking as reluctant to leave as Ruby was to have her go, "but there are duties we must attend to back home."

"Yes, indeed," said Zeus, his booming voice filling the graveyard. They had gathered there so that the Olympians could retrieve Artemis' corpse from its temporary residence within Regina's mausoleum. "Our stay has been most productive, and enjoyable save for the unpleasant circumstances that prompted us to visit. I was already proud of you, Eleni, but now that I know you in person I can say in truth that I love you. I love all of my grandchildren, of course, but you are special to me, and to your aunt, as are your precious daughters. But however much I would prefer to remain and spend more time with you, we must confer Artemis to the Temple of Hestia on Mount Olympus with all due haste. She has already spent too long away. She cannot return to her body elsewhere. Forgive us, Eleni."

Ruby didn't bother to correct Zeus' choice of name by which to address her. She gave up on that after the tenth time she told him she went by Ruby now. Come to find out, when the God of Thunder made up his mind about something, he did not budge an inch. For anyone. Something she and Diana, who had stopped addressing Ruby as Eleni the first time she was asked to, often commiserated about. Especially whenever Zeus launched into a critical diatribe regarding Earth's modernized way of life and soulless culture. Diana had adapted to Storybrooke with ease so that within a day she had given up her Olympian style for modern dresses or jeans and dress shirts. Not Zeus, though. For him every day was Toga Day.

"There's nothing to forgive," she said, glancing between her new relatives. "I knew this day was coming. I'm just not ready to let go. But I wasn't ready to let go of Granny either."

"Such is life, I'm afraid," Diana reached for Ruby's hands and held them between their bodies. "Just remember, this is not goodbye. Father will have to stay in Olympus for the foreseeable future, but I will return soon. And do not forget, the way is open now for you to visit any time you wish."

That had been a nice bonus to her discovery that she was now more Olympian than human. Apparently, in the right state of mind and with enough concentration, she could peel away the fabric of reality between the mortal realms and that of the eternal world of Olympus which lies at the heart of their cosmic system that the ancient and noble Asgardians had dubbed Yggdrasil. It was some trippy shit that Ruby couldn't quite fathom, not to mention actually make actionable sense of.

"I just have to figure out how to use all this crazy ass magic suddenly coursing through my body," she said ruefully. She had yet to get a handle on the fact that she was a goddess, not to mention the ocean of energies her transition had unlocked.

Diana chuckled, her eyes flitting over to Regina. "Thankfully you have a spouse with expertise in the subject."

"As I've told her over and over during our lessons," Regina said, lips turned up teasingly. "But you know Ruby. Stubborn and impatient. Emma was a better student, and that's saying something."

Ruby huffed in annoyance, not at all appreciative of Regina's needling, even if it was accurate. She really was hopeless with magic.

"Not nice," she said, folding her arms over her chest. "This is a stressful day for me. Aren't you supposed to be playing the supportive wife right now and not the mean teacher who likes to mercilessly pick on her student?"

Regina rolled her eyes so hard that Ruby was surprised they didn't get stuck that way. "You're doing great, sweetheart! That's okay, your hair is supposed to catch fire whenever you summon a fireball."
"Just keep at it. Maybe one day Pongo will forgive you for turning him into a sphynx. There. Was that better?"

"No!" Ruby grumped. "God, you're an ass."

"And you're such a bitch." Regina's grin took the edge off the slight.

"Yeah, but I'm your bitch," Ruby said, grinning up until what she said registered. At which point she did her best impression of exasperated Picard. "Wow. I walked right into that one."

Regina laughed at her. "Head first, dear. But don't worry, I love you in spite of your chronic foot-in-mouth disease."

"Gee thanks." Putting on an exaggerated pout, she peered at Zeus and Diana for help. "Guys, are you sure you wanna leave me alone to this abuse?"

"It's not abuse if you enjoy it," said Diana, totally deadpan. "I believe they have another term for that sort of predilection here..."

"Hah!" Regina barked. "I knew there was a reason I liked you, Diana." To rub it in, she held up her hand for a high five that Diana surprisingly returned.

"What the hell!" Ruby exclaimed, staring at her aunt as if wounded by the betrayal. "This is so not fair. You're supposed to be on my side."

"I am. Which is why I'm on Regina's side. She's the only one I trust to take care of you."

The response took a great deal of wind out of Ruby's offended sails. She softened measurably, but still maintained a slightly put out expression. It was the first time Diana and Regina had ganged up on her, after all. Somehow she knew it wouldn't be the last, either.

"Here, here," Zeus added. "I could have chosen none better than Elaine to walk through life by my granddaughter's side. Do try not to take her for granted, little one."

"Three on one now?" Ruby said, scowling petulantly. "Really? Okay, if it's gonna be that way, I'm kinda glad you guys are leaving."

Chuckling indulgently, Diana patted Ruby's cheek as if she were a child, which only made her sulk more. "No you're not. Don't pout, now. I want to see that gorgeous smile at least one more time before I leave." Unable to resist the goddess' tender expectation for longer than five or so seconds, Ruby allowed her lips turn up. The toothy smile Diana responded with prompted a much more genuine one from Ruby. "There it is," the statuesque Olympian said when Ruby finally gave in. "I know you're still in mourning, but promise to keep doing that as much as you can. Your smile is a gift to the world that shouldn't be hidden away."

It was one of the nicest things anybody had ever said to her. Except for Regina, who could be incredibly poetic when she wanted to be. The problem was she rarely wanted to be when other people were around. Ruby wasn't going to complain, though. She felt special knowing Regina saved such sentimentality for her alone.

"I'm gonna have a lot bad days," she said, not wanting to lie. Her easy going, fun loving attitude had taken a pummeling and had yet to fully recover. "I promise I'll try, though."

"That's all I ask." Diana gave Ruby's hand a squeeze before releasing it and turning to Regina. "Before I leave, I wanted to thank you for indulging me so much. I know it's been an imposition for
you to allow me so much unfettered access to Ruby."

"It's not been easy," Regina said. "But I did it for her."

"Which is I know you'll take good care of her. And my precious nieces."

Regina nodded firmly, a confirmation as well as a solemn vow. "Damn straight I will. I should be the one thanking you, though. Having you here has been good for Ruby. Both of you. Family is everything to her, as it is to me, and that's what we all are now. So don't be strangers. Nuestra casa es su casa."

The gesture was so unbelievably sweet that Ruby broke free from Diana to give her wife a bear hug and a resounding kiss upon her cheek. Regina batted her zealous attention away halfheartedly.

"You have my word," Zeus said after they parted, amused by their interaction. "We will endeavor to visit as soon as we can. As Diana said, I will need to remain in Olympus for some time. But perhaps some of Eleni's other aunts and uncles can accompany her when she returns as compensation for my prolonged absence."

Ruby gasped with glee. Getting to know her Olympian relatives had been a trip, but she'd gone bananas over the stories they had told her about the other gods and goddesses that now occupied her rapidly expanded family tree. She was chomping at the bit to meet all of her aunts and uncles, including the notorious troublemakers.

"That would be amazing!" she gushed. "Bring them all, I say! I'd love to meet the whole family."

Eyes bulging, Regina held her hands up in objection. "Whoa now. Not so fast. I'm happy to host a few at a time, but the house will only hold so many. Hell, if half of what the mythologies state are true, Storybrooke will only hold so many."

Diana laughed when Ruby pouted at having her plans to host a house full of Olympians dashed. "Regina isn't wrong, little one," she said. "It would be best to introduce you slowly. As you've heard from the tales Father and I have told, my siblings can be a rowdy bunch when on their best behavior."

"We're raising two hellions right now," Ruby replied, thinking of a few times the girls almost brought the house down with their antics. "Surely to God we can handle some mischievous and/or misanthropic gods and goddesses."

But then she thought of all the trouble the girls could rope their aunts and uncles that just so happened to be stupidly powerful gods into. Gods like Ares and Mars whose squabbles of over who had the greater martial prowess leveled entire mountain ranges. Or Apollo, one of a set of triplets with Diana and Artemis, who once on a dare instructed his Muses to inspire mortals to worship a malformed rock he dubbed Prosopilithio – or loosely translated, Stupid Face.

"Maybe you're right, though," she added, wincing at the endless, terrifying possibilities. "A few at time would probably be better."

"Praise the lord," Regina muttered loud enough that Ruby heard and cut narrowed eyes over at her. "I mean, of course, thank you, darling."

"Sure you do," Ruby said, drawing out the syllables. Zeus chuckled again, his mirth rattling the earth, and then turned his face toward the sky. Ruby was suddenly reminded of the reason for their gathering. She had delayed it long enough. Time to rip off the band aid. "Anyway...I've made you guys wait long enough. I know you have to get back, but...can I have hugs before you go?"
Zeus kindly refrained due to the load he was carrying, though he accepted a kiss on his bearded cheek and reiterated how proud he was of her. Diana, however, did not deny the request.

"Take care of yourself, little one. I love you so much," she said during their lengthy embrace, and by the time Ruby pulled away from her aunt she could feel the sadness welling up within her chest.

After that, she took a minute to trace out Artemis' features with her hand. Her mother. It was wild enough that Aretmis had been Eleni's birth mother, but the fact that she and Diana could pass as identical to Anita was almost too far out to grasp. Then again, that was just the way fate worked. Inexplicable. Incomprehensible. Amazing yet terrifying. Tragic but wonderful. For a while it had looked like Artemis would fail her even worse than Anita had, but at the last moment she redeemed herself in a way Ruby was sure Anita never could have. She was imperfect and had committed terrible atrocities with Belmordan, but from Ruby's perspective, her sacrifice had proven there was still goodness left inside. A goodness that made her want to be a daughter to Artemis if and when she decided to return to the land of the living.

Placing a tender kiss to Artemis' bronzed brow, Ruby blinked back rapidly rising tears. "Goodbye, Mama," she whispered, and to hold herself together she stepped away, she bit her lower lip hard and thrust her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. "So...I guess this is it," she said a little bitterly once she was back at Regina's side.

Diana gave her an encouraging smile that managed to dampen the grievous bite of disappointment. "Only until we meet again."

"See you both soon," Regina said with a wave that Ruby weakly imitated, unable to speak any more for the lump in her throat. She'd said goodbye way too much lately and was sick of it.

And then Zeus smiled, and a spark of lightning flashed across the sky as the scar over his eye began to gleam a brilliant white. A resounding clap of thunder shook the ground. Still holding on tightly to his fallen child, he lifted his head toward the sky. The second Diana laid an elegant hand upon his shoulder, they were engulfed in a beam of white light so bright that Ruby had to cover her eyes to keep from being blinded. When the light faded, they were gone. All that remained to prove they were ever there were little puffs of smoke rising up from the charred circle of earth upon which they'd stood.

"Well," Regina said after allowing Ruby a moment of silence to process their departure, "let's get back home. Those hellions you were talking about a minute ago are going to be climbing the walls if they don't get dinner soon."

In spite of her sadness, Ruby perked up immediately at the mention of food. "Oh, yeah? Whatcha making? 'Cause I have to say, our little impromptu..." she cleared her throat suggestively and winked very deliberately, "workout earlier burned through lunch."

Regina's full, hearty laugh lifted Ruby's heart right out of the mire of her new family's departure, and carried her all the way home.

THE END
Well, this is it. 350k words later. It's been an experience, to say the least. I hope everyone enjoyed the ride, bumpy and long as it was.

Unlike most of my stories, there will not be an epilogue. I had initially planned a much more extended ending, but I feel like this is a good place to stop. Plus after over three years, I am just ready to move on. That said, there is more material from where I'd written some of the end scenes I cut out I may post as a sort of appendices a la Lord of the Rings. The future will tell, I suppose, though I have my doubts. For whatever reason, be it the death of the fandom or my writing being terrible, this story didn't really seem to get any traction. Never say never though.

My next project has been rough drafted already. I anticipate it to be the last novel length Red Queen story I will ever write, so I'm kinda sad about that. I'll probably start posting it sometime in late October as a sort of shout-out to the now defunct Red Queen Week, the event that got me hooked on this pairing in the first place. Until then, be good y'all.

Lastly, if it's not too boastful, this chapter pushed me over 1 million words published. I'm actually pretty proud of myself. ;)

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