She Promised Me Love

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Summary

Time has passed and Snow White and Prince Charming are back in the Enchanted Forest. Emma, Henry, and Regina visit for a birthday and meet a man Regina was supposed to love - or was she? (No copyright infringement intended.)
Fairy Tale Land

Chapter Notes

I revised this story and reuploaded it. I hope it's gotten better, is easier to read. And I hope you like it.

„Explain to me why I'm here again,“ Regina asked of Emma as they were walking toward the throne room of Snow and Charming’s castle. The room seemed altogether bigger to her than when she last stood in it, threatening to curse everyone, and maybe it was. The castle had been rebuilt, everything seemed bigger somehow.

“It’s Killian’s birthday,” Emma answered, smiling bemusedly.

“I still don’t understand why they had to name their son after the pirate. Your parents are the most sentimental people, no wonder everyone is taking advantage of them.”

“He saved David’s life, Regina. I think that’s a good reason to get a little sentimental.”

Henry turned toward them, grinning. He had grown a lot this last year and was now about as tall as Emma. She was now nodding at him and he started running through the dome-like room, then glided on his sneakers.

Emma laughed.

“Don’t encourage him,” Regina scolded. “And while we’re on the topic of saving lives, I have saved all your lives but no one ever named anything after me. I really don’t know why I’m here.”

“Because you don’t trust me to take Henry to the Enchanted Forest alone, like I would kidnap him and stay here with my family,” Emma reminded Regina.

Henry had meanwhile reached Snow and was hugging her, positively dwarfing her.

“It’s not you I don’t trust, Emma, it’s your parents. Every time you’re here your mother gets this glint in her eyes… she still dreams of dressing you up as her little princess and sell you to the next ridiculously handsome and incredibly dumb prince that comes along.”

"Did you just say you trust me?"

"More than your parents, less than any common pedestrian on a New York subway,” Regina said. She looked at Emma, grinning mischievously.

“Nice,” Emma complimented her as they reached Snow and Henry.

“Emma, finally,” Snow hugged Emma tightly.

“Hello Snow.” They had agreed that Emma would call her mother this after her parents had moved back to the Enchanted Forest and she had stayed in Storybrooke. It was easier to say than ‘mom’ to someone who was about the same age and lived in a different imaginative realm.
When they parted, Snow looked at Regina for a moment. “Regina,”

“Your Highness,” Regina gave back, executing a perfect curtsy.

Emma hid a grin behind her hand. Snow merely took a deep breath, ignoring Regina’s sarcasm.

“Where’s David?” Emma asked.

“He’s in the garden with Killian. They’re playing with swords, you know how your father is,” Snow said fondly.

“Can I go join them?” Henry asked.

“Sure, kid.”

“But no fighting with real swords,” Regina warned. They all looked at her. “Like Henry couldn’t talk David into it.”

“Go, kid.”

Henry dashed through the double doors into the castle’s wide-spread gardens.

“Will he find them okay?” Emma asked Snow.

“I think so, maybe I should go after him?” Snow looked at the alternative of staying with Emma and Regina and her lack of enthusiasm showed plainly on her face.

Regina was no more willing to spend time with Snow. She knew that Snow would have liked to spend time with Emma, they saw each other very little, but Regina didn't want to wander the castle alone. She didn't want to feel even more as an outsider than she knew she was.

“We'll be all right,” Emma told Snow.

“I brought books,” Regina said. She gave Snow her fake smile.

Emma rolled her eyes at her.

“I'll see you both later,” Snow excused herself and followed Henry outside.

Emma turned toward Regina. “Is this how it’s going to be between you two this whole week?”

“It’s… I can’t help myself with your mother, not in this realm. There are memories here of walking into a room of cowardly peasants, everybody afraid and shaking in their badly manufactured boots. The kind of power I had. And now I’m a visitor. Do you know how aggravating that is? To reside in your mother’s castle, her being queen? I was queen, I was the Evil Queen,” she tried to explain, straightening her shoulders, lifting her chin.

Emma smiled at her.

“You’re not taking me seriously,” Regina accused.

“I remember that woman. She was the mayor of Storybrooke when I first arrived and she scared the shit out of me.”

“I did?”
Emma nodded. “She was pretty amazing, but…”

“But?”

"But she had nothing on the woman who saved all our lives,” Emma answered, smiling proudly.

Regina couldn't help but smile, too. She did that far more frequently than she used to, especially around 'the savior.' And that was the thing – besides having Henry be proud of her and loving her – she liked better about her current self than the Evil Queen she'd been.

They were interrupted by footsteps that echoed in the great room and they both turned. A man Regina didn't recognize came toward them. He was wearing simple clothes, no armor or helmet, yet his figure and stance told her that he was a warrior. The bow he had slung over his shoulder merely confirmed the first impression.

"Excuse me, m'ladies. I am looking for King James," he said as he stepped closer.

"And who might you be?" Emma asked taking advantage of her status as princess without letting the stranger know who she was.

"My name is Robin Hood," he said and bowed just as Emma reached out her hand. He straightened quickly. "You must be Emma." He seemed glad to meet her.

"You've heard of me. Well, I guess that's only fair considering that I've heard of you too. Or read of you, rather."

"You shouldn't believe everything you read," he said, not understanding that she had read about him in a book and not on a wanted poster.

"I don't." She grabbed his forearm in greeting. "And this is Regina."

He looked at Regina, then he looked some more.

Regina nodded her head at him as he offered his hand like before, but it merely hung in the air. Regina wasn't the kind of woman Emma was, she wasn't a warrior, and wouldn't stoop to grabbing arms. As she looked down at the man's arm, she noticed the tattoo on it. Her smile faded, her pulse started racing. "That... is an interesting tattoo, Mr. Hood."

"Thank you. It's the coat of arms of King Richard," he explained.

Regina looked up at Robin, looked into his eyes, tried to see whether he was indeed the man she had been supposed to love in what now seemed another lifetime. "I suspect many of his subjects wear the same tattoo?"

"Not one like this. My wife drew it," he answered proudly.

"Your wife. You are married?" She noticed a slight note of relief in her voice.

Emma turned toward her, an eyebrow arched.

"She died. I'm a widower," Robin answered, his voice serious but not grief-stricken as if he had only just lost her.

"That is unfortunate." Regina turned away. She pretended to have seen something outside and went to the double-doors, looking out. She still felt Robin's gaze on her back and could only imagine Emma's confusion.
"You were looking for my father," Emma said after a moment.

"Yes. Is he around?"

"He's in the gardens. I guess you could go find him or stay here and wait. It's almost lunch time, so they'll probably come in soon. Our son never misses a meal," Emma added.

Regina could detect the smile in her voice, but for once, didn't feel inclined to smile herself. She felt too distressed by having met Robin Hood.

"I think I'm gonna see if I can find them. Thank you, Emma," Robin said. As he walked by Regina on his way out, he made a bow. "Miss Regina." He smiled at her.

"Mr. Hood," she answered, deliberately not smiling back. She watched him go and then felt Emma's presence in her back. She stood directly behind her, close enough that Regina could feel her warmth, even without them touching.

"Do you know him?" Emma asked.

"No, we have never met."

"You're acting weird, what is... oh, my God! Did you kill his wife?"

Regina turned. "No! I did not kill his... at least, I don't think I did. And Mr. Hood doesn't strike me as somebody who wouldn't know his wife's murderer if she stood before him."

"It could be a trick," Emma said.

"I don't think so."

"There's something you're not telling me," Emma accused.

Regina lifted a bemused eyebrow and smirked. "And since when do we tell each other all our secrets, savior?"

Emma took a step back, blushing slightly. "We don't." She turned away from Regina and pushed her hands into the pockets of her jeans.

Regina watched her, sorry about what she'd said. But it wasn't like they were even friends. They raised Henry, most of the time not even together, it seemed. Regina said one thing, Emma said another. If Henry didn't get permission from one of them to do something he would go to the other, most likely Emma because she was more likely to give in. It was a struggle most of the time. But it wasn't only a struggle. They spent holidays together, usually quite harmoniously. Sometimes Emma came over for dinner because she couldn't cook and they would eat together. Henry would take care of the dishes and they would retire into the living room, talking. They weren't friends, they just got along somehow, sometimes.

"I think I will take a look at my room now, make sure it befits my status as former queen," Regina said.

"You do that. I think I'll take a walk." Emma stepped through the double doors outside.
Emma reentered her parent's castle through the massive front doors. She had been walking around the grounds for some time. It had been impressive and she had let the impression divert her thoughts away from her conversation with Regina deliberately. Because, really, there was nothing to think about there. Regina was in one of her moods, she had made what Emma felt was an insensitive remark; it wasn't that uncommon.

Emma stopped in her tracks when she noticed someone standing in the wide arch of the entrance hall.

"Mulan?" she exclaimed, surprised. Emma started walking toward her. Mulan turned, a small smile on her face.

"Emma," she said, her voice already conveying the respect she had for her.

Emma simply hugged her to convey her own emotions, she was smiling at Mulan.

"What are you doing here? Mom told me you were working for Aurora and Phillip, some kind of bodyguard?"

"I am the chief of the king and queen's personal guard, yes," Mulan answered proudly.

"That's great. I mean that you and Aurora and Phillip are still kind of hanging out. Aurora must be glad to have such a fierce protector and friend, of course."

Mulan merely nodded quietly.

"So, why are you here? Did you come to see Snow?"

"I came with Robin Hood, on official business for King Phillip. Robin has found out about a group of marauders. We don't know what they're up to yet, but Robin tries to get the surrounding kingdoms to put together a small army to arrest or possibly fight these people. They seem dangerous, very sneaky, too. Phillip sent me and twenty men to help, he hopes your father will do the same."

Emma nodded to this. "I met Hood earlier, he seems... capable."

"He is a great warrior."

Emma knew that this was about the highest compliment Mulan could give and felt that Robin Hood was a force to be reckoned with - not that she didn't already know that from the original tale. Of course, tale and the human being who inspired it weren't always necessarily the same thing. Regina wasn't anymore.

"He mentioned that he's a widower. Do you know how his wife died?" Emma couldn't help asking. While Regina didn't remember killing the woman, Marian might have been among her victims without her knowing it. They had both been aware of that possibility. Emma hoped that this wasn't the case, that there wasn't a blood trail that would follow Regina everywhere in the Enchanted Forest.

"He mentioned Marian? He rarely does that. She died in childbirth, about six years ago."

"The child?"
"Oh, Roland is doing well. He's very much one of the Merry Men." Mulan smiled

Emma answered it in kind. She was relieved, in truth, more than she would have admitted to. She went back to their earlier conversation. "Does Hood know where those thugs hide out?"

"Well, you know how dense the woods are around here, but Robin believes they're hiding out in several camps in at least four kingdoms. One's Phillip's, one's your parents', the third one is reigned by Eric, and the fourth... it was the Evil Queen's," Mulan said with a meaningful look.

"Shouldn't that be part of this kingdom now? I mean, it was Leopold's, right, my grandfather's?"

Mulan nodded. "Yes, but... well, after the curse broke there was fighting everywhere and the abandoned kingdoms were raided. But the kingdom of the Evil Queen, people pretty much burned it to the ground, salted the earth. They knew that it was all her doing, that it was her curse that brought unrest and anarchy to the kingdoms. There's not much left of it, and nothing to do with it."

"I never knew," Emma said thoughtfully.

"It has become a ghostly kingdom, nothing grows, only very few people live there and certainly no honorable ones."

"And my parents do nothing about it, that doesn't sound like them," Emma argued.

"They tried at first but they met with resistance from their own people. They believe that the land has absorbed the queen's evil. They don't want anything to do with it, they don't want their king and queen to have anything to do with it. Somehow the people have made their own curse. I hear, trolls live there, some ogres and now this gang of thugs, Robin heard about. Their camps are very difficult to detect. We could use your skills to find them, Emma."

"Well, I'm here for my brother's birthday. I don't think my parents would be too thrilled if I went searching for some marauders in the wilderness."

"It's almost a week until the prince's ball. Maybe you can help for a couple of days. Robin would appreciate it and so would I. We haven't seen each other for awhile, I would like to catch up."

"I'll think about it," Emma promised. "Are you staying for dinner? I would like for you to meet Henry."

"I think we will and I would be honored to meet your son. I've heard a rumor that... that the Evil Queen..."

"Regina, Mulan, her name is Regina, and she's not evil anymore," Emma interrupted.

"So it's true, she's here?"

"Yes, she is. You're gonna meet her if you stay for dinner."

Mulan frowned.

"I know, but believe me, she's nothing like her mother. Not anymore."

"Cora almost killed Aurora," Mulan said darkly.

"I know and I'm not saying that the Evil Queen wouldn't have. She certainly killed enough people, but she's different now. She changed."
"I'm not sure that I believe in redemption such as this, Emma. She was never punished for what she's done here. She just gets to live far away with you and your son--"

"We're not living together," Emma interrupted quickly.

Mulan looked at her questioningly. "You don't live in the same kingdom? Snow told me that you did."

"Well, we live in the same town but... well, we share custody of Henry and we see each other pretty much every day. But we're not living together."

"It seems an awfully mild form of exile if one gets to keep one's family."

"That was the deal Regina made with my parents."

"And she gets to visit here, too," Mulan argued further.

Emma wasn't sure what to say to this. In a way, she understood Mulan's argument, but she knew more about Regina's story. She knew about the things Regina had lost, the things and people who had made her into who everybody ultimately called 'the Evil Queen.'

"She's not evil anymore. She deserves to live her life, with Henry and... well, she deserves it, believe me."

Mulan nodded thoughtfully. "I take your word for it."

"Let's see if we can find Snow and the kids. They should be around here somewhere. You can meet Henry," Emma changed the subject and led Mulan away into the recesses of the castle.
Dinner was a big affair. Emma and Henry visiting brought many of their friends who had formerly lived in Storybrooke to the grand dining room of the king and queen's castle. And everybody was talking over each other. Regina's presence wasn't commented on, she merely received furtive glances, especially from the dwarfs. Regina ignored everybody but Henry and Emma.

Emma noticed that Mulan watched the mayor of Storybrooke quite openly. She couldn't read any hostility in her eyes, she seemed curious. But it wasn't Mulan's interest that worried Emma – it was Robin Hood's. His eyes strayed from David – with whom he was having a conversation – to Regina quite frequently. His gaze wasn't curious, though, nor furtive or hostile, he admired her beauty. That was all. But it made Emma uncomfortable.

"Is everything all right, ma?" Henry asked into her thoughts.

"Hm?"

"I thought you would be glad to see everyone."

"I am. It's a little bit much, don't you think? The food, all these people..."

"It's a little like it was back at Granny's." Henry smiled.

Emma smiled, too, though to her this seemed as far away from Granny's as it could get: everybody was wearing their Sunday-best, even Mulan had shed her armor and was wearing a dark blue shirt with black leather pants. The setting of one giant round table, the way everybody could look at everybody else this way - it wasn't like Granny's at all.

"What do you think of Robin Hood, ma?"

"Oh, he's... a little different from how I imagined him from his stories," she whispered close to his ear.

He grinned back at her. "I think he's even better. He showed me how to shoot with bow and arrow, he's really good. Better than Snow, even." He seemed impressed.

Emma nodded. 'A force to be reckoned with,' she remembered her earlier thoughts about him, though she seemed even more wary of his impact than before.

And as she frowned across the table at the man, he seemed to feel her gaze. He turned, searching for the source of the unfriendly gaze and found her. His eyes widened in surprise, but then he simply smiled. She smiled back. He turned to David... James, as he was called here, and said something to him. Her father looked at her and smiled. It seemed Robin had paid her a compliment. Emma smiled at her father and he lifted his cup to her. It was all perfectly normal and civilized but Emma couldn't shake the restlessness she felt.

After dinner, most of the guests lingered for awhile to share a few words with Emma – some actually addressed her as 'Princess Emma,' but she made it quite clear that she was still more sheriff Swan than she was any kind of princess. Only Regina retired early. She hugged her son then sought Emma's gaze. She smiled, nodded and then turned. She walked like a ghost through the mingling guests. Nobody really acknowledged her presence, but they shied away from her, as if she was emanating evil – or cold.
'She's like the land she left behind,' Emma thought and it made her shiver. She looked over to Henry but he didn't seem to have noticed. He was talking to Happy and Doc, and next to him they seemed more like dwarfs than ever.

Emma turned back at Snow and Grumpy who were talking about the thugs Robin Hood had set out to hunt or arrest or whatever. This seemed to be the most imminent topic of conversation. Her eyes strayed from her mother who was standing next to her and started looking for their guest. Robin stood with her father a little ways off, David looked quite concerned.

Emma walked over.

"... if they hide in the dark kingdom? I'm not sure if it's worth the trouble, actually," David was saying.

"I understand that, but do you want to wait until they surrounded themselves with even more scum? It's not like there's a shortage of those, there are still quite a number of kingdoms where the poor are treated badly. My own, I'm ashamed to say, since Richard is still not back and John is simply incompetent. They could build an army, James," Robin warned.

"An army without weapons?"

"They already have weapons. Wherever they get them, they'll be able to get more, believe me. Those people are dedicated."

"You seem to know an awful lot about people you have allegedly never met," Emma interrupted whatever point her father was going to argue.

Robin turned toward her, his expression serious.

"Are you accusing me of something, Princess Emma? I thought you didn't believe everything you read."

"I'm no princess, I'm just Emma," she corrected him, though she could see her father stiffen slightly. She may not assume any princess-y attitudes or responsibility but fact was, she was a princess and her parents would have liked for her to accept the fact, at least. "And I don't believe everything I read. I understand that you're quite the hero. Take from the rich, give to the poor and all that. Still, you and your merry men live in the forest, you are still fugitives in your own count... kingdom. Who is to know whether or not you're in kahootz with those other outlaws. Or maybe you just want them gone because they impede on your territory."

"Emma," her father scolded.

Robin merely smiled at her. "You make an interesting point, Emma. The woods are deep and wide around here, there are several bands of brothers – as I like to call them, although many also include women and children. Not all of them are outlaws, many are simply too poor to live in a town. This is how I first heard about this group of men – they seemed to be all men. They live in peace with their neighbors but every now and then they set out to raid a village or small town. They're ruthless; they beat the men, they rape the women, they steal everything they could possibly need. But since they are alternating between three different kingdoms their deeds have been too wide-spread to become alarming to the kings of these kingdoms. But the woods, they're abuzz with what these people are doing. I have sent some of my men to other camps and they all bring back stories about these men. They're no bedtime stories, Emma."

Emma had listened intently to what Robin had to say. He seemed genuinely concerned. He was
indeed a hero and this irked Emma. For some reason, she felt that she would have liked to dislike him, and she also felt how ridiculous that was.

She nodded. "I didn't mean to offend you, Mr. Hood."

"No offense taken. People are usually not quite as reserved when they accuse me of wrongdoings. I've been called a thief, a murderer, a traitor. Thug sounds almost like a complement, compared." He smiled.

She tried to answer it in kind, but felt that she couldn't. "Are you going to send some men with him?"

"I don't think there is much of a choice. I trust Robin's judgment and Phillip's, of course. Eric will probably do the same. Will twenty men be sufficient, Robin?"

"I think with the ones that Phillip sends and a possible equal number from Eric, it should be. With Mulan and my men, we'll be close to a hundred," he answered confidently.

Then he turned toward Emma once again. "Mulan tells me that she already asked you to join us. She says you're good at finding people. If this is true then I would like for you to come with us. If you can be spared, that is?" He looked at David questioningly.

"Well, she's mostly here for Killian's birthday, but... well, we wanted to have her around a little..."

"Can I talk to you for a minute, Da...d?" She already took him by the elbow and smiled at Robin in apology. He turned away so as not to eavesdrop on what Emma wanted to talk about to her father.

"I think it would be good if I joined them, David," she now used her usual address for him.

"Emma, these are capable men. There's no need for you--"

"I know that. I just... I know you and Snow want me to get more involved, but I don't feel like a princess. I'm a sheriff in a small town in Maine. And I've met most of our old friends tonight. I could be of use," she argued.

"Snow was so looking forward to seeing you, Emma."

"And I'll be back in a few days and we'll be able to spend time together, I promise."

"Are you really just wanting to help or is it because you don't trust Robin?" David asked in a quieter voice.

"I don't know what it is about him. I just have a bad feeling about this. Do you trust me?"

David looked back at her quizzically. "You're my daughter, Emma. Of course, I trust you."

"Then trust me on this and... explain it to Snow?" she pleaded.

David rolled his eyes. "You're a sheriff, the Savior and the mother of a teenager but you're too chicken to face your mother? Really?"

Emma smiled sheepishly. "She's not just any mother."

"Yeah, you're right there. She's the mother who'll have my hide if anything happens to you. You know that, right?"
"I'll be careful. And, you know, if my sword-swinging skills should desert me, there's always magic – as a last resort," she promised.

Using magic was still a sensitive topic with her parents. They didn't like her to use it, because of Gold's saying that all magic came at a price. And Emma was reluctant to use it as well, but she saw its usefulness too. There was also the tingle of it, the power. This was something her parents would never understand. And, of course, there was the fact that magic was something she didn't share with them, but with their worst frenemy, Regina.

David nodded solemnly. "A very last resort."

Emma nodded.

"All right, I'm going to talk to Snow later. Why don't you tell Robin? I think I'll have to mingle a little." He smiled at Emma then nodded at Robin who had turned toward them to see how their conversation was going.

When David had left her company, Robin joined Emma.

"I'll accompany you," she said.

"I hoped you would."

"Though I would have to be back here in time for the ball."

"The search should be the most time-consum ing part and I'm grateful for all the help we can get. I don't expect many problems with the apprehension. From what I hear, there should only be around thirty men, fifty tops."

"I'm glad to help," she said and once again tried to smile at the tall man. It still wouldn't come, though. She felt stupid.

"Earlier at the table," she found herself saying. "I looked at you and... well, it must have seemed unfriendly. It wasn't meant that way, I was in thought."

He seemed surprised that she'd even mention it, and in truth, so was she.

"I don't take offense easily. Usually, I'm the one doing the offending." He smiled good-naturedly.

Emma realized that one of the things that irked her about him were his good looks. He was really very handsome, even with the beard he was wearing. Why that would annoy her, she didn't quite know, but that didn't make the observation untrue.

"That's something we got in common," Emma said. "Well, it's been a long day. I think I'm gonna retire."

"Mulan and I are going to leave early to meet with King Eric. We'll be back here by noon to instruct the troops, join with my men and organize the supplies. If you were ready then."

"I will be," Emma assured him. She nodded at Robin and then took her leave without another word.

She shared a few words with Snow before she left, only now noticing that Henry had also already left the festivities.

As Emma climbed the wide castle stairs, a lone candle in her hand, her thoughts turned unexpectedly to Regina. She once again saw her leave, her chin high, her shoulders set. Yet a lone figure, an
outsider. The image seemed to haunt Emma, maybe because she didn't really see Regina that way. Sure, even in Storybrooke a lot of people maintained their distance from the mayor, but it wasn't like it was here.

People didn't fear her in Storybrooke, they respected her. They respected her for doing what was good for the town, for what she did to make their everyday life easier. They also respected her boundaries, the way she sometimes acted aloof. And they respected her as Henry's mother.

And so did Emma.

Only, Emma knew Regina a little better than everybody else seemed to want to. They talked about Henry a lot, but they didn't just talk about Henry. They talked about their own days, they talked about their respective jobs which sometimes overlapped. They talked about music and films, about food which they both were very fond of – Emma more from the side of an eater than a cook.

Emma smiled. Regina liked to tease her about the fact that she couldn't cook. And somehow Emma always thought that Regina enjoyed cooking for her because she enjoyed food so much. That was probably why Regina's comment this morning – about them not being close enough to share secrets – had stung. Because it wasn't true. They always tried to keep their cool, to make their meetings about Henry but usually, after half an hour, they felt comfortable with each other. And they started talking about all kinds of things.

This was what friends did, wasn't it? Emma certainly was no expert. Even with most of the people in Storybrooke she kept it friendly but distanced. But not with Regina. They were both loners, loners who shared a son. And they both felt left out and uncomfortable in Snow White and King James' castle.

Emma had reached the landing where her room was. It was down the left hall and it led her by Henry's room. But even before that, it led her by Regina's room and as she reached the door, seeing light falling into the hall from underneath her door, she thought of knocking. She thought of talking to Regina for a few minutes, wishing her a good night, perhaps. But what would Regina think of that?

Emma shook her head. Regina would probably not care for her sentimental notions, her childish need to connect with her. She had no use for sentimentalities... not many besides what she felt for Henry, everything surrounding him.

Emma looked over to the door that separated her own from Regina's. Henry's room. She smiled, and she sighed. Yes, Henry. Maybe he was really the only thing they shared and maybe that was a good thing too.
Breakfast with the Charmings. Regina wondered how she had gotten from cursing all of the Enchanted Forest because of them to sitting at their breakfast table. It was only the family – and her – this morning, and it felt strange. She could see that Snow and David felt uncomfortable, too, while Henry and Emma didn't seem to feel anything amiss. And why would they? They shared breakfast with Regina almost every morning, Emma always joining them when they sat at Granny's.

How very strange the concept of family was.

"David told me about your plan," Snow addressed Emma while cutting her son's pancakes into edible sizes.

"And you don't like it?" Emma seemed mildly amused.

"I thought you came here to spend time with us, and now you want to hunt rapists and probably murderers in the woods – of course, I don't like that," Snow told her daughter. Regina and Henry both looked up and at Emma.

"You're going with Robin Hood?" Henry asked, impressed.

"That's the plan."

"Can I come, too?" he then asked eagerly.

"Absolutely not," came from Regina.

"No, kid," from Emma at the same time.

"Of course not," from Snow.

They all looked at him intently.

"I'm almost 17," he argued.

"You just turned 16 and there is no way for you to join a group of... unwashed woodsmen to go after a dangerous band of even dirtier woodsmen. Finish your breakfast," Regina told him.

Henry folded his arms in front of his chest, pouting.

"Listen, kid. I will only help them find these thugs. It's not even interesting work, it's just running around in the woods, sleeping on the hard earth and have bugs crawl all over you."

"And fighting those ass..ah, thugs when you find them," Henry argued.

"There won't be any fighting for Emma. She's going to come home before the fighting starts. I talked to Robin about it, she will only help them find these guys. When they do, he's going to send her home. ASAP," David said and it was as much for Henry as for Emma to hear.

Emma smiled ironically at her father. "It's not like I was looking for this, David. Mulan asked me, then Robin did, too. I only want to help."

"You're on vacation, Emma. They shouldn't even have asked you," Snow said. She still didn't sound very happy with Emma's decision.
"I guess, they figured that as the princess of this kingdom I would want to help. You're always the ones telling me to fulfill my share of responsibilities as princess. Now I do and you don't like it?"

"This has nothing to do with princess' responsibilities. This is only you wanting a good old-fashioned adventure. I thought Neverland would have cured you of all that," Snow gave back.

"I'm not looking for adventure, Snow. I just want to help my kingdom. And I will be home before the ball, earlier depending on how long it takes to find them. I promise."

Snow sighed as she helped her younger child eat his breakfast.

Regina watched the interaction thoughtfully. Forbidding Henry to go with Emma had been a maternal reflex, but she wasn't sure why Emma would want to go on this mission. She didn't buy her reasoning for a minute, but why would she want to go if it was such tedious work? From what Regina had understood of the situation the night before, there were capable men hunting for the band of thugs. Why would Emma want to get involved in this? Did she really just want an adventure?

Regina didn't know but she was curious enough to find out.

Emma was in her room, packing a bag with some clothes, thinking about things she might need – a bar of soap was certainly at the top of that list.

She looked up when there was a knock at her door.

"Come in," she called out, expecting it to be Henry. He wasn't likely to give up so easily even when both his mothers put their feet down.

She was surprised to see Regina enter.

She had to hand it to the dark-haired woman, she surely knew how to wear a dress. While Emma insisted on wearing her usual clothes with an upgrade to dress pants and shirts when meeting visitors, Regina was garbed in the more traditional clothes of her home realm. As Emma understood it, they weren't really the kind of style she had preferred when she was the Evil Queen, but they still fit very nicely. She wore peach this morning, it complimented her darker skin and those amber eyes... Emma blinked, noticing just in time, as Regina turned after closing the door, that she was staring.

Regina surveyed the room.

"Now, this is what I call a princess-y chamber," she said.

"Oh, drop the act, Regina. It's not like Snow put you up in the dungeons, your room is only two doors down. It can't be that different," Emma said, smiling.

"It certainly isn't as grand as this. Maybe it was build as the maid's quarter?" Regina gave back, but smiled also.

Emma was about to counter something, but in that moment Regina's look became earnest, her posture changed from relaxed to... regal, was the best term for it.

"Is there something wrong?" Emma asked.
"You've decided to ride with Robin Hood. Were you going to tell me or is that a courtesy I haven't earned yet?"

"Well, I wanted to tell you last night, but I didn't want to disturb you. I figured you would be at breakfast so..."

Regina looked at her for a long moment, seemingly burning her eyes into Emma's skull to see if she was telling the truth.

Emma remembered how she had told Henry about her 'superpower.' While she could usually tell when someone was lying, she herself was bad at it and she wondered what Regina now saw. Because she hadn't lied, yet she hadn't told the entire truth, either.

"I have decided to accompany the search party as well," Regina informed her.

Emma literally took a step back in surprise. "You what?"

"I've decided to come, too," Regina repeated.

"Why?"

"Why not?"

"But..." What was she to argue? That Regina couldn't because it was too dangerous? If it was dangerous for Regina it was even more so for herself. her magical powers weren't nearly as advanced as Regina's. But she was supposed to look after Henry, maybe? Regina would give her a piece of feminism 101 if she tried that argument. And she certainly couldn't give her the truth, that she didn't want her to come because of... something that might not even be real.

"Have you told Henry?"

"Not yet and I don't suppose he will be thrilled, but he'll have to accept it," Regina answered.

"Just like that?"

"You don't want me to come?"

Emma hesitated. "It's not like that. I just... it didn't even cross my mind that you would want to."

"You mean because it would be much more comfortable staying in a place I'm not wanted, merely tolerated even by the servants? Did you think I would rather stay here with your mother, exchanging recipes, or telling her how she can keep her son from sucking his thumbs?"

Emma closed her eyes for a moment. She hadn't thought about this at all. That Regina would feel abandoned in a place where no one but Henry would have a friendly word for her. "I'm sorry, I didn't think about this."

"Why would you? It's not your problem," Regina said simply. And judging by her attitude she wasn't going to make it Emma's problem, either, she was simply doing what she thought necessary for everyone to survive this week.

"It's...," Emma wanted to argue something, but then didn't.

"I should go pack and tell Henry. Maybe you could tell your parents?"

"I will." She watched Regina walk to the door. "Regina," Emma called out to her just as she reached
for the doorknob.

Regina turned and looked at Emma expectantly.

"You said yesterday that we weren't friends. Did you mean that?"

It wasn't really what Emma had wanted to ask, she had wanted to ask Regina if she had told her all her reasons for coming with them. She had wanted to ask if Robin Hood had anything to do with her decision. But how could she? And why would she? It wasn't any of her business what might be going on between Regina and the 'King of Thieves.' And, really, they had only met the other day – as far as Emma knew.

"No, I didn't," Regina answered her question.

For a moment Emma was confused to what she was referring. Then she remembered her question and she smiled.

Regina answered it with a small one of her own before she left the room.
When Emma came down the stairs, everybody was already gathered in the hall. Regina stood a little to the side with Henry and Emma walked over to them.

“You can spend some time with David and Mary Margaret… and Killian,” Regina just told Henry.

“Ma,” Henry turned to Emma as she came closer. “If you all go, I wanna come, too.”

“I’m sorry, kid, but your mom and I have made a vow to protect you, always. And taking you with us on a potentially dangerous trip would be breaking that vow.” She tried to ruffle his hair.

He pulled his head back, annoyed. “And who’s going to protect you?”

“Well…” Emma was at a loss, she didn’t really feel like she needed a protector.

“I’m going to look after Emma, and she is going to look after me,” Regina helped her out.

Emma nodded quickly.

“You could be looking after me, too, while we’re away,” he argued weakly.

“I think I’m going to have my hands full with one dare devil, Henry,” Regina said, winking at him.

Henry couldn’t help but smile. He looked at Emma who rolled her eyes.

“I’m hardly a dare devil,” she complained.

“Well, I hope not. Recklessness is a sure way to get yourself killed in an endeavor like this, and others with you,” Robin supplied as he stepped closer. He had just told his son goodbye; Roland would stay at the castle with three of the Merry Men.

Henry looked worriedly at Emma and Regina.

“Thank you, Mr. Hood, that was very helpful,” Regina admonished the man sarcastically. “Henry, what I told you – Emma and I are going to look out for each other, nothing’s going to happen to us,” she repeated.

Henry nodded, but he didn’t smile anymore. He let himself get hugged by Emma, however.

Emma looked at Regina behind Henry’s back, remembering a time in Neverland when this topic had come up before. They could have died and they had agreed that the surviving parent would take care of Henry. This pact included Neal. Should they die, Snow White would inform Neal and he would take Henry back to New York. That was the deal.

“I heard that you’ll be joining us,” Robin said to Regina.

“I’ve decided to, yes,” Regina answered, giving the tall man her wide politician’s smile.

Emma always thought of it as her ‘shark smile.’

“I also heard that you’ve got… special talents?”

“I’m a witch, Mr. Hood. I think that is still the predominant term used here.”
He nodded. “A sorceress is a valuable advantage to have, especially when one walks into unknown territory.”

Emma watched Regina squint her eyes at him. Robin looked back at her pleasantly and Regina’s face relaxed into an easy smile.

“I only hope that you can keep up with the riding, we’re going to go at a swift pace,” he added.

She laughed. “You should be so lucky to be able to keep up with me, Mr. Hood. I could ride before I could walk.” As Henry now turned to her, she gave him her sole attention. She hugged him fiercely.

Emma, meanwhile, looked at Robin suspiciously. Watching his interaction with Regina, she had only liked it to the point where Regina had started to smile at the man honestly.

He was still looking at Regina.

Emma took a step toward him. “Are we all ready to head out?” she asked the obvious question because she couldn’t think of a more creative one. The only purpose to approach him had been to divert his attention from Regina’s assets.

“Yes, we’re all set. Mulan is already waiting.”

Emma nodded. She turned and kissed Henry’s cheek once more while he was still hugging Regina, laying a comfortable hand on Regina’s back as she did so. Regina turned to her.

“We’re ready to go.”

Regina nodded. “Aren’t you going to say goodbye to your parents?” she asked.

“They’ll be outside.”

They picked up their bags and walked outside with Henry between them. The courtyard was a noisy ruckus of horses, armored guards and Merry Men. There were two wagons with supplies and a big man in monk’s robes waving his arms at the drivers to get in some sort of line only he could see.

Henry nudged Emma in the side and nodded toward the monk. “Friar Tuck,” he whispered to her.

Emma looked at the man. She grinned and looked back at Henry. “I sometimes forget,” she said.

“I know. I guess that’s what happens when your mom is the Evil Queen,” he joked.

“You know she’s not--”

“I know, ma. Hell, I’m the one who should finally know that my mother is not evil. Don’t think I don’t feel bad about ever having thought that,” he said quietly.

Emma hugged him again as a stable boy brought her horse. “I’m kinda grateful that you once did. You wouldn’t have come looking for me if you hadn’t,” she whispered in his ear. “But don’t tell your mom.”

When she pulled away from him he was grinning.

“I won’t,” he promised. “Have an eye on her. You know how she can get around… peasants.”

Emma merely rolled her eyes then turned to hug her parents. They had some advice to give before Emma finally pulled herself into the saddle. Regina was already sitting on her own white horse. She
smiled easily at Emma.

“Someone must have mixed up our horses, Savior,” she said pointing at Emma’s black stallion.

“Looks good on you, though,” Emma gave back.

The progression slowly moved out of the courtyard. About thirty horsemen, fifty foot soldiers, two supply wagons with drivers and the friar left the courtyard to the waving hands of Snow White, King James and Prince Killian. Robin Hood’s son ran beside his father’s horse for as long as he was able to then returned to the three men who acted as his bodyguards but were really friends he had known all his life.
Emma lost sight of Regina as they left the courtyard. But she spotted Mulan and waved her over. The two women rode together for the first hour. Mulan told Emma about Aurora’s children, three by now. She said they were showing promise which was high praise coming from Mulan.

“Where is your friend?” Mulan asked at some point.

Emma looked at her blankly before realizing that the other woman talked about Regina. “I’m not sure. She should be around.” She turned in her saddle, but still couldn’t detect Regina as the road they were on was narrow, restricted on both sides by dense wood.

“Robin talked about her this morning.”

Emma’s head whipped back around. “What did he say?”

“He said she was graceful,” Mulan answered.

“Well, she is,” Emma returned in a level voice, even though her pulse beat a little more insistent than a moment before. It annoyed her that Robin talked about Regina, it also annoyed her that it annoyed her. It wasn’t really her business if Robin liked Regina – or if Regina liked Robin. He had made her laugh when they had talked earlier and that didn’t happen often with her. Emma usually succeeded at it now but it had taken time for them to be that comfortable with each other. Of course, they had a complicated history… Robin could just waltz in, be charming and make Regina laugh.

“Did he say something else about her?” Emma asked, wondering why she kept torturing herself. Already she could hear the first chords of ‘You Are Woman, I Am Man’ from Funny Girl in her head. She really didn’t need this.

“That she seems very serious and mysterious.”

Emma huffed. “Mysterious,” she grumbled to herself.

“You don’t trust Robin. Why not?” Mulan was nothing if not direct.

Usually Emma appreciated the other woman’s straight forwardness. This question, however, merely made her glare into the distance.

“He’s very brave and good-hearted, Emma. Regina would be very lucky if he asked her to marry him.”

“Marry? Who says anything about marrying? Regina can’t stay here anyway, she has been exiled from the Enchanted Forest.”

“And yet she is here now. It’s where these things usually lead to, don’t they? A man and a woman meet, they like each other, they get married.”

The thoughtful note in Mulan’s voice wasn’t lost on Emma, but she didn't think about it, because she now started looking in earnest for Regina. She had promised Henry to look out for her and it might be a good time to start. “She’s not going to marry Robin Hood,” Emma said before she turned her horse around to go looking for Regina.
Emma made slow progress through the throng of riders and foot soldiers. Some of her father's men greeted her and she talked to them. She came to notice the different colors of the different kingdoms - her father's colors were red and white, Phillip's blue and black, while Eric's were green and gold. The banners and armors of their men paid tribute to that, of course. It was all very princely and made a spectacular noise.

Robin's men were garbed mostly in soft leather and were easy to detect among the princely guards. They seemed indeed 'merry' as many of them talked to whoever was around, there was a small group of them making music, and a golden-haired boy sang to it. Emma had an inkling that they would use Robin's men as lookouts once they came closer to where the criminals were supposed to camp.

As she neared the end of the procession, she finally spotted Regina in a group of Merry Men who were on horseback. One of them was Robin and Emma frowned on seeing him. She had expected that he would ride at the head of the column.

Emma pulled her stallion to a halt and watched the interaction between Regina and Robin from the side of the road. They didn't talk to each other, instead they were both listening to a dark-skinned man whom Emma hadn't met yet. She noticed with unease, that Regina and Robin rode next to each other, Robin looking over at Regina quite frequently, seemingly to see how she reacted to what was being said. Regina looked at him, too, Emma noticed. Less often and more covertly, but she did look.

Emma took a deep breath and steered her horse close to Regina's as these last riders rode by. She didn't say anything to her, she merely took her place at her side and started listening to the dark-skinned man also. He told them about the men they were searching for. They seemed unusually well organized for a band of thugs, they had better weapons than was to be expected, they were also more vicious than was necessary. Azeem, as Robin called the man, said that he assumed that they wanted something, something other than just raiding villages. What this something might be, Regina asked him.

Azeem shrugged his shoulders. "We all have something we yearn for. Sometimes a group of men with the same yearning comes together to reach their goal. That's usually the beginning of political unrest.”

Regina looked at him thoughtfully.

"What is it called when women come together to reach a goal?” Emma asked into the silence that followed Azeem's words.

"I'm sure some of my friends would say 'gossip,' but in my experience it's called education," he said seriously and nodded at Emma.

Emma nodded back.

"Emma, I'm glad you decided to join us. Azeem, here, is our declared expert on our adversaries. He's talked to everyone who had information about them and Regina tells me that you usually find your targets through... what did you call it?"

"Intel," Regina said.
"Yes, intel. You collect information?"

"Intel is short for intelligence. We use it for any kind of information we can gather about a person," Emma explained.

Robin nodded. "Azeem could help you with that."

Emma smiled at Azeem in acknowledgment, then she looked back at Regina. "You're going to be all right?"

"Of course," Regina answered with an amused smile.

"You told our son that we were looking out for each other. If something were to happen to you it would be on me," Emma explained her worry.

"You know why I told him that."

"Yes, but I also know that you've got my back when we're in a tight spot and I want you to know that I got yours."

They looked at each other for a long moment, Regina frowning at first, but then accepting Emma's words with a nod.

"We're still a little ways away from trouble, Emma. I'll be fine for the time being," she promised her.

"I'll make sure of that," Robin said and both women turned to see him smile reassuringly.

Emma frowned.

Regina turned back to Emma. "I'll be close." She smiled.

"Good." Emma steered her horse over to Azeem.

He greeted her easily and started telling her about the marauders in great detail.
Regina found herself unoccupied while people organized the camp. She had seen Emma walk off with Azeem and Robin was also busy so she set out toward the supply wagons. Friar Tuck was busy recruiting some of the guards to peel potatoes and vegetables. Regina offered her help and he took her up on it. It wasn't long before he found that she knew her way around herbs and spices and they cooked up a tasty stew for dinner. Regina liked the easy-going monk, he was cheerful and had no use for pretenses or pretexts.

When dinner was ready, Regina grabbed two bowls of the stew and went to find Emma. It didn't take her very long, every man who had seen her that evening could tell her exactly in which direction she had gone, Regina just followed their dazed expressions like bred crumbs. She noticed that not every soldier answered her willingly, though, some didn't even pretend to be polite and merely pointed in a direction. Two of them even pretended not to have heard or seen her. Regina couldn't blame them. She was the Evil Queen, no amount of space or time could erase her guilt toward these people from their memories - or hers. The only thing she could do was being a better person in the here and now. It was hard, but not harder than looking at these people and actually feeling the shame instead of being aloof and condescending and falling into old habits of dismissing what she'd done.

She found Emma as she came back from one of the guarding posts she had helped set up.

"Regina? What're you doing out here?" she asked but didn't wait for an answer when she noticed the bowls of food in Regina's hands. She hurried to take one. Her stomach chose that moment to grumble from neglect.

Regina laughed. "Somebody's hungry."

"I haven't eaten since breakfast," Emma contemplated surprised.

"Well, considering how late we ate breakfast, it was more like brunch."

Emma looked around and pointed at a fallen tree where they sat down to eat together. There was some light coming from the nearest fire but it was dimmed by the people sitting around it. They could have gone the few yards to join this group but Regina found that she preferred it this way.

"Considering that we're on vacation, it was still early," Emma countered and searched for something in her bag.

Regina had already found her own spoon and dug into her dinner with the same ferocious appetite she usually saw in Emma and their son. It had been a long day and she too had last eaten at the king's breakfast table.

"Mmmhhmm," Emma made dreamily after the first bite.

Regina had to laugh again. She knew only one other person who enjoyed food as much as Emma did - Belle French. Another one of the many people who had left Storybrooke after it became possible. She sometimes visited, though, brought back stories of her adventures of which she finally had many. Everybody knew that she was still trying to cope with the loss of Rumple, if you could call realm-jumping, never knowing where you would come out and not caring, coping.

Emma nudged Regina in the side. "Hey, what're you thinking? You look sad?"

"Oh, I was... actually I was thinking of Belle," Regina answered honestly.
"Belle? Our Belle?"

Regina laughed. "She's the only Belle I know. Unless you know another? You care to tell me about her?"

Emma rolled her eyes. "Be serious."

"With all the people we met yesterday who have left Storybrooke, I guess I started thinking about everybody. And just now, Belle popped into my head."

"I hope she's gonna be back soon. Ruby always gets so anxious when Belle has been gone for too long," Emma noted.

Regina nodded. She watched Emma eat her stew but didn't continue with her own. She wondered how she did it, this living among people instead of just alongside them. To care enough to notice anxiety in others. She herself couldn't have said that anything about Ruby Lucas' behavior was amiss these days. But then again they usually only saw each other at the diner when Ruby served her breakfast; they weren't friends. She didn't have any friends - except for Emma, she reminded herself. "I hope so, too."

Emma looked at her surprised. She didn't comment, however. "This was good. Tasted like something you would whip up in your kitchen," she said instead.

"Well, the equipment was a little outdated so whipping up included a fire, a gigantic cauldron and tons of potatoes but, yeah, I helped."

Emma chuckled and leaned back on one hand, closing her eyes and let the wind play with her hair.

"You seem more relaxed now," Regina said while slowly finishing her meal.

Emma looked at her but didn't answer. She didn't seem to want to talk about her earlier mood or the reason it was on edge today. "I wonder what Henry's doing now," she said after awhile.

"He's probably enjoying his meal of potatoes, meat and more meat. No mother to remind him of his vegetables," Regina said.

Emma laughed. "Snow will make sure he eats some."

"She's his grandmother, Emma, not his mother. That's different. She's probably going to make sure he takes seconds of whatever they're having for dessert."

"Dessert," Emma mused and smacked her lips. It wasn't difficult to imagine where Emma's mind was going at that moment.

"I'm sorry," Regina said. "But maybe if you ask Tuck nicely, he'll give you an apple," Regina smiled easily as Emma turned a pouting face toward her.

Emma's expression turned thoughtful in another second, however. She looked up at the sky for a long moment before she asked, without looking at Regina:

"What do you think of our host?"

"Host? Can you really be the host of a search and apprehending party?" Regina didn't answer the question.

"What do you think of Robin then?" Emma rephrased the question.
"He seems nice, well-mannered, and heroic."

"High praise. He's also not too terribly looking," Emma commented.

"I should have known, after all, he's wearing a beard," Regina gave back still not quite serious. But Emma was. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"That you have a thing for men with beards maybe?"

"I so do..." but the 'not' wouldn't come. "Whatever. I wouldn't stand half a chance with him, he's all eyes on you." There was an edge in Emma's voice, but Regina chose to ignore it.

"You noticed."

"It's hard not to," Emma said.

Regina looked at her searchingly and noticed that her restlessness had returned. Emma leaned forward on her thighs, looking at her unflinchingly. Regina sighed and looked up at the stars, different stars from those she would see at home. Home... was that what Storybrooke had become? Possibly. Wherever home was for her, the Enchanted Forest hadn't been it for a long time, probably since Daniel had been killed. She made herself think about it this way, instead of just thinking that he had died. Maybe it was time to face some truths, truths that had hurt her, frightened her before. Maybe now was a good time, maybe meeting Robin had been her sign to work through some personal issues. And maybe Emma could even be of some help?

"I've never told you how I knew Tinkerbell, have I?"

Emma frowned, shaking her head. She seemed confused as to what Tinkerbell had to do with Robin Hood.

"She saved my life once and we kind of became friends, I guess you could say. Friends with a fairy, imagine that." Regina smiled.

Emma did not. "I understand she's very different from 'mother superior'?'" Emma made quotation marks around the adopted title of the Blue Fairy.

"Very different, yes. She was kind of a rebel fairy and that's why she lost her wings. She stole fairy dust to help me find love."

Emma merely raised an eyebrow at this.

"I was married to Leopold, Snow's father, your grandfather... our family tree is not something I would willingly share with the world, you know?" Regina joked.

Emma smiled. "I know what you mean."

"Well, I was unhappy in that marriage. I've lost my lover, Daniel, and I was sure that I would never love again. Tink tried to cheer me up by promising a new love. She stole fairy dust to reveal him, someone who would love me for who I was at that point. I wasn't bad then, I was someone scared and hurt. I was trying my hand at magic, yes, but it wasn't all I had hoped it would be. The fairy dust showed me a new love, a man whom I only ever saw from behind." Here, Regina hesitated. She looked at Emma, hardly seeing her now that the fire at which the nearest soldiers sat slowly burned down. She could, however, make out her eyes as two tiny mirrors which reflected the flames. They seemed to look right into her, feeling with her. Maybe this was really Emma Swan's superpower, her
compassion, Regina mused.

Regina looked back up at the stars. "It was Robin Hood," she finally said.

"How did you know if you only saw him from behind?"

"I saw his tattoo." She looked at Emma.

There was a moment, Regina could have sworn Emma looked frightened, or angry, maybe even both.

But then Emma lowered her head. "Is he..." A pause. "Is he your one true love?" she asked quietly.

"No," Regina answered quickly and quite vehemently. "I don't believe in that concept like your parents do," she added as explanation.

"Why not?"

"Because if I did then it would be Henry. But I have loved before Henry... Daniel. And maybe one day..."

"You'll fall in love with Robin Hood?" Emma asked.

Regina shook her head. "I don't know. It was a long time ago when I was supposed to love Robin, before he married Roland's mother, before I became the Evil Queen. Those 28 years, the time in the Enchanted Forest stood still, I lived them, Emma. It seems a lifetime ago now and I'm certainly not the woman I've been then. And, of course, I would be a fool to fall for someone I can't have. I will be leaving soon and Robin won't be able to come with me."

"He could," Emma reasoned.

They both knew, however, how improbable it was. Not only did Robin seem perfectly at home in the woods, in this realm, Storybrooke was a completely different world. The story characters who lived there now were only able to live in Maine because they had memories of having lived there their whole life. Regina knew how difficult it was to resettle from the Enchanted Forest to Storybrooke, knowing. Would Robin do it for someone he loved? She didn't know.

"He won't," Regina said with finality. But it wasn't as final as she wanted Emma to think. She had thought about this question most of the past night, she had woken wondering what all was possible and what wasn't. And finally she had decided to do something she had never been good at: wait, watch, let things happen as they might.

"What if my parents allowed you to come back here? You know how they are when it comes to true love," Emma asked.

"I won't leave Storybrooke," Regina answered, again with finality that wasn't quite final but a work in progress. Because Regina had thought about this possibility, too.

"Not even for love?"

"Henry is the most important person in my life, Emma, and he's in Storybrooke. Or are you thinking of a change of address to Enchanted Forest, mom and dad's castle, canopy bed on the third floor?" Regina asked, annoyed.

"I'm not thinking of leaving Storybrooke, Regina."
"Then why are we even talking about this?" Regina snapped.

"Let's not!"

They stared at each other in anger for a moment.

"I don't even know why I told you this," Regina said dismissively and wanted to leave.

Emma held onto Regina's sleeve. "Because you wanted to talk about it. I'm sorry, I went off. I'm not sure I trust Robin Hood, Regina. That's actually why I volunteered to come along, I want to make sure things are being handled in a way my parents would approve of," she explained.

"That's usually not the way things are being handled out here, Emma. The only law you'll find is the law these people make. It's a little more rustic than what you're used to." Regina sat back down, taking a deep breath to let go of her anger.

"I've dealt with a tyrannic mayor. How much worse can it get?" Emma joked.

"Maybe you're about to find out how bad it can get and then you'll cherish that tyrannic mayor a little more," Regina gave back.

"Good one, Madam Mayor, but I doubt that will happen."

They were silent for awhile, each thinking her own thoughts.

"I'm really sorry I went off earlier. I just... I want you to be happy, Regina. I think you deserve that," Emma finally said.

Regina looked at her for a long moment. "I am happy, Emma. In Storybrooke with Henry."

Emma acknowledged this with a nod.

Regina could sense that there was more to this. She knew that Emma was happy, too, that she liked her life in Storybrooke. But Emma had grown up an orphan and had seen people leave, maybe too often.

"We should turn in, it's getting late and we have another day in the saddle ahead of us," Regina roused Emma from her thoughts.

Emma groaned as she got up from her seat on the tree. "Even with all the riding with Henry, I certainly feel all the muscles I didn't know I had," she complained.

"I have something for that." Regina rummaged in her bag and pulled out a small container that had formerly contained some night cream. "Here, rub this into your... sore muscles. It should relax them?"

Emma took the jar from Regina and opened it. She smelled the clear cream inside. "Smells like herbs."

"I'm a witch, Emma, I'm good with herbs and those kinds of things."

"There are no parts of mutilated animals in here, are there?"

"If you don't want it," Regina stood and made an attempt to take the jar away from Emma.

Emma turned quickly away, holding the cream out of Regina's reach.
They smiled at each other.

"I will get it back to you when I'm done," Emma finally promised.

"Don't bother, I packed two of them."

Emma grinned widely. "You packed one for me especially, didn't you?" she teased.

"Don't be ridiculous, Sheriff. I never think of others, especially not you," Regina teased back.

"Yeah, you do."

Regina rolled her eyes and walked away in a dramatic huff. She heard Emma follow her back to camp and their respective bivouacs.
When Emma trudged forward in the long line to get her bowl of oatmeal the next morning, Regina stood talking with Robin and Azeem in front of the armory tent. Emma's frown returned full force and her already testy mood turned sour.

She hadn't gotten much sleep that night. Between soldiers' snores, the hard earth and her thoughts about what Regina had told her, sleep had made a rather late appearance, or maybe 'early' was the better word. Waking up to stomping footsteps all around her, had not helped quench a developing headache. The only thing she could be grateful about was that her muscles didn't ache like she had thought they would. Whatever Regina had put into that creme she'd given her was working well, her body felt warm and prepared for another day in the saddle – even if her mind berated her for having come here in the first place.

Having received her breakfast bowl from a too cheerful friar, she walked over to the armory tent.

"... then I'll be happy to accompany you." Robin just said, smiling easily at Regina who looked fierce in her riding leathers.

"Morning," Emma mumbled around a mouthful of oatmeal that tasted better than she had anticipated. There was cinnamon, one of her favorite flavors, and apples, Regina's favorite. "Good," she said and pointed at her bowl with her spoon.

"I thought you would appreciate the cinnamon. I helped Tuck preparing the food earlier," Regina said, smiling.

"You're certainly making good on that promise to Henry to look out for me.”

Regina laughed. "As long as your stomach's happy.”

They smiled at each other as Emma continued to eat.

"You must have known each other for a long time. You seem like sisters," Robin commented.

They turned to look at him as one.

Emma started frowning again.

"That would make Snow MY mother. No, we're not like sisters at all," Regina told Robin.

"Do you think she's a bad mother?"

"Not worse than mine but then, she'd only been at it for about six years," Regina said and her voice plainly said that she didn't want to discuss this topic any further.

Robin looked puzzled but didn't pursue the topic.

Emma shrugged her shoulders. "How long have you been living in these parts, Robin?" she asked him after an awkward pause. She knew that Neal had met Robin and Mulan on his way to Neverland, her ex had told her about it.

"I first came here about five years ago. Things were different then, all the surrounding kingdoms were leaderless, anarchy reigned. Until your father, Phillip, and Eric came back. You know about this, of course."
Emma nodded.

Robin looked at Regina for confirmation.

She took a deep breath. "You heard about an Evil Queen who cursed them?"

Emma looked at her surprised. She hadn't thought that Regina would take this path, that she would admit to anything. She still wondered if she would or if this was merely some sort of dare between herself and Regina.

"Yes, I have. But she was exiled or killed... I'm not sure which," Robin answered Regina's question.


He looked even more puzzled for a moment. Then it dawned on him what she was saying. "You're the Evil Queen?"

"She isn't anymore," Emma said before Regina could answer.

Regina looked at her for a short moment as did Robin, then they turned toward each other again.

"I think you have a right to know who you're riding with. I'm the Evil Queen. I may have changed, I hope I have, but that's how people see me here. The soldiers do, the people at the castle, certainly Snow and James. That's why I asked you about my former kingdom, I want to see it again," she told him honestly.

Emma watched Regina breathlessly, her breakfast long forgotten. She felt a deep burning in her chest, it stung and it spread. It seemed to fill her whole chest and Emma wasn't sure exactly what it was, but there was pride in it, humility, joy - her eyes watered with it and she had to look away, close her eyes against the threatening tears.

"And you shall," she heard Robin say to Regina. "If you're ready now, we can head out. My men are ready to go."

"Thank you, Mr... Robin. I'll just saddle my horse," Regina said and was about to turn when Emma said.

"I'll come with, I just need to--"

"Emma," Robin interrupted her.

She turned to him.

"I've already organized everybody into groups and I wanted you to go with Mulan. You know each other and she trusts you. She's going to search in a part where she told me you've been before," he informed Emma.

"I can't. I go where Regina goes," Emma said, staring into Robin's eyes unflinchingly. The man looked back earnestly until it seemed that it turned into a staring match.

Regina sighed audibly and they looked back at her.

"Emma?" Regina pulled her a few steps away from Robin.

They stood close. Emma was looking into Regina's eyes through lowered lashes. She found that she had trouble breathing. It wasn't the first time, either, but it was the first time she noticed that Regina's
mere proximity made her breathless. She blinked several times, but Regina was still looking at her and she felt herself unable to shake lose from that look.

"I know you promised Henry, Emma, but I don't want you to come. I don't want you to see where I lived, where I reigned," Regina said honestly.

"It's not like it was before, Regina, people have--"

"I know what they did. Your father has told me when we first saw each other after they came back," Regina interrupted Emma.

"It won't be like it was. Why do you wanna go back?"

"I need to see what my actions have caused. I have to face this, and I have to face this alone," Regina pleaded.

They looked at each other for a short while, then Emma turned away. She looked over at Robin who watched them but couldn't hear them, they were talking too low.

"You won't be alone, he'll be there."

"He doesn't know what I did. He didn't suffer--"

"I haven't suffered!" Emma protested.

Regina reached out her hand and laid it on her cheek. It may have been their first touch, it may have been that it burned Emma's skin.

"Because of me your parents put you in a wardrobe and sent you to another world. If it wasn't for me you would have had your parents' love growing up," Regina argued.

"We wouldn't have Henry," Emma argued back.

Regina closed her eyes. "Please."

The emotion behind this single word touched Emma's heart. She nodded. She took a step back and Regina's hand left her cheek and although it had burnt her before she now missed the touch. "If I'm satisfied with who'll be with you," Emma said louder now so that Robin could hear her. "I want somebody to guard her. Somebody other than you." She pointed at Robin.

His eyes spoke of his surprise, though he didn't seem insulted. He laughed. "All right, she shall have the best," he said and beckoned Emma to follow him.

Emma followed Robin through what seemed like the whole camp. And while she walked behind him, her mind berated herself constantly for letting Henry down, for having promised, for being a bad mother. But Regina had asked her to, she had practically begged her not to come. But what was so bad? Emma would see burnt earth, a land ruined. It wasn't Regina's fault, she hadn't done this... her mind rambled until she almost walked into Robin who had stopped.

"Emma," he called out to her, pulling her beside him with an arm around her shoulders. "I want you to meet Little John," he said with a proud smile.

Emma looked up at a tree of a man. From where she stood, he seemed to stand about 7 feet tall, tightly muscled, with blond hair that hung down to his shoulders and a full beard. He looked like someone had pulled him out of a movie about Marvel-hero Thor and put him before her. She
blushed, she didn't know why and yet she couldn't help it. This man exuded magnetism.

"He makes one afraid to ask what Big John looks like," she said.

Robin laughed and so did Little John. "Little John, meet Emma. She's Snow White and King James' daughter."

"It's nice to meet you, Emma," the tall man said and took her hand in his. His handshake was deceivingly gentle but she could feel his strength behind it. He was deliberately holding it all back. "You certainly got your mom's looks," he added charmingly.

Emma blushed some more.

"People sometimes think we're twins," she said dumbly and rolled her eyes at herself.

"You'll be riding with us today, John. Emma feels like her friend, Miss Regina, needs an escort and she finds my skills lacking," Robin told his friend good-naturedly.

John laughed. "She's looking right through you, Robin." He slapped Robin on the shoulder.

"Do you think Little John will be up to the job, Emma?" Robin asked.

Emma nodded. "He'll do, but if something should happen to her..."

"Nothing will happen to her, Emma. John is the best, he'll protect her with his life."

Little John nodded, smiling confidently.

"All right. I'll go find Mulan," Emma simply said and turned. She knew that Robin hadn't meant it maliciously, he was naturally good-natured and with friends like Little John he could afford to be a little cocky. Still, Emma's chest had started to burn again... with feelings. She felt humiliated, inadequate, stupid. And she couldn't really blame Robin for it. She had challenged him, he had come up to it and then some. She still wanted to hate him more than she did, she wanted him to be fake when she knew he couldn't be. He was the hero of his own tale, nobody had yet written a book about the Savior.
"Emma." Mulan pointed at something further up their trail. She signaled for the three men behind them to stop and slid out of her saddle. Emma followed her example, she drew her blade. They had done this about half a dozen times today and Emma tried to look sharp as she watched Mulan's back while she investigated a snapped sapling. She motioned for Emma to look for prints to the right while she went left. Once again, all they found were animal tracks. Mulan smiled at Emma apologetically and they returned to their horses.

"Do you want to advance in this direction or should we backtrack and go further east?" Mulan asked.

"I don't know," Emma said and looked around herself. It all looked the same to her by now. She wouldn't even have known that she'd been here five years ago if Mulan hadn't assured her that she had. "This is kinda fruitless." Emma shook her head in frustration as she was about to get back into the saddle.

"Wait," Mulan said.

Emma turned her head with her left leg already in the stirrup.

"Let's take a break, have a look at Azeem's map."

"All right," Emma agreed.

She signaled for their companions to take a break and the three young men unhorsed. They all found someplace to sit and made sure that they could overlook the terrain so that no one could sneak up on them. Mulan seated herself against the same tree as Emma, looking into a different direction. Emma stared at the map Azeem had given them.

"You seem distracted," Mulan said after awhile.

Emma raised her head. She couldn't see Mulan without leaning forward and turning to her far left so she didn't try. "What makes you say that?"

"You seem more interested to observe the horizon than our path - and the horizon is hidden behind trees and hills here. You're staring into nothing," Mulan clarified in her level voice that observed but didn't condemn or praise.

"I'm not feeling too well today. Maybe it's something I've eaten."

"What are the symptoms?"

"My chest feels heavy somehow, a little like it's burning inside. And I'm short of breath," Emma answered.

"I know that feeling."

Emma frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You're in love," Mulan made the diagnosis.

Emma's head whipped around. "What?"
Mulan leaned forward so that she could look at Emma. She repeated, "You're in love."

"That's ridiculous. Who would I be in love with?" Emma demanded, but somehow she already knew the answer because a name flashed instantly through her mind. She felt tears sting her eyes at the same time and she pulled her head back to not have Mulan see them. She lowered her gaze into her lap. "It can't be," she whispered to herself.

And yet it could because her body told her that it could. It had been there for awhile now, this feeling of complete contentment when she was with Regina; the anticipation when she was on her way over to the mansion or the diner, knowing she would see her. The joy when she made her smile or laugh, and the way she sometimes couldn't sleep at night because she was going over conversations they'd had, or conversations she'd imagined they'd have. She'd fooled herself into believing it had all been about Henry, always. But that wasn't true, hadn't been true for a while now. She loved her son, yes, but there was a part of her heart that had been claimed by another – Regina.

Emma put her face into her gloved hands, shaking her head. This wasn't good, it wasn't right. And it had taken coming to the Enchanted Forest to make her realize it. They could have just been as they were in Storybrooke, things wouldn't have changed, but they had to come here. Now she knew. And what if Regina knew as well? Had she given herself away already? She had been protective, yes, but it was under the cover of the promise she'd made to Henry. They had talked, they had looked at each other. She had looked at Regina a lot. She was a beautiful woman – elegant, passionate, with a whip-smart sense of humor. She loved to hear her laugh, see her smile...

"Oh God, help me," Emma whispered and wasn't really sure there were deities in the vicinity. She felt a hand on her arm and looked up into Mulan's dark eyes.

"It's okay," Mulan said.

"No, it's not. It's Regina. She would never even consider me. She hardly thinks we're friends. How could we ever be anything more?"

"You can't, not here. This is the Enchanted Forest, nobody's ever even heard of... a woman who loves another woman."

"Yet you're not shocked," Emma stated.

Mulan took a deep breath, her own eyes fixed on an horizon she couldn't see. "I told you I know the feeling," she then said.

Emma gasped. "I'm so sorry."

Mulan smiled softly and lowered her eyes. "I'm luckier than most, I'm friends with the person I love. She cherishes my company," Mulan said proudly.

"She's the lucky one to have such a friend, a protector, Mulan," Emma said with conviction and now it was her arm on Mulan's, trying to give comfort.

Mulan nodded. She shifted her position from her knees to sitting down a little downhill from the tree
Emma sat against. "What are you going to do about Regina?"

Emma shook her head. "I don't know. If you're right and the Enchanted Forest doesn't support same-sex relationships – this is so absurd – but then I can't even solve this here, can it? Only, what if she falls for Robin?"

Mulan turned. "That's how it usually happens," she repeated her words from their conversation the day before.

All the things that had been said on the subject came back to Emma, Tinkerbell, her fairy dust, the tattoo. The Enchanted Forest seemed to already have made up its mind about Regina and Robin. The only way to win Regina's heart would be to get her back home to Storybrooke, but would this realm let her go? Emma shook her head again, more about the way her thoughts personified this realm. How could an imaginative constellation of earth, air, people form opinions? But she knew about storytelling, and this realm was all about stereotypes, themes, literary form... and magic.

Could it be possible to change fate? To break a predestined pairing of a fairy tale happy ending? Did true love have an expiration date?

Emma hoped so. Regina had already changed all of these things when she decided not to meet Robin, hadn't she? When she had cursed her enemies. Robin had married Marian, had loved another - and by what Emma knew of that story they had been each other's one true love. But what if Regina wanted this? What if she wanted her happy ending now? With Robin? Could she, could her parents, could anyone interfere with the power of love?

Emma leaned her head against the bark of the tree. Loving a fairy tale character proved to be one hell of a mess. But then, she loved Regina, not the Evil Queen, and Regina had ceased to be a character a long time ago. She was a woman, her own woman. Someone who could decide for herself who she wanted to love. Emma just had to have faith that it would be her and not Robin. That didn't mean she just had to sit by and watch, right? She would just have to be doing what Robin did, too. Woo Regina.

And she already had the perfect code name for this mission: Operation Cinnamon.

Emma smiled lazily to herself. She would win the queen's heart; she had to.

Regina looked around herself, even though there was not much to see. They had just entered the part of the woods that had marked the border to her kingdom, turning onto a level path when before they had been going down a hill. Now the same hill was to their right, green with foliage; to their left the formerly luscious flora looked desolate, burned, dead.

Regina sighed and stopped her horse. She looked over her former kingdom and her heart broke for it, for its former inhabitants, for King Leopold's subjects. They had been good people, used to a kind king. The fact that the same king had treated her like a possession, like a servant, like a whore shouldn't have mattered in the way she had treated them after Leopold's death – but it had. Everything that was his, everything that was connected to him had seemed guilty of some crime against her. And she had taken her revenge – on him and everything connected to him, including his people. They, in turn, had taken it out on the land to tell her never to return, never to torture them.
again.

It all ended here.

"Regina?" Robin roused her from her thoughts. They had all stopped, Robin and Little John sat patiently on their horses beside her.

Regina nodded and they resumed their way down the path. Regina kept looking past Little John at her former land, until they entered another path and the desolation greeted them on both sides. Robin pointed for the four men behind them to ride in a square around them, to be on the lookout for enemies.

"It's pretty depressing," he said.

Regina looked at him with haunted eyes.

"I'm sorry, it must be hard. This was your home."

"Home," she tried the word out. Had this kingdom ever been her home? She had lived here for most of her life, first with her parents in their lavish house, then at the castle. She had loved aspects about this land, green fields to ride on, lush apple trees in their garden, it had all seemed so big when she'd sat on her horse, riding fast, the sky the limit. Then the king had married her and her world had become a golden cage. And even as she reigned as queen she hadn't been free to roam the woods, to ride the fields. She'd had too many enemies and she had ridden in a heavily guarded carriage.

It seemed that people had been her home more than the actual land or a house, a castle. She had wished her mother to be one of them but that didn't happen. Her father had been a home, Daniel another. She'd cursed her enemies to live in Storybrooke. She had cursed herself to live in Storybrooke with them. And she had build herself a new home when she'd adopted Henry – family was indeed a strange concept.

Not very surprisingly, she thought of Emma. She was part of her family now, part of her home, because she talked to her, she cared for her, she wanted her to be safe. They had taken this feeling of home back to the Enchanted Forest, into these woods.

Regina jerked at the reins and her horse stopped, though it moved nervously by the suddenness of her command. It seemed to fear some sort of attack and Robin and Little John looked around hastily, too. Regina rubbed the neck of her horse.

"I'm sorry, I just... I was thinking about something," she reassured the men that she hadn't sensed any danger.

"You haven't seen anything?" Robin asked.

She shook her head. Thinking of Emma had made her realize that it had been a mistake to ask her to not come to this part of the realm with her. Emma should have seen what she had been, what she had made people do. Regina had been afraid for a moment that Emma wouldn't understand, that she would be disgusted with the person Regina had been. But as she very accurately had observed the other day, she had met the Evil Queen and, though she had been frightened, had probably hated her, Regina wasn't that person anymore. Emma understood, she was a part of a safe place where Regina had nothing to fear. And that wouldn't change by looking at some dead trees.

They had resumed their way.

As Regina's mind settled into the truth she had just discovered, she became aware of Robin Hood's
eyes on her. She cocked her head to the side and looked back at him. She gave him a little smile. "Do you think I'm crazy?"

He gave the smile back, bemusedly it seemed. "No, not crazy, but quite a mystery," he answered.

"A mystery? Well, I'm a private person. I don't share a lot of myself."

"You seem sad here," he observed.

"I'm sad that this couldn't have been prevented, the ruin of this land. It was quite beautiful and now it is dead."

"People do cruel things when they're angry, or in pain, desperate," he said.

"I don't blame the people, I blame myself. I shouldn't have been the person who inspired this cruelty," she clarified.

He nodded.

"You don't know the person I've been. I don't think you can imagine the person I've been."

"I've met bad people," Robin said.

"Bad people and bad people with power – with magic – are two different things. You know about the curse," she countered.

"Well, I know what happened here during the curse. I'm not sure... James wasn't very clear on where he and the other people had gone to. Another realm... I'm not sure I know what a realm is. Is it another kingdom?"

"It's another place, another set of beliefs, other circumstances. I send us all to a world where magic didn't exist. I wanted to go to a place where nobody would get a happy ending, because I thought I'd lost mine."

"A lover?" Robin asked.

"Yes, Daniel. He was a stable boy at my family's estate. He was killed by my mother. Because she had different plans for me, plans that included a king, not a stable boy."

"Your mother killed your lover? That seems outrageously cruel."

"She was a witch also," Regina told him. It wasn't an excuse but maybe an explanation. People imagined all kinds of crazy behavior from witches.

"She was your mother," he argued.

"And she had ambitions for her only child."

They rode in silence for awhile.

"You did marry a king, didn't you? Snow White's father?"

"Yes. I didn't have much of a choice. But I took my revenge and killed Leopold," she told him what few people in this realm actually knew to be true. Many may have speculated on it, but few knew for sure that she had killed her husband – had him killed, to be precise.
"What about your mother?"

"That is a very long story," she said. "But she is dead. I killed her, too." And other than with the admission about Leopold there was regret in her voice.

"You are becoming more of a mystery, not less. Is that part of your witchcraft or simply your charm?" he asked with a smile.

Regina smiled back. "My life is complicated."

"It still is?"

She nodded. "Not as much as it has been, perhaps, but it's different."

"And is there a man who shares that complicated, different life?"

"Yes, my son," Regina said.

"That's not what I meant."

"I'm still living in that other realm, Robin. There is no way back for me. I've been exiled and even if I wasn't, I don't think I would want to live here anymore. The people hate me, they fear me, they will never understand I've changed and that might change me back into the person I've been. Being misunderstood can make a person vengeful."

"My son and I have been looking for a home these last few years. There are rumors that Richard is dead and if he doesn't come back then England will never again be a home to us."

"I don't think you'd be happy where I live. It's--"

"I think," he interrupted her and smiled in apology. "I could be happy anywhere with Roland and the right woman."

Regina looked at Robin. He was serious, she knew. Of course, he didn't know just how different Storybrooke was from the Enchanted Forest or 'his' England, but she had an inkling that he would be able to adjust, he would at least try for her.

But did she want that? Someone who gave up everything for the one they love? Someone out of a fairy tale? Was she ready for her happy ending – with Robin?

Questions to consider. And feelings to observe. And she only had five more days.
Mulan had decided to turn back to camp early.

Emma had hardly registered the decision, but she was glad when they rode into camp, when she could leave the stallion to someone else to take care of and just find some solitude to think.

She found it near one of the camp's lookouts, the one furthest west. She sat down against a tree not far from it with a perfect view of the path that Regina and Robin's search party had taken that morning. She would watch them return, she would see that Regina was all right and that was all she wanted just now. Because she couldn't face Regina yet.

From the moment she had confessed her feelings to Mulan, thoughts and emotions had attacked her constantly. At times, she had felt like laughing and shouting and dancing because she was in love and it had been so long since she'd felt this way. And then, she had thought of how Regina would react to this news, and her shoulders had slumped, her eyes filled with tears because it was impossible that Regina could feel the same way.

There was nothing, no indication that Regina liked her that way – that she'd ever felt anything remotely romantic for another woman. There had only been Daniel. Her one young love, the man who'd been taken from her. And then she had made Graham her willing-less sex slave.

Emma didn't want to think about what she might feel for Robin, what she might feel for him now that they'd spent the whole day together.

Thinking about Regina's sexuality was senseless when she'd been raised in a society, in a realm where there was simply no alternative to heterosexuality. At least, that's how all the storytellers of Emma's childhood had presented it. But even if Regina liked women, there was little chance of her liking Emma because Emma was annoying and obnoxious and, on top of that, she was Snow White's daughter.

But had Regina more reason to not fall in love with Emma than Emma had to not fall in love with Regina? Regina had tried to kill her, to curse her, to keep Henry from her and yet she had fallen. Somehow. Regina had been there while that had happened, she must have felt a connection, too. She had confessed to thinking of Emma as a friend, and didn't things usually progress from there?

There was no guarantee for it but it could happen. Right?

Emma leaned her head back against the tree. She felt herself arguing the same points she had already thought of on their way back to camp and there was nothing new to report. There was only to wait and wonder what Henry would think of this.

Henry. Their son. Their reason to bond at all. What would he think of Emma falling for Regina? He would probably think it funny, and Emma could certainly see the irony in it. But he would also feel with her, he would try to make her feel good about herself, and he would do everything in his power to ensure that both his mothers were happy. If they were it together, he would be, too. Emma was sure of it. If not... Emma didn't know what would happen if Regina decided to marry Robin, or even just be with him. She didn't know how she would deal with it.

It was still so strange to know that she loved. That she loved Regina. She tried for any doubts that would belie her feelings. She even tried to remember the woman she had once hated, but she couldn't anymore. In her mind, she could just see Regina sitting across from her, her mood relaxed, her lips
curled up in a smile at something Henry had said. Then Emma would tease him and Regina would either frown in jest or laugh, her eyes shining in that deep dark caramel color. So warm, so enticing.

Emma sighed. How could she not fall for a woman like that?

The sounds of riders drew Emma's attention to the path beneath her and she saw Regina and Robin race beside each other, Regina with a short head start on the man, looking back at him, laughing. Emma smiled as the sound reached her ears, then her face fell because she realized who she was laughing with. She'd obviously had a good day, she was relaxed, she had let loose. That rarely ever happened with Regina and it showed Emma just how well Regina and Robin must get along.

Another sigh. She had long ago consented to life as difficult and sometimes just not fair. But she hadn't yet gotten used to its random cruelty.

Regina sprang out of her saddle, her mare having barely stopped. She was still laughing and some of the soldiers standing around sure must have wondered at a laughing Evil Queen. And then there was Robin Hood, also laughing, jumping out of his saddle and breathing heavily, sweat glistening in his beard.

"You're one hell of a rider, Regina Mills. How you took that fallen tree back there was surely a thing of beauty," he complimented her.

She smiled, her cheeks reddened from the exertion of their race. "Thank you, kind sir. I thought it a matter of pride to beat you on my home turf," she told him and could see one of the guards behind Robin frown in anger. "Well, not really my home anymore, I guess. Still, it was a pleasure to have beat you," she emended, not that it made a difference with the soldier. He still looked darkly at her. Regina chose to ignore him and concentrate once again on Robin who laughed.

"And such a modest winner, too."

Regina smiled at him as their companions rode into camp at a more modest pace than their leaders. Little John frowned at Robin.

"Come on, John, don't be mad. We're both all right, no harm has come to us," Robin teased him as he dismounted.

"I'm sure, Princess Emma will be glad to hear it," he said, frowning, but then winking at his friend to tell him he wasn't really mad. A moment later, he stood to attention to something behind Robin, and he and Regina turned. Azeem was coming toward them.

"Robin," he said in a way of greeting, sounding almost grave.

Regina could see Robin's expression changing from relaxed to business in a moment as he faced Azeem.

"One of our search parties has come across a hidden camp on King James' land. There was a fight and half a dozen men have been apprehended. Two soldiers have been injured. They should recover given time, but I arranged for them to be brought back to the castle. And I would suggest we send
"Are they talking?" Robin asked.

Azeem shook his head. "Nothing so far, but they'd only been brought back half an hour ago and I thought you would want to be present at their questioning."

"Good," Robin acknowledged. "Are Mulan and Emma back yet? They should probably be present, too."

"They're back. Mulan is with the prisoners but I haven't seen Emma." Azeem looked at Regina as did Robin.

"I will go find her," she said but then remembered something else Azeem had said:

"The injured soldiers? Is there anything I can do?"

Azeem sighed and shook his head. "There probably would be, but they're James' men and they barely let me touch their wounds. They seem to think, I'm in kahootz with dark magic because, well, because I'm dark. With you...," he let the sentence hang in the air between them.

Regina nodded, she knew better than trying to help someone who didn't want her help. "I'll go find Emma," she repeated and went off in search of her. She once again asked her way through camp until she found a young soldier, one of Eric's who were by far the least prejudiced against her, who told her that he'd seen her at one of the lookouts. According to the young man, she'd been there for most of his watch until he was relieved.

Regina frowned, she hadn't signed up for a hiking tour. She knew that it was important, though. She also wanted to talk to Emma, she wanted to apologize for this morning.

Twenty minutes later, Regina found the lookout. She had been lucky that it had gotten dark as she set out and the men had made a fire or she might have gotten lost. The soldiers bade her stop and identify herself when she came up to them, but even though they didn't look at her friendly, they let her pass and pointed to where Emma sat against a tree.

Emma looked up as she approached. "Regina." She seemed surprised.

"You're being awfully hard to track down, Sheriff. What's with the vanishing act?" Regina asked, smiling. She could see the outline of Emma's face in the watch's firelight. It seemed to harden as Emma turned away from her, staring into twilight.

"I just needed time to think," Emma said in a small voice that hardly sounded like her. She cleared her throat, then shook her head.

"I take it, your search wasn't successful," Regina asked and sat down next to Emma who merely shook her head.

"Some of your father's men had more luck. They found a camp and apprehended some men. Robin is about to question them."
"Why did nobody tell me?" Emma asked.

"Well, it only happened an hour ago and it seems that nobody knew where you were."

Emma frowned.

Regina was surprised that Emma didn't jump up that moment to go back to camp. Something seemed to bother her, but Regina couldn't be sure what it was. She suspected that it had something to do with this morning and her own decision to exclude Emma from her party.

"How was your day?" Emma asked unexpectedly. She looked back at Regina, her face thoughtful, almost sad.

"It was all right. Not exactly exciting, but... good. I wanted to apologize to you," Regina said. She found her own point to focus on in the dark as she said this; she still wasn't good at this sort of thing. "I shouldn't have told you not to come to that part of the realm. I thought you would remember who I was. I also thought I might remember who I was and..."

"Go off the deep end?" Emma asked.

Regina took a deep breath. "I feel... sometimes I feel like I want it all back. It's like an addiction. Power, magic. I thought I would feel it there, I thought I would turn into someone you hated. I didn't want you to see me like that. But it was a mistake. The land had nothing to do with who I was, nor the people who'd lived there. It was me--"

"You had help," Emma reminded her.

Regina would have liked to reach out and take one of Emma's hands, just for making an excuse for her. There were few people who would do that and she was glad that Emma was one of them, but she still couldn't apply the gesture. It seemed too intimate, holding hands in the dark.

"Sure, but... well, my mother is dead, Rumple is dead, or supposedly so. There's no one left who has that kind of influence over me. The only one who can make me into that person again is myself."

"And you won't because of Henry," Emma said with conviction.

Regina looked at her again. She smiled and laid one of her hands on Emma's arm where it rested on her knees. It was a compromise to what she wanted to do. "And you," she said.

"Me?"

Regina nodded. "You are a part of my family, Emma. I know it's strange and quite ironic but that's how it is. And that's why you should have been there today. You know me, you know I'm not that person anymore."

There was a lump forming in Regina's throat as she looked at Emma. Emma's green eyes seemed somehow too close, too affected by what she had said. For a moment, Regina believed there were tears forming in Emma's eyes, but then she looked away.

"Well, I guess Robin was glad to have you for himself, though."

"Possibly," Regina admitted.

"Hasn't he professed his love for you yet?"

"Not really," Regina gave back.
"You don't want to talk about it?"

"There's nothing to talk about as of yet. He likes me but I'm not sure how I feel. I'm not sure he could cope with Storybrooke or even with me. He doesn't know me. He sees me but he doesn't know me," Regina answered and found that she could be more honest with Emma than she'd been to herself where Robin was concerned.

Emma kept quiet. She looked into the darkness that had settled around them. She seemed so thoughtful to Regina, so closed off. And frowning a lot.

"Are you still... is it because of Daniel that you don't know how you feel for Robin?" She asked tentatively a moment later.

Regina looked at her profile in the flickering light of the nearby fire. She knew her face well and could detect a strain in the set of Emma's jaw. It puzzled her but she didn't comment on it. Instead she thought about the question. Could Emma be onto something there?

Regina thought back to the time when she'd almost met Robin for the first time and she was sure now that Daniel had everything to do with her not wanting to meet a new love. But now?

"I don't think so, Emma. Daniel was a long time ago. Even when I tried to bring him back I knew it was a mistake. Daniel could never have loved the woman I've become. And I probably couldn't have loved him anymore."

"But he was your love," Emma said.

"Yes, but he was my love when I was 17 years old. The woman I became wasn't capable of that kind of love. I couldn't love Henry properly then, I was just plain bad at it."

"And now?" Emma asked.

Regina thought Emma was holding her breath as she waited for the answer. When she turned, she found Emma's eyes fixed on her and stared into them for a long moment, before she answered, "I don't know. I haven't tried to love anyone but Henry for a long time."
At the Castle

Snow was looking for Henry. He'd been quiet at breakfast and hadn't attacked it with his usual fervor. Something seemed to bother him and it wasn't very difficult to guess what that something was. Snow found him walking in the garden with a forlorn look on his face.

"Henry, here you are," she greeted him.

He smiled at her, but it was a very small smile. She answered with one of her own of which she hoped it would be uplifting somehow.

"Where are the boys?" Henry asked after Killian and Roland who had grown thick as thieves these last two days with Killian running after the bigger boy and Roland showing him all sorts of games he'd learned from the Merry Men. They actually played at Robin and Little John, with Roland imitating his father, telling Killian how to behave like Little John. It was comical and Henry liked to watch. He also liked to participate, usually taking the part of Friar Tuck.

"They're with David. He's trying to show them how to shoot an arrow with their little practice bows – as if David was ever any good at it," she added with a wink.

Henry laughed a little.

Snow took Henry's arm and they walked by the beautiful flowerbeds of this late spring. When they came across a bench that looked over this part of the garden, Snow pulled Henry toward it. They sat down.

"You miss your mothers, don't you?" she asked him.

He nodded. "Yeah. I mean, it's great spending time with you and David and the boys. Killian has grown so much since we were last here, he's great." Henry tried to be upbeat, but Snow could tell that his heart wasn't in it. His gaze drifted into a far distance.

"Is there something else that's bothering you, Henry?"

"I don't know. Things are so different here," he said.

"Bad different?" Snow asked, worried that someone had said something hurtful to him.

Henry shrugged. "They treat her so differently here," he said and looked at his hands as if ashamed he'd even mentioned it.

"Emma?"

"Mom," Henry answered in a small voice. "And I know... I know that she's done terrible things. And I can't blame them and mom doesn't, but it's like she's not really here. They stare through her. And it's not just them."

It seemed to Snow that this last part was especially difficult for him to say and she assumed he was referring to the way she herself and David treated Regina.

"Henry, you know that we love you and that we're all trying to make these visits as pleasant as possible, but too many things have happened between Regina and us and--"

"I wasn't talking about you. I was talking about ma," Henry said with a hurt yet equally shamed face.
He seemed to fight with his loyalties toward both his mothers.

"Emma? But..." Snow didn't know what to say to this. She didn't really know how Emma and Regina 'lived' with each other. She just assumed that they treated each other much the same way like they had before: distant, antagonistic, trying to work out a schedule for Henry while otherwise talking as little as possible. And, in truth, she hadn't paid much attention to the interaction between them while they had been here because what Henry said about everybody else was certainly true for Snow – she looked through Regina. So now she made an effort to remember some of the interaction between her daughter and Regina and she seemed to recall them talking in low tones at dinner, Regina looking to Emma before she'd left that night. There was no hostility between them, there actually seemed to have been... a camaraderie there. One that Snow had never noticed before, one that Emma hadn't said anything about.

"How are they in Storybrooke, Henry?" Snow asked, curious.

Henry looked at her. "They get along. I think they're friends now."

"Really?" That certainly surprised Snow.

"Yeah, I mean, not like you and Ruby, you know. Mom's not for all the hugging and stuff but we're all having breakfast pretty much every morning at Granny's," he said, grinning. "Mom always teases Emma about ordering the same thing and Ruby always asking her what she's having. It's kind of this thing they do. And sometimes when mom and I are late or something, ma orders for her. You know how mom always just drinks coffee and ma would order a stack of pancakes for her and mom would look at her all... angry, but not really. And she would eat every last bite of the breakfast. They tease each other like that," Henry told Snow.

"I had no idea."

"Yeah, because when they're here they're not doing any of that, they hardly talk. And I think it's because ma tries not to be disloyal to you or anything. And mom goes along with it," he explained what bothered him so much. He looked at Snow openly, trustingly.

"And that confuses you," Snow said.

Henry shrugged his shoulders. "I don't think it's right."

"What else are you guys doing? You're right, Emma probably feels like she has to keep this from us because she thinks it might hurt us, but I really want to know. And I'm going to talk to Emma about it, that is, if you want me to?"

"Really?"

Snow smiled and pushed Henry's long bangs from his forehead. "Yes, I will talk to her. We don't want Emma to be different here. We always want her to be herself," she assured Henry.

He smiled, more relaxed now. "Sometimes we have dinner together, you know how ma can't cook much but mom does it and sometimes ma comes over. And after dinner they're talking or Emma and I are playing a video game. That one time, after I'd gone to bed, I was thirsty and I went to the kitchen and they were..." He laughed at the memory. "They were in the living room and ma was teaching mom how to play Mario cart. Mom was laughing so hard because she bumped into everything. They didn't see me. I mean, I didn't watch them for long, just for awhile," he said quickly because he knew it wasn't nice to spy on people.

Snow smiled at Henry to reassure him. "You're spending alternating weeks with them, right? Emma
one week, Regina the next?"

"Yeah, but it's, you know, they don't even seem to keep track because the new house is pretty much across from the mansion."

Snow nodded to this, she had known about it. Emma had said it was easier this way, especially if one of them had something coming up and suddenly Snow was curious as to what something like that might be.

"What about when one of them is busy one night when they have you over. Are you just staying with the other then?"

"That rarely ever happens. Mom sometimes has late meetings but she's usually home before nine."

"Don't they ever go out with someone, like on a date?" Snow asked curiously.

Henry just shrugged his shoulders. "No, not really."

This surprised Snow - a lot. She'd always thought that Emma would date. She was an attractive young woman with an almost grown son, and the same could be said about Regina. Storybrooke certainly wasn't big but outsiders had already started settling there while they were still looking for ways to cross realms, not in droves but slowly. Emma had told her that this was still happening. Were there no bachelors among these newcomers? Were there no single men living in Storybrooke?

"Maybe they go out when you're not staying with them?"

Again, Henry shrugged. "You know how Storybrooke is, everybody knows everyone's business and I would probably have heard about it if either of them had been going out with somebody," he reasoned, but didn't seem bothered by it.

Snow, however, was bothered and she made a conscious effort not to let Henry pick up on it. She smiled. "How often does your dad visit, Henry? Is he around sometimes?"

"Yeah, Neal visits every month for a few days. And I've visited him twice last year," he told her.

"In New York?"

Henry nodded. "We went to a basketball game, it was awesome."

"Did Emma come with?"

The boy shook his head. "No, it was just the boys on the town," he told her, grinning widely. It seemed like that had been the phrase Neal had used. They had probably eaten a lot of pizza and played video games on these occasions.

"Does Neal have a girlfriend?"

Henry shook his head. "I think he's kind of still hung up on ma. I mean, he sometimes looks at her when he's visiting and you just know that he still likes her a lot."

"And what do you think Emma feels for him?"

"She treats him like a friend, mostly. Sometimes they fight, but I'm not sure what it's about. They don't do it in front of me and I'm not eavesdropping. It's not often or bad."

Snow nodded. She grew thoughtful and Henry looked at her expectantly for more questions she
might have.

"Are you happy like this, Henry? With just your moms and your dad visiting?"

"Sure, it's how we are. We're a family," he said smiling.

Snow smiled back. "I'm glad that it's going so well for everyone," she said and laid her arms around him. He was now much bigger than her and it was difficult to get her arms around his shoulders. Henry hugged her back a little awkwardly, but he seemed better now that they'd talked about things.

When they parted they sat for a while longer and Snow told Henry about the upcoming ball for Killian's birthday. He seemed eager to wear his new suit with the red pants and the white jacket, the colors of the kingdom. He'd had two appointments with a tailor in the past days and the suit which looked a little like a dress uniform was being made especially for the ball.

"I'm sure you'll look just as handsome as your... as David," she told him.

He grinned.

"Speaking of, if there's nothing else you want to talk about, would you maybe go looking for David and tell him where I am? I want to talk to him about something. And you could show the boys how to really shoot with bow and arrow," she added with another wink.

Henry laughed. "Sure. Will you really talk to ma about what we talked about? When she comes back?"

"I will, Henry, I promise."

"Thanks, Snow," he said and then walked off in search of his granddad.

A while later, David came across his thoughtful wife on her bench.

"You wanted to see me," he smiled and sat next to her, pulling her into a one-armed hug.

She put her arms around him and clung to him.

"You all right?" he asked.

"Yeah, I... I had a long talk with Henry about something," she told him.

"Something serious?"

"I'm not sure."

He could tell by her look that she was worried, though.

"It's about Emma and Regina, something... seems to go on there," she said, choosing her words carefully.

"They're not fighting about custody again, are they? I thought they had it all figure out by now."

"They're not fighting, David. It seems to be quite the opposite," she said and looked up at him.

He looked at her quizzically and she started telling him what Henry had told her.
Emma had a headache. She had hardly slept the night before because of all the thoughts buzzing through her mind like flies around a dead body in summer. It was mostly Regina, of course, the things they’d talked about, the way she had looked at Emma, smiled, looked sad, walked in front of her as they made their way back to camp.

She was worried about her own behavior toward Regina, too. She didn't want to give her any sign of what she felt, not until she was ready to tell her about it or to do something about it. But that was the hard part, to know what she wanted and be ready to act on it - no matter what the consequences might be. And Emma wasn't there yet, so 'Operation: Cinnamon' was on hold, indefinitely.

What had actually occurred to Emma at four in the morning, however, had nothing to do with Regina. Her mind had drifted so far off that she'd thought about the mission they'd come into the woods for, to apprehend the men who terrorized the realm. While the questioning of the six men they’d caught the day before had yielded nothing, her mind had danced around the question why there had been so few men in that camp. She came across a possible answer quite unexpectedly and was so relieved by it that she fell asleep a moment later. Considering this, it was probably a miracle that she had remembered it at all this morning. But she had and now she was walking toward the tent where she knew Robin would be at this hour. He liked to talk to some of his men and Mulan in the morning, organizing the search parties and consult about how to proceed. Emma had missed it the morning before and Robin had blind-sided her with his plans, she wanted to make sure that didn't happen again.

Emma walked into the tent as everybody was already huddled over some maps of the surrounding areas. Robin didn't even notice her as he talked in low tones to Azeem. Mulan, however, looked up at her entering and nodded at her. Emma gave the same greeting and then cleared her throat. Now everyone was looking at her.

"Emma," Robin said, surprised but it seemed pleasantly so. "Good morning."

"Good morning. Are you talking about the plan for today?" she asked.

"Yes, we were about to decide which parts to search today. Mulan told me that you haven't gone very far yesterday."

"I know it was my fault. I guess I'm not used to spending a whole day in the saddle, not to mention two in a row. But... I was thinking about something. May I?" Emma pointed at the table with the maps, asking permission to step forward. Given, it felt a little formal but she wasn't sure if she was even allowed inside this tent or whether Robin would take offense at her interfering.

"Of course," he said.

Emma stepped forward, looking at the maps that were lying before her. There were individual maps of each of the kingdoms and she pulled four of them together to form one map of the area they were searching. Azeem had already added something that looked like an abandoned camp site on the map of her father's land.

"I was thinking about... how there were only six men in this camp." She put a finger on it. "From what Azeem told me, there were always about thirty men raiding any given place, so, where are the rest of them? This morning I remembered that there have been some attacks that had been fairly close in time... and..." She looked at the maps, pointing to the middle where the four kingdoms in question
met. "What is here? What kind of terrain? It looks hilly?"

They all looked at the spot where Emma rested her finger.

Robin looked at Azeem.

"There is a mountain here on Eric's land, it falls off in a cliff. At its base, there is supposed to be a valley. I have never seen it, that's why the space here is blank. As you can see, there's hills on your father's side and on Phillip's. I've never traveled Regina's kingdom and it could be that all there are more hills and that the valley is a myth."

"I don't think it is," Emma said. "Look, there are supposedly four camps of these marauders, one in each kingdom. But the last attacks, they were a day apart. One here, on Eric's land, one on my father's. There's no way thirty men could have traveled from here to there in one day, especially not with the kind of terrain you're describing. What if there's a camp right in the middle, in that valley? Something like we have here, a base camp where most of them live. These surrounding camps would act as decoys where a couple of them stay, maybe just to draw attention away from their base," Emma explained her theory. She was glad that it still made sense in the light of day, she had feared that she had been delirious the night before. But by the thoughtful expressions on everybody's faces she was onto something.

Robin scratched at his beard while looking at the maps, then he looked up at Azeem who also seemed thoughtful.

"What do you think?" He asked the man who seemed to be his advisor.

"Emma could be right. It makes sense. They wouldn't have to have a lot of men in the camps, just about the six we found in one yesterday. Then they would send about twenty out for a raid..." Azeem's voice trailed off as his mind stumbled across something.

"Which would mean, we don't know how many men there are in total. There could be any number of them living in this valley," Robin voiced what had Azeem stop mid-sentence. Azeem nodded.

They all grew eerily quiet.

"What're we gonna do?" Emma asked the obvious question.

"I'm gonna send a message to your father telling him about all this. The wounded men and the prisoners are about to leave. I want for you and Regina to accompany them and..."

Azeem interrupted Robin with a hand to his shoulder and then he leaned in and whispered something to him. Robin looked thoughtful, frowning at whatever Azeem had told him. It didn't seem to Emma that it had been good news to Robin.

"We'll send a message with them and then set out, all of us," Robin said and seemed to include Emma and Regina in his plan now.

"All of us?"

"Regina seems to be the only one who knows that part of this land and I don't think you would leave her with only about a hundred men for protection, would you?"

Robin fixed his blue eyes on Emma.

"Not for a second," she answered him.
As it turned out, Regina was indeed the only person of their current party who knew that part of the realm, and she was certain that there was a valley between a vast area of hills that was accessible only from what had been her kingdom. But she made sure to mention that it had been a long time since she'd been there and that she wasn't at all sure how to get there. The fact that there was a time lapse of 28 years between everybody in the Enchanted Forest remembering her having been there and her actually having been there, wasn't something she could explain so she didn't try.

Breaking up camp took longer than Regina would have liked. While the soldiers were prepared to start fighting a war within minutes, they had more leisure when it wasn't an imminent matter of life and death. Only the Merry Men exhibited a high degree of discipline and haste.

When they were finally ready to head out, it was almost noon and Regina saw Robin riding among the trek to ensure that everybody was ready and nothing had been left behind. Finally, everything seemed to have been taken care of and the two parties left the base camp; one headed for King James' castle, the other for Regina's former kingdom.

The path led them uphill on a relatively wide road. There was enough space for three horses or five foot soldiers to walk alongside each other which made it easier to overlook the whole trek.

Robin was once again riding in the far back with Azeem while Little John took lead, Mulan by his side.

Regina and Emma rode somewhere in the middle since it would take them some time yet to reach the part of the realm only Regina knew. They rode in companionable silence for awhile, at least it felt like that to Regina. She was deep in thought and it took her some time to notice that Emma seemed nervous. She was looking around herself quite frequently, turning in her saddle to look back along the trek, then turning and looking toward the tall figure of Little John.

"Are you all right?" Regina asked.

Emma turned toward her. "I don't know. I have a bad feeling about this," she admitted.

"Are you actually quoting Star Wars at a time like this?" Regina asked with what she hoped was a calming smile.

Emma looked at her quizzically for a moment then she smiled back. "It's a classic." Once again, she turned in her saddle looking back toward the end of the trek.

"What is bothering you, Emma?" Regina asked.

"I'm feeling like I'm leading everybody into a trap. I don't know, maybe it's just nerves."

"What makes you think it could be a trap?" Regina asked.

Emma shook her head impatiently as if wanting to shake off the notion.

Regina reached over to touch her arm. She could feel the muscles under her hand tense but she didn't relieve her hold on Emma. Instead she squeezed to get her full attention.
Emma looked back at her; for a moment there was this easy flow of communication that sometimes occurred between them, quite unpredictably and without words, something like magic.

But then Regina blinked in confusion, looking away for a moment to escape the intensity of Emma's stare. She touched her chest where her heart beat wildly beneath her rib cage.

"This is all taking too long," she heard Emma exclaim impatiently beside her.

Regina turned to her but couldn't detect anything amiss, anything that indicated that they had just shared a moment. Had it all been her imagination, was she the only one that had felt the current of electricity floating between them?

"Why do you think it's a trap?" she heard herself repeat the question.

Emma's look seemed guarded this time and it didn't linger. "We've been here for two days now, searching these woods. We haven't been exactly quiet and we have already found out one of their camps. And those weren't there for protection, they were decoys set up to be discovered so that search parties would find them and think the threat was over." Emma shook her head again. "This whole operation is too big, too elaborately planned for them to have not taken some kind of precaution."

"You should tell Robin," Regina advised.

Emma only looked grimly at her for a moment.

"Did I say something wrong?" Regina asked.

"I know that you're quite taken with him but that doesn't mean that I have to share that opinion," Emma gave back testily.

Regina squinted her eyes at Emma. "Is this still about you thinking I would leave Storybrooke? We both know that's not an option so would you please drop it?" she snapped.

It looked like Emma wanted to snap back, but instead Regina saw her clamp her jaw. It took Emma a long moment to finally answer. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm just on edge and I guess I'm not used to confer with anyone on my haunches, especially not someone who's been asked by my father to have an eye on me."

"David is just worried about you. I was actually surprised that he didn't join us, just to make sure you'll make it home in one piece." Regina sat up straighter in the saddle, trying to get back control of her emotions. She wasn't sure why she'd snapped at Emma, why they were both so touchy about this subject.

It was so strange between them. There were moments when they were completely at ease with each other, like just now before... but moments of trust and easy conversation were usually followed closely by one of them shutting down, getting uncomfortably conscious that it shouldn't be like this between them. It was a tug-of-war and it was exhausting. Regina didn't want to build any more walls against Emma. She felt that this part of their relationship was over, should be over.

"I'm not as bad as all that," Emma now said.

Regina looked at her puzzled, having almost forgotten what they'd talked about before.

Emma smirked. "David trusts me," she added in explanation.
"Maybe you should trust yourself and follow that haunch," Regina acknowledged and gave Emma a small trusting smile of her own. "There's a fork in the road, I would say about half an hour from here where we will take the left downhill toward the 'dark kingdom.' The right one leads uphill and should afford a view of the valley now that my former kingdom has been burned. There's no guarantee but maybe you could see something from up there," Regina suggested.

Emma beamed at her. "We make a good team," she said, then blushed.

Regina laughed. "Like it's the first time we set out to save the world together. Why don't you head back and talk to Robin about it and I will tell Little John to slow down when we reach that fork in the road?"

Emma nodded and they parted to do what Regina had suggested.
It was closer to one hour before they reached the fork in the road Regina had mentioned.

Emma had talked to Robin but he wasn't convinced about her argument. To him it was unlikely that the people in the camps reported back daily to the base and he thought they had a good chance of surprising them - if they moved in quickly. Going uphill now would cost them hours of daylight in which they would probably see any attack coming. He had good arguments, but Emma had her haunch.

"All right," Emma said as they were standing at the fork. She leaned over her saddle horn, closer to the tall man. "I'll take a few of my father's men and go uphill. You wait here two hours, and I'll send a signal if I see anything like a trap on the way. How's that? If there's nothing there, you head out and I'll catch up with you as fast as I can."

Robin thought about this plan.

"Two hours, Robin," she repeated.

"All right. Take a dozen men. Everybody else, we take a break but I want everyone ready to go in two hours."

"A dozen? I thought I'd just take four--" Emma started to argue.

"Your father entrusted me with your life, Emma. If something should happen to you, there's going to be another king hunting me. I'm not going to take that risk."

"Neither will I. I'm going with Emma," Regina chose that moment to say.

Both Emma and Robin turned to her in surprise.

"But we'll need you to lead us," Robin argued.

Emma kept quiet.

"We'll have caught up with you long before that point. Just follow the way we took yesterday. It will be helpful if I can take a look at the terrain we're going to travel. It should look a little different now," Regina told Robin. She turned to Emma and just caught her smiling. "Are we ready to go, savior?"

Emma smirked. "If you follow me." She looked for her father's men, but twelve of them had already assembled and now build a formation that would allow the women to ride between them, six men in front, six behind.

They set out at a fast pace but as they were going uphill, Emma soon ordered them to go slower so as not to tire the horses too much.

"Thank you, by the way," she said after a while riding in silence.

"For?" Regina asked, not bothering to look at her.

"For giving me the vote of confidence," Emma said and saw Regina suppress a grin.

"I don't know what you're talking about, savior. We should hurry, we only have two hours," she said.
Emma knew it was just to change the subject. Regina didn't spur her horse.

"Is savior your new nickname for me? I've never heard you say it without a hint of sarcasm before."

"What do you mean 'new' nickname. I've never had a nickname for you, none that I called you to your face, at least," she added, now smirking.

Emma laughed. "Oh, come one, just confess that calling me 'Miss Swan' held just a little bit of affection," Emma teased, or maybe she was actually flirting with Regina. She couldn't tell and as long as Regina didn't resist, she would also not stop. And by the laugh that came from her, Regina didn't mind the banter at all.

"You're delirious, Miss Swan," she gave back, emphasizing the address just like she used to. It actually gave Emma goosebumps to hear her say it.

She grinned mischievously. "That sounds like you're daring me to call you 'madam Mayor.'"

"Well, considering where we are 'Your Majesty' would completely suffice, dear," came the answer.

They exchanged a look, long and lingering. Once again, it was Regina who broke it by blinking. Then she turned her attention back to the road and Emma could see the walls were back up.

Emma sighed quietly. 'Just once...,' she thought already knowing that once wouldn't be enough, she wanted forever.
They rode for just over an hour when the treeline to their left fell away to reveal a view of the land below. Emma imagined that it had once been beautiful but now there was nothing to look at but a vast desert of brown and grey. There were ruins and dead trees and nothing much else. They stopped the horses to look at it. Emma looked at Regina for a moment but her dark eyes were fixed on a point in the distance.

"What're you looking at?" Emma asked.

Regina leaned forward toward her, stretching out her arm. For a moment, Emma thought she might faint with Regina leaning into her like this but then she made herself look into the direction Regina was pointing.

"Do you see that dark patch of land there with something that looks like wall attached to it to the west?"

Emma followed Regina's pointing finger and nodded.

"That was my castle," Regina whispered sadly. A whisper that caressed Emma's ear and made her clench her jaw so as not to sigh, or moan, or whimper. She was aware of how inappropriate this was, of how ridiculous it was getting, but Emma felt her libido respond instantly to Regina's close proximity and she felt helpless to do anything about it.

"Do you miss it?" Emma asked around the lump in her throat.

"It wasn't like your parents' place, not with all the light and the wood... it was just stones. I had to regulate the climate in my kingdom through magic or it would have been impossible to live there."

"Wait, you can do that? Then why am I freezing my ass off most of the year in Storybrooke?"

Regina leaned back to be able to look at Emma better.

"That's because it takes concentration. Part of my magical powers were always tied up to regulate the weather. In Storybrooke there's central heating, problem solved," Regina explained with a slight smile.

"You said you sometimes miss it, the power of the place," Emma reminded Regina.

Regina concentrated her gaze back to where her castle had stood. "After you broke the curse completely, I used to have dreams of the place, nightmares. I walked the halls of my castle, not knowing where I was or how to get to my chambers. I always seemed to end up in the dungeons. I've lost control of something that should have felt like home to me. You made me lose that control but it was me who had failed. I had the same dreams after we came back from Neverland. My mother used to say that love made you weak and I had believed it too long to just let go of it. Do you remember that time?"

"You were pretty moody," Emma did indeed remember.

"To put it mildly. Henry was still living with you and I couldn't sleep, I could hardly eat, I was a mess. It was you who brought me out of it, savior, when you agreed to shared custody," Regina confessed. "Ever since then, that castle had been like a looming threat to me, of bad things that could happen if I should ever return. I know that the kind of power I had then was deceiving and highly
addictive. And that's why I sometimes want it back. It's the illusion of control I miss," she said wisely.

"You sound a little like Archie," Emma said with a smile, one she hoped was reassuring not mocking.

"I read up on dream analysis," Regina said. "Let's go, we should get a little higher yet."

Emma nodded and they continued their way for another twenty minutes when they came to a plateau from whence the road became a steep path. They were about to dismount when Emma heard a whizzing sound. It reminded her of her mother and when she looked up she saw a swarm of arrows coming right at them.

Emma reacted instantly, throwing herself sideways over Regina. Had someone asked her later what her plan had been, she would probably have said that she just wanted them off the horses and roll under some trees but the truth was, there was no plan; Emma panicked. And that was why the deep drop over the plateau's edge surprised her while the hard landing knocked the wind out of her. The rumble-tumble down this side's slope made her just barely able to pull Regina's head to her chest in an attempt to save at least one of them should a cliff follow. Emma reacted on pure instinct and wrapped herself around Regina as best she could while they were rolling and rolling.

To both their surprises the terrain flattened out and the dizzying motion stopped until Regina rolled off of Emma. They were both panting, both moaning in pain and somewhere in the back of her brain Emma marveled at their luck to not have hit a tree. She looked up into the canopy of some pretty big ones but there hadn’t been any on the slope. She was sure, however, that they had killed some saplings. She started laughing but a dull pain in her side made her stop a second later, she moaned. Then she heard the voice:

"Emma, are you all right? Emma?" Regina was leaning over her, hair sticking out to all sides, leaves stuck in it and to her clothes which were in much the same state as could be expected after a tumble like they had just had. She was looking down worriedly at Emma and the blonde found a small smile in herself. All this wasn't so bad if it made Regina lean over her like this, looking into her eyes, caress her face.

"Can you move?" Regina asked.

Emma stretched her legs. "Seems to work," she said as they both checked the working condition of her limbs.

"Try and sit up," Regina told her.

Emma obeyed though reluctantly. At first, she thought that the loss of Regina's proximity would be the worst but then she felt the pain. "Ow, ahhhh. Damn," she moaned as her back reminded her that she'd fallen onto it when she'd heroically – or recklessly – thrown them both from their horses.

"What is it?"
"My back hurts."

"Small wonder, you could have killed yourself. You could have killed both of us," Regina admonished her.

"You're welcome," Emma answered sarcastically as they both worked to lean Emma against a tree. The pain subsided when she rested her back against it and she looked at Regina. "Are you okay?"

Regina smiled a small smile. "I don't want to know how I look but I'm fine, thanks to the Savior."

"Now I really wish you would stop calling me that."

"Oh, please. You love it," Regina teased. "Here, let me have a look at that cut," she then said and once again leaned over the blonde, taking her face between two soft, inquiring hands. She looked at Emma's right cheek.

"Cut?" Emma seemed to just barely recall the sharp pain of one of the arrows nicking her but she had thought it had been in her shoulder. On further inspection that was true but it had scratched her face even before that.

"It's pretty deep. What were you thinking, damaging that pretty face of yours?" Regina asked but she smiled. "I'll fix it."

"Wait. With magic?" Emma asked, her green eyes boring earnestly into Regina's darker ones.

"Of course, with magic. It's a deep cut; you could get an infection out here."

"No," Emma said. "I don't want you to use magic."

They looked at each other, Emma determined, Regina puzzled.

"All magic comes with a price, Regina. I don't want you to heal the cut and then have one of my ears fall off. I'm quite attached to my ears, you know."

"That isn't even funny, Emma. There's going to be a scar."

"Don't you have some cream prepared for cases like this?"

Regina shook her head as she also rolled her eyes. "No, and it's a deep cut. It needs stitches. So, unless you reconsider and let me do the magic, I'll have to sew you up," she said. Emma's eyes went round at this as Regina rummaged in her bag that still hung around her neck. "A good thing I've got my sewing kit with me."

"Sewing kit? You can sew?"

Regina only smiled in answer.

Emma sighed to herself but she didn't want to give in and have Regina magic her face.

As she thought of a way out of this, she looked around for the first time at where they were. They were on a relatively flat terrain on what still seemed her father's land as there were trees around them, birds singing in the canopy. She looked up the slope they had rolled down from but couldn't quite see the edge. Her restlessness made her get up but it was painful.

Regina watched her get to her feet and walk a few yards up that slope.
Emma could see the edge now and she could see something hanging over it. It was a red and white clad body of one of their guards.

"Damn," she said and returned to Regina. She looked around some more and detected just how lucky they had been because the other side of this ledge fell dead away, overhanging the valley between the kingdoms. Emma carefully crawled to the edge and could see right into it. She had the satisfaction of having at least been right. There were huts and fires burning, men busy at work. Many men. From the number of haphazardly put together huts standing around, she assumed there were around fifty.

"Damn," she once again exclaimed when she spotted some of the defenses of this little village of thugs. Being right sometimes sucked aplenty.

She went back to Regina.

"We should try and find a way back up, down is not really an option," she told Regina.

"Come over here," Regina took Emma by the arm and sat her on a fallen tree trunk. "Sit still for a minute so I can stitch you up," she ordered.

Emma sighed. "Well, at least I can say it's a battle scar this time. Not from falling off my bike," Emma consented as she watched Regina pull a flask from her bag. "You were holding out on me."

"Hush, it's for medicinal purposes," Regina told her. She disinfected one of the needles from her kit, then handed the flask to Emma. "Don't drink it all," she told Emma as she took a healthy swig.

It was some of the good stuff, not that mayor Mills had anything but good stuff. Emma took another pull and felt the liquor settle hotly in her stomach. "Good."

Emma swallowed as Regina came at her with a needle and shaking hands. "Regina," she said softly and put the flask down. She took Regina's hands in hers and looked up into her eyes which swam in tears now.

"You could have been killed, Emma," Regina said, her voice even raspier than usual.

Emma stood and put her arms around Regina's shoulders. There was a hesitation in Regina before her arms came around Emma's waist and then clung to her desperately.

Emma rubbed Regina's back soothingly, whispering reassuring words. When she finally pulled back to look into Regina's eyes, she had to wipe away tears from her lovely face.

"What would I have told Henry if..."

"That I died a hero?"

Regina hit her on the arm.

"Ow."

"You would have died an idiot, savior," she told her. "Saving my life."

Emma smiled. "Well, I guess I could've killed us both in that fall."

"Now, that's a relief. And then Henry would have to live with Neal, in New York. That's not exactly where I want him to grow up, Emma."
"Would you rather, my parents took him in?"

"God, the choices are getting worse. Just... we have to stop doing this, Emma. Putting our lives in danger. Henry needs us," Regina said. "Both of us."

Emma nodded. "That's why we should get going. Whoever attacked us up there will figure out where we must have landed. They're probably on their way, if there is a way onto this ledge, that is... or off it," Emma mused.

"First things first," Regina said and made Emma sit down on the trunk again. Her hands were steady now as she started stitching up Emma's cheek.
They had decided to go south, hoping that at some point they would either be able to climb up to the path they had ridden uphill earlier or have their allies see and rescue them. Progress was slow as Emma's back was still hurting her. Regina had insisted on helping her walk. She had her arm slung around the Emma's waist, Emma hers over Regina's shoulders. Maybe she leaned into Regina a little further than would have been necessary, but she felt that she might never get another chance to be this close to her and she couldn't resist the temptation.

"All right, the name of the caretaker's cat," Regina was now saying.

Emma rolled her eyes dramatically. "Seriously? Mrs. Norris. You have to put in a little more effort if you want to win the goblet of fire from me."

"I can't believe you beat Henry at this. Do you remember when he turned eleven and waited for three weeks for his acceptance letter to Hogwarts?"

Emma laughed. "Yeah, and he would have gotten in, too. Look at who his mothers are," she said proudly.

Regina nodded in agreement.

"And as for beating Henry at this game, I think I caught him on the wrong foot when I asked him the name of the three-headed dog."

"Fluffy?" Regina asked grinning widely.

"Very good, your evil queenliness."

"You forget who introduced Henry to the books," Regina gave back.

"I just didn't think you could be so nerdy." Emma was grinning.

"I guess it's a little paranoid but I think on some level I wanted Henry to believe in magic. I wanted him to know about possibilities. I also kind of wanted him to be the hero, someone like Charming. And I can't believe I'm saying this, either," Regina confessed.

"And that's what Henry became when he came to Boston, the hero of his own tale."

"With me as You-Know-Who," Regina stated.

"I always thought of you more as Bellatrix Lestrange, you know?"

"Really? What made you think that?"

Emma shrugged her shoulders not ready to confess that she'd had a crush on Helena Bonham Carter for years.

"Who are you if we're translating Storybrooke into Potter?"

"I always wanted to be Hermione Granger," Emma confessed.

"Of course, you did. Then your mother would be Professor McGonagall?"
Emma laughed.

"Yeah," she said.

Regina shook her head but grinned.

"Ow, ow, ow," Emma made.

Regina helped her lean against a tree. "You need a break," she said. "Here let me look at your back, I want to see how bad it is."

"No," Emma said looking at Regina like she had just made an indecent proposition. "Emma, I want to make sure it's just bruised and not something worse, okay? I'm not going to do magic on you, I promise."

But that wasn't Emma's problem. The problem was lifting her shirt, having Regina look at parts of her naked body and possibly touch it, too. She felt a little panicky. "I make you a deal. You show me your back, and you can have another drink," Regina tempted, waving her flask.

"I'm not an alcoholic, Regina," Emma said.

"But it'll help with the pain, hopefully. Come on. If there are people after us right now we don't have much time," she said quite seriously now.

Emma took a deep breath. "Help me with the jacket?"

Regina did.

Emma opened two buttons on her shirt to lift it up a little. She turned around so as not to let Regina see the heightened color in her head.

Regina gasped when she saw the beginning of the bruise that showed itself on Emma's right back. "Is it that bad?" Emma asked.

"Pretty bad, yeah." Regina stepped closer and now put a hand on the hot swollen flesh.

Now it was Emma who gasped.

"Easy," Regina soothed. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Again, not Emma's problem.

Regina lay her hands flat on the bruise, they felt cool at first but seemed to heat rather quickly. Emma clamped her teeth together, looking up at the sky that was slowly darkening.

Heat flew through her, or rather, it seemed to flow out of her. The pain eased considerably and then it seemed to vanish. Emma blinked in confusion.

"Regina!" Emma called out and jumped away from Regina's touch.

Regina stared at her hands which seemed to glow. Then her face contorted in pain and it brought her to her knees.

"What...?" she just barely got out as tears shot into her eyes.

"Regina?" Emma wanted to help Regina up, but then kept her from falling as she slumped to the side. Emma knelled beside her.

"What happened?"

"You magicked my pain away," Emma said.

"Not away, I'm afraid," Regina answered as her face contorted.

It became clear to Emma what she had done. She'd magicked the pain onto herself.

Emma flushed from a rush of anger. "Take it back. Whatever you did, reverse the spell."
Regina shook her head. "It's all right. Just give me a minute. I can deal with this as well as you can."
"This is not a contest, Regina. You don't win a fucking goblet of fire if you can stand my pain better
than I can," Emma yelled with tears in her eyes. "Give it back!"
"Language, Miss Swan," Regina admonished her.
Emma stared at her. "Don't get sassy with me now, evil queen. I want my pain back," she said,
pouting.
Regina merely smiled and then pulled herself up on Emma's arms that were around her.
"It's okay. Just let me take a sip of this and we can keep going." Regina took a hefty swig of her
flask and let it do its work.

Emma took it from her without a word and took one herself.
"Don't you think the injured one should be the one drinking?" Regina asked.
"You still owed me one for lifting my shirt. Always buy a girl a drink first."
"Cute. If one drink is all it takes, you come pretty cheap," Regina joked.

Emma blushed, hoping Regina couldn't see it in the fading light. She helped her to her feet.
"Are you okay? Do you think you can walk?"
"With a little help," Regina assured Emma and they set out again, while now leaning on her.

It was getting dark and the ground became decidedly more difficult to maneuver.
"Maybe we should rest for the night," Emma said.
"We can't be that far from help," Regina protested, even though her back was killing her. She had
berated herself inwardly for having been so foolish to take Emma's pain. There was a part of her,
however, which wasn't sorry at all, because she felt she'd done the right thing. After all, Emma had
rescued her from the arrow attack and then had to endure the full impact of their landing for her
troubles. It wasn't fair, and Regina felt that she'd balanced fairness just a little – not that this small
sacrifice could outweigh Emma saving her life again.
"We can't be that far from our enemies, either, and we could just run into them in the dark. We
should find a sheltered place for the night and get some rest," Emma answered a little testily. She was
still mad, Regina could tell, and probably exhausted from helping her walk.
"Let's sit over there," Emma pointed.

Regina didn't protest this time, she was too tired.

Emma helped Regina sit on another fallen tree and then stretched her back, looking around them.

Regina let her eyes wander as well, but couldn't see very far. She knew that making a fire wasn't in
their cards tonight and it was already growing colder.
"You wouldn't have a blanket in that bag of yours, would you?" Emma asked, as if reading her
thoughts.
"This is not Mary Poppins's bag, Emma. That one's in the closet at home," Regina said.

Emma looked at her questioningly.
"That was a joke."

Emma nodded.

Regina found it quite endearing, how Emma never seemed to know when she was joking about
these things. She seemed to think that anything was possible, now that she knew that Snow White and Prince Charming were her parents. It gave Emma a youthfulness, a charm Regina had never seen in anyone else.

"Then we have to make do without a blanket," Emma mused. There was a giant tree not too far away and Emma moved toward it.

"I'm sure we'll manage," Regina said.

"Well, I bet you wish by now Robin was here with you." It came out so unexpectedly that it seemed to even surprise Emma. She stopped walking, her body tensed.

"Would you stop with this nonsense already?" Regina admonished her, but her words were less sharp than they would have been if Regina hadn't been surprised by the jealousy she'd heard in Emma's tone.

"Don't tell me you don't like him," Emma said, her back rigid.

"I do like him but that doesn't mean anything. We hardly know each other."

Emma whipped around. "It means everything in these woods, Regina. This is the Enchanted Forest, a place for happy endings. And if you fall for Robin then everything will change, our lives will change."

"Maybe that's a good thing," Regina snapped.

Emma stared at her.

It had gotten too dark to see her expression, but Regina was sure it was confused, maybe even hurt. She lowered her head.

Emma took a couple of tentative steps toward her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that neither one of us is dating. We're spending a lot of time together... people talk," Regina revealed hesitantly.

"Have we gotten too close, Regina? Have I gotten too close? Are you casting me out now?"

Regina didn't answer, she kept staring at her boots. Her heart was beating too fast, thoughts whipping around in her head. She felt dizzy and ashamed.

"I know that you're scared of people getting too close. And I can empathize but that doesn't mean you have to... throw yourself at the first man that comes along. Robin is not the only option, Regina," Emma said earnestly.

Her words seemed to hit Regina in the chest like a fire ball, sending a wave of heat through her body. Did she actually mean that? Did she mean it the way Regina thought she did? And was that a good thing? Her body told her that it was, but her mind seemed undecided. Regina looked up at Emma, unsure of what to search for in her face. She was still too far away, but maybe she would say more, maybe she would tell her what she meant?

"Regina...," Emma was about to continue, but a noise interrupted her.

It sounded like the snap of a twig.

Regina stood as she saw Emma duck, turning. She couldn't see anyone in the dense foliage, the dim light. Emma crawled toward her, she plucked at her sleeve and Regina crouched down. A moan escaped her as her back protested against the movement.

Emma put her finger to her lips and Regina nodded. Talking was over for now. They moved behind a tree, straining their eyes against the darkness to see what had made the sound but nothing moved.

Emma pointed at the tall tree she had noticed earlier and they quietly scuttled towards it. Due to the uneven terrain, the roots had formed a small alcove. Emma bend a root outward and signed for
Regina to crawl into the space. Regina did, then helped Emma slip into the space beside her. It was a tight fit and if Regina had worried before that they would be cold, she now feared that they would catch fire. She already felt the heat between them, pressed against Emma who was lying half on top of her.

And then she heard them, or rather, she felt the vibration in the earth. Footsteps. At first she thought it might be an animal but no animal would bother trying to be this quiet. They both held their breaths as they listened into the darkness beyond the roots of their hiding place. There were at least two, that much Regina could tell. They weren't talking but they were getting closer.

Regina couldn't help but notice that Emma was holding her breath. She leaned forward, pressing her lips to Emma's ear. "Breathe," she whispered.

Emma looked at her, her eyes seemed to shine in panic, but then she slowly breathed in air. Her rib cage expanded against Regina's, pressing her curves into her. Regina felt trapped. The thought of flight and fight was tempting, to jump out of her hiding place and throw a fire ball at their pursuers before they even knew what hit them. But there was no way of telling how many men were out there, they could be outnumbered 10 to 1. Judging by the number of arrows that had been shot at them earlier that day, the odds could be even worse. But could it be worse to die fighting than lying here with Emma's breath against the sensitive skin of her neck after what she'd just said to Regina? Oh God, the things she had said!

Footsteps just below them, made Emma once again catch her breath.

Regina held hers too. Two men, just outside their hiding place. Regina closed her eyes. "Where did they go?" one of them asked quietly.

"I'm not sure. Maybe they're trying to climb up over there. It's leveled out some. Maybe they're trying their luck further on," the second man said. He had a deep voice and it was filled with authority.

Regina stiffened at the sound of the voice. It was familiar, but she wasn't able to place it.

Emma looked at her, frowning.

Regina shook her head slightly, there was no way they could communicate while these guys were so close.

"If they reach the path, our chance of capturing them is gone. Let's hurry," the second man then said and they walked on, the footsteps retreated.

Regina and Emma started breathing again.

"I know that voice," Regina said against Emma's ear.

Emma closed her eyes tightly, their faces so close, Regina felt the light brush of Emma's lashes. Her heart skipped a beat.

Emma lifted herself up a little, straining against the roots in her back. "Let me... slip behind you. Maybe that way we could get some sleep," she whispered.

Regina fought to change her position beneath her. It took them a few minutes but finally Emma settled behind her, her arm across Regina's waist holding her.

The earth was hard and a little damp and Regina didn't want to think about the kind of creatures that inhabited this space with them, but Emma was holding her and she felt safe. They were both safe - for now. She couldn't ask for anything more as she relaxed into the warmth embracing her and fell asleep.
Snow and Charming's Castle

Henry checked left and right before entering his mother's bedroom. He didn't mean to snoop around, he just wanted to be here for a moment because he had nothing else to do - and because he was worried. A wagon had arrived late the night before with two injured soldiers and some prisoners. It also brought two messages, one for David from Robin and one for himself from his moms, though it was obvious that Regina had written it.

She had apologized in it for not having helped the soldiers. She wrote that they didn't want her help. It was a plea to believe her, that she had wanted to help but couldn't. There was something in her words and the urgency in her usually impeccable handwriting that tore at him. His mom was on edge, he could feel it through her words. Only when she signed with 'we love you,' she seemed to relax into herself again, her writing strong, a little playful.

Interpreting a written text had always been Henry's kind of magic. Maybe that was why the fairy tale book Mary Margaret had given him, had stirred such strong convictions in him. But ever since he seemed to be able to look behind the text and feel the writer's emotions, memories, things that had been edited from the text. It was strange but it was also real.

Henry sat down on the bed, looking for any personal items on Regina's nightstand but there weren't any. He grinned. Regina didn't trust anyone in Snow White's castle and since the doors could only be locked from inside, and maids entered at least once a day, she had put her belongings away. Henry opened the bottom drawer of her nightstand and reached into the back. Sure enough, there was the book she was reading: The Hobbit. They were both reading it and Henry opened it on a bookmark, seeing how far she already was. She was far ahead of him as usual. His mom was a fast reader, he on the other hand liked to take his time, feel what the writer had felt, build the world in his own mind. It sometimes seemed to Henry that his mom only read these fantasy stories, stories about other worlds, because she was afraid she would somehow end up in one and not know where she was. It was her way of controlling that fear, to gather knowledge about all places, real and imaginary.

Henry closed the book and wanted to put it back when he felt something else in that space. He pulled it out and looked down at a photograph. It was the one that stood by his own bed in Storybrooke. It also stood on Emma's mantle but he hadn't even known that Regina owned a copy. It showed the three of them, Henry and his moms, smiling at the camera close-up. Ruby had taken it at the diner just a few weeks ago at his birthday and they all seemed happy.

Henry settled back on Regina's bed, the photo in his hands. He thought about that day... they had met for breakfast at the diner where Ruby took the picture, they had had breakfast. Then he had to go to school and his moms to work but they all met at Emma's that night – it had been her week with him – and they had cooked dinner together. Regina had brought a cake she had baked. They'd had a fun evening, he'd never seen Emma and Regina so relaxed with each other. At midnight, Emma had sent him to bed since he had to go to school the next day. He hadn't really wanted to go but she'd said they would just clean up and unless he wanted to help clean her kitchen... he'd trotted up the stairs to his bedroom. Then he had thought better of it and had wanted to help clean because it really beat going to bed, spending more time with his moms. But they hadn't moved from the couch yet, they had been talking.

Henry didn't know how they had started the conversation, it seemed far from anything they had talked about when he'd gone to bed but he heard his mom say:

"... education wasn't something of high value where I come from. You just have to look at the curse to know that. I honestly thought that cursing everyone to a life without happy endings would make
me happy. But what did it really mean? I cursed myself to live with the very people I hated the most. Now I wonder how I could have been so stupid."

"Rumple had talked you into it," Emma had argued.

"Yes, but it didn't take him much. I was just full of hate and vengeance. I didn't think. Nobody much did back there. I think the only people I know who educated themselves much were Rumple and Belle. Rumple so he could manipulate people and for his own magic's sake, and Belle... she just wanted knowledge for its own sake."

"And to read about adventures," Emma had said. They'd talked about the Enchanted Forest that night, and Henry had listened from the stairs. Yes, he knew that it was wrong to eavesdrop but he had learned some things about his mom that he would never have known otherwise. Some of the things she'd done, and how she regretted them, how she woke every morning feeling guilty, and how hard it was to make up for her past mistakes when sometimes she wanted to just use her magic to forget. And how Henry was the reason for her not to do that.

Things had changed between them all after that night. Regina had asked Henry if he wanted to invite Emma over for dinner or a movie night, something she hadn't done before. And two weeks ago, he had just called Emma up and invited her over because he knew Regina wouldn't mind. There was something else... the looks. Regina was sometimes looking at Emma when she didn't realize it. And Emma looked at Regina, too. That one time, Henry had caught his ma totally checking Regina out. It had made him a little uncomfortable and he hadn't said anything, but it had happened.

"Henry?" He was roused out of his thoughts by a voice at the door. It was Snow, she was standing in the doorway, looking at him. "I was looking for you. Isn't this Regina's room?" She asked, already knowing the answer. She seemed reluctant to enter.

"Yeah, it is. I just wanted...," he shrugged his shoulders, unable to explain what had brought him here.

Snow smiled. She made herself step into the room and came over to him while he moved from his relaxed position against the hardboard to sit on the edge again. Snow sat down beside him and looked at the picture he was holding. "That's a nice photo," she said.

"Ruby took it on my birthday."

"You seem very happy."

He nodded, thoughtfully. Then he looked up and into Snow's dark eyes, they were full of love, compassion, and they seemed knowing, too. And maybe she did know what had just occurred to him.

"We all were," he said. "We're happy when we're together. Do you think... do you think they... love each other?" he asked.

Snow's eyes widened in surprise but it was far from the shock he thought this question, the insinuation would give her. Had she thought about this, too?

"I... I don't know, Henry. I really don't know."

"But you think it's possible?" he asked.

Snow took a deep breath. "From what you told me the other day, from what I've seen I can't say for
sure. There's something going on but I don't know what it is."

"They look at each other when they think nobody's watching. Ma... she...," but he only blushed because he didn't know how to say that Emma had stared at Regina's assets.

"You think Emma likes Regina?"

Henry nodded.

"And do you think Regina feels the same?"

"Mom's very private. Sneaky, too. But she looks at Emma. And sometimes they look into each others' eyes without realizing it, I think. And then they look away. It's weird but they seem... almost giddy when we're all together," he voiced what he just realized. Of course, they had always been happy to spend time with him, usually individually. But lately, yes, there was much more laughter, more banter between his moms. Their annoyance with each other had turned into good-natured teasing, and he couldn't even say when it had begun. The change had occurred gradually.

"Do you want this, Henry? Your mothers together, as a couple?" Snow asked.

Henry could tell it took her some effort. "If it makes them happy, yeah. They deserve that, Snow. I think they're happier together."

Snow nodded.

"You don't like it, though, do you?" Henry asked.

Snow looked at him and then reached over to grab his hand. "I want Emma to be happy. I want her to have a family. Do I wish, she would have chosen... fallen for someone else? Yes. Regina isn't the easiest person to love. But that's not for me to decide. Love is random, with a will of its own. I wouldn't have thought that I would fall for Charming when I first met him but it happened. True love is the greatest power there is, I'm not going to mess with it."

Henry smiled and then hugged his grandma.
An Old Acquaintance

There wasn’t any light yet but the birds could already smell morning and started singing. Emma woke drowsily in the cramped space they had hidden the night before, but she still felt somewhat rested and comfortable. The warm body she held in her arms had something to do with the latter and as her eyes grew accustomed to the semi-darkness Emma looked at a sleeping Regina.

It was like a dream she'd never had, like a yearning she hadn't felt or let herself feel because this was what she'd always wanted, but had never acknowledged. To wake with the one she loved. To feel them, to be able to touch them. And she closed her eyes to enjoy this moment for a second longer, a second she stole from the day and the urgency of their situation just to be close to Regina – without her knowing.

When she opened her eyes again, she pulled her arm from around Regina and touched her shoulder. "Regina," she said softly, far too softly. Emma cleared her throat to lose the tenderness in her voice and make it real, audible.

"Regina."

Regina stirred. "Hmm?"

"It's almost morning," Emma said quietly.

Regina turned her head toward her. She blinked at Emma.

"How's your back?"

"Feels better," Regina answered sleepily. "I guess I'll have to see when I get up."

"May I...," Emma cleared her throat again. "May I have a look at the bruise?"

"Are you going to buy me a drink first?" Regina smiled wickedly.

"You're the one with the flask, but sure, when we're back in Storybrooke we can go for drinks," Emma tried to sound nonchalant but she could see that Regina was onto her, that this was Emma asking her out on a date.

"We'll see about that," she answered non-committal. "You wanted to look at my back?" She then reminded Emma who nodded.

Emma put as much space between them as she could, backing into the roots behind her. Then she pulled Regina's jacket and shirt up.

"How does it look?" Regina asked.

"It's a pretty purple that leans toward blue, not likely to disappear in a day or two," she told Regina and pulled her clothes back down.

"I didn't think it would," Regina answered. She gave Emma a brave little smile and was about to find her way out of this enclosed space when Emma touched her shoulder again.

"Regina?"

She looked back at Emma.
"Thank you," Emma simply said.

"I think I should be thanking you, considering that you saved my life. Taking that bruise from you was the least I could do."

"You know you shouldn't have," Emma admonished but not in earnest.

"That's what friends do, they share," Regina answered. "We should get going." She then reminded Emma and they both worked to push at the roots to get out of their hiding place.

"Last night you said you recognized one of the men by his voice. Do you know from where?" Emma asked as she was helping Regina to her feet. "The back holding up okay?"

"Yeah, so far. It hurts but it's not as bad..." But Regina didn't get any farther before they heard noises above them and a moment later six men had jumped out of the tree above and surrounded them.

Regina's hands filled with fireballs immediately.

Emma drew her sword at the six armed men.

"Hold on, just a second," one of the men said.

Emma recognized his voice from last night and looked at Regina. The frown on her face told her that she was thinking hard from where she knew the man.

Meanwhile, he had stepped closer, holding up his hands. Of course, one of them held a sword of its own, but he didn't seem likely to use it just yet. Instead he bowed deeply to Regina. "My Queen," he said and smiled. It wasn't a very pleasant smile.

Emma stepped forward, trying to get Regina behind her.

Unfortunately, Regina didn't move. She faced the man, extinguishing the fire in her hands with a flick of her wrist. "Marcus," she addressed the man. "Would you kindly tell me what this is all about?"

Emma looked at Regina. She seemed to have grown several inches, standing tall and even though she was smaller than the man before her, she seemed to look down on him.

"The queen has come back to her kingdom, to her people," he said and grinned.

Regina smiled also but Emma recognized it as her shark-smile which wasn't a good sign. Emma just wasn't sure for a moment for whom.

"Well, it's certainly changed," Regina said pointing in the direction of her former kingdom.

"Yes, they poisoned it. But with your help – your magic – the land will recover. And those miscreants will suffer our vengeance," Marcus said in grand gesture. And then he grinned even wider.

"Our vengeance, Marcus? Where do you figure yourself in my kingdom?"

"Well, I have an army, former soldiers of the evil queen plus some recruits from these woods. They're very loyal," he told Regina.

"Loyal to you, I presume?"
"That is correct," he answered.

"And you figured that I would want to combine my magic with your army to bring this kingdom to its former glory?"

"Well, not just your magic," he said and let his gaze travel over her body.

Emma who'd been quiet until now stirred, stepping in front of Regina.

Marcus glared at her. "And who would you be?"

"Think of me as the Savior," she told him.

Marcus grinned then he started laughing and his men laughed with him.

Regina touched Emma's arm. "I will deal with him, Emma," she said and stepped next to her.

"Marcus, you know I'm grateful for all the years you and my loyal soldiers served me, but you can't seriously think that I would form an ally with a former guard? I've been forced to marry a man I didn't love once, I'm not going to do it again."

"Love?" Marcus laughed some more. "My queen, please tell me you don't suddenly believe in something like love. This is not about love, it's about power. And we can have that power back. You and I," he explained as if to a child.

Regina looked at him then she looked at Emma, their eyes locking for a moment, before she looked back at Marcus.

"I will let you in on a secret, Marcus, something I learned after I left the Enchanted Forest. There is no greater power than love, not in this world. Good never loses because good people believe that they're always right. Bad people – like us – we know we're wrong and that defeats us every single time. So, the answer is no. There's not gonna be an alliance for you, not with my magic, and certainly not with my body," she told him in much the same tone he had used on her. And she had barely finished her little speech before the fireballs were back in her hands and she was firing one at Marcus.

Marcus ducked surprisingly fast for a man of his height and the fireball hit the earth, stirring up a cloud of sand and leaves. Regina kept shooting fireballs while Emma was fighting off attackers with her sword, kicking at them with her long legs. They held up well against their six enemies but, unfortunately, six additional men appeared out of their hiding places among the trees around them.

Emma felt herself losing ground as three men attacked her at the same time. She was blocking three swords above her head, kneeling, her left hand forming a fireball and throwing it at her attackers who were pushed backwards. Regina turned and grinned at her, her complexion heightened by the adrenalin that rushed through her. But that was the moment, one of the attackers got behind her, grabbing her.

"Regina!" Emma yelled.
Then her attention was diverted by vibrations in her feed from a group of horses, rushing closer.

Everybody felt it, everybody ceased fighting and looked around.

Then Emma saw them: Robin, Mulan, Little John and about ten soldiers were heading toward them.

Already the first of their attackers was running toward the cliff over the valley - and it was Marcus.

Emma turned back to Regina and saw her fall to the floor. The man who had grabbed her, small, a little overweight, started running.

"Mulan, get him!" Emma called out, pointing after him.

Mulan reacted quickly, turning her horse and chasing after the man.

Emma ducked another attack and kicked the man to the ground. She pushed herself up and ran over to Regina. "Regina," she called out, leaning over her. "Regina, what..?"

But Regina's eyes were closed. She was unconscious, she was like dead.
The fight didn't last very long. Half of the men had fled to the cliff where ropes helped them escape into the valley. The royal guards couldn't follow as archers opened fire on them as they tried.

Regina was still unconscious and Emma was at a loss as to what she could do for her. She couldn't detect a bump on Regina's head, there was no bruising around her neck, her heart was beating but she just wouldn't wake up.

Mulan and one of the soldiers brought the man who had attacked Regina.

Emma jumped up from the floor, running at him. "What did you do to her?" She called out, then grabbed him at his shirt and pulled him to her. He was smaller than her, her anger almost lifting him off his feet. But he didn't answer her, he just looked at her bemusedly.

"What happened?" Robin asked as he and Little John came closer, breathless from their own fights. Robin saw Regina lying lifeless and Emma could see how his instincts made his muscles twitch. He wanted to hurt somebody badly. But he'd have to get in line for that because this little thug was hers. She shook the man by his shirt.

"What did you do to her?" she asked again.

He merely shook his head, his eyes mocking her.

"All right." Emma pushed him back onto his feet. "Hold him," she told Mulan and the soldier. She looked at Regina for a moment, setting her jaw in a determined line. Then she turned back to the man who'd hurt the woman she loved.

"You were one of the evil queen's guards, yes?" she asked him and now he nodded. "Then you know what she liked to do with people's hearts." It was a statement, not a question. He didn't answer her, he merely looked up at her suspiciously.

"Well, Regina isn't the only one who's able to pull hearts from people's bodies, you know. I can do it," she informed him. It wasn't a lie but it wasn't necessarily true either because she had never done it before. She knew how, though. Having someone try and take your heart out of your chest quickly taught you the essentials.

Emma put her hand to the man's chest, lying it where his heart beat strongly. "I will pull your heart from you and then I will crush it to dust – and you'll be watching," she told him.

He didn't seem to believe her just yet.

Emma had hoped that the threat would be enough, that she didn't have to do this but he left her no choice. She couldn't help Regina if she didn't know what he'd done and she would do what it took to get that information. And nobody even tried to stop her.

Emma made a claw of the hand that had lain on the man's chest and she pushed slightly. She felt the flesh give way under her fingertips and saw the man flinch in pain.

"I'm gonna do it slowly," she informed him while she felt her stomach churn. "I want you to feel the pain."

And he did. It made her sick to her stomach but she pushed her hand further into the heat of his
chest. She felt life around her hand, the mechanisms of his body, his emotions, his anger, his fear. But what she mostly felt was the strong beating of his heart that led her hand forward. He cried out in pain as her knuckles disappeared in his chest.

"Noooo!!! No, I will tell, please!" he cried out.

Emma pulled her hand back quickly. She felt the urge to be sick, to collapse from the disgust she felt at herself, but she fought it down.

Regina's attacker was already babbling.

She didn't quite get what he was saying so she grabbed him by his shirt again. "What did you do?"

"It was poison. All our daggers were coated with it and I cut her, on her arm," he said quickly.

Emma turned to see Robin kneel next to Regina and check for the wound. There was a deep cut on her left forearm, right through her jacket and shirt. The wound gaped angrily at Emma.

"What kind of poison?" she growled at the man.

"I don't know."

"Don't make me rip your heart out, man! Tell me what poison!" Emma shook him some more, adrenaline rushing through her, making her angry, making her stronger than she had any right to be.

"I really don't know. Marcus gave it to us. He's got an antidote, too, but he didn't tell us what it was. She's got twelve hours."

"What?"

"She's got twelve hours. She'll be asleep but if she doesn't get the antidote, she's not gonna wake again."

As fast as it had come, all strength went out of Emma's limbs and she let go of the man. Her anger dissipated just as quickly. For a moment, she felt nothing and she collapsed next to Regina's unconscious body. She lay her hands on it, warm but still sort of lifeless.

"I'm going to get that antidote," Robin said.

"In twelve hours? My dad's reinforcement haven't even arrived yet, have they?" Emma asked, desperately.

Robin set his jaw. "We can do it. We found a way down to the valley from up here. We don't have to take the way around."

"They'll be waiting for you."

"We outnumber them," Robin argued.

"Not even 2 to 1," she argued back. "And they have the home advantage."

"What else can we do?" He hissed at her.

"I'm going to get her to the castle, to Henry," she said.

"Henry? What can he do? He doesn't happen to be a powerful wizard, does he?"
"No, but he's her true love. He's gonna kiss her and she's going to wake up," Emma said, her confidence in her plan growing. She turned and looked at Little John. "I need that second wagon ready and a few guards, four." Then she turned to Mulan. "I need you to drive the wagon while I take care of Regina. Will you do it?"

"I will," Mulan said earnestly.

"We have to hurry," Emma said, talking to all of them.

"You can't be serious. True love's kiss, that's a myth. You can't risk her life like that," Robin argued.

"I've seen it work. It worked for my parents and it worked for Henry when he fell under a sleeping curse," she told him.

"You saw it work?"

"I made it work," she said and they looked at each other.

There was a battle going on at that moment, between blue and green eyes, between Robin and Emma, a battle of wills.

And then Robin said something that surprised them all, "If you think it'll work, let me try it."

"What?!"

"I want to try to wake her with a kiss," he said.

"You're not her true love," she told him, her hand reaching out to grab his shirt to keep him from trying anything. She pushed at him, her other hand on Regina. She would not let him kiss her.

"How do you know?"

"It's Henry, she told me," Emma argued.

"But what if it's not anymore. What if she has feelings for me and I could save her right here, right now? Would you rather drive all the way to the castle, possibly arriving too late and thus risk her life when the solution, the cure could be right here?"

Emma started shaking. She wanted to push Robin away but her strength once again left her in the face of this possibility. Regina had said she liked Robin. What if she hadn't let herself feel more because she knew that it was impossible? What if Robin was right? He certainly felt it, Emma could see it in his eyes.

Her own filled with tears and she lowered her head, at the same time losing the grip on his shirt.

"Do it," she said but as he leaned down over Regina, she had to look away.

Nothing happened.
Robin put his lips to Regina's and nothing happened. She didn't wake, she didn't even stir.

Emma didn't know whether to feel relieved or devastated. She didn't want Regina to love Robin, but she did want her to regain consciousness.

Robin looked up at her then away in embarrassment.

"All right, let's move," Emma said. "We need to get her to the wagon ASAP."

"What is ASAP?" one of the soldiers asked.

"As soon as possible, make that as fast as possible. Little John?" She called to him.

He nodded and stepped closer. He knelled next to Regina, in the spot Robin had left vacant when he stood up, and lifted her into his arms.

"How can we get out of here quickest?" Emma asked Mulan.

"We came down here from the north, there is a way that goes all the way from the top of that hill to the valley. But it's a long trek, we'll lose time. There should be a way to get out of here if we go further south," Mulan said with confidence.

"You don't know that," Robin said. "We could waste precious time searching for a way when we already know a way out of here."

Emma looked at him. She knew he only wanted to help but Regina's welfare wasn't his responsibility, it was hers.

"We try south, but just in case we need assistance I need some of those soldiers to ride the north route and alert the men on the hill. They should be able to pull us out with ropes, if all else fails," she said.

"I'll go," Robin said and jumped onto his horse. "You two with me. The rest of you make sure everybody gets out safe," he commanded and then spurred his horse to ride north, two of the soldiers following him.

"Let's go," Emma said and the rest of them set out south.

It only took them about half an hour to reach a place where they could actually climb up and reach the narrow road that led up the hill. It wasn't effortlessly but with the horses they had and Little John giving everyone a lift, they managed. They made it back to the crossroads where most of their trek still waited in just over an hour. It was now before half past seven, about one and a half hours since Regina had been wounded.

Little John ordered the second supply wagon to be emptied but it all went too slowly for Emma. She ordered some of the soldiers to help.

One of them had the nerve to mumble under his breath, "I don't know why we bother. She's the evil queen."

Emma grabbed him by his armor, pushing his helmet from his head. He was a young man, only a few years older than Henry. "You don't know, that's right. You don't know that that woman saved your king and queen's lives, together with mine and our son's You don't know that this woman regrets, that she's still waking from nightmares over what she's done. And you don't know that she's her worst enemy and that she would rather die than ever be responsible for a single death, a single
wound inflicted in her name. She just... she could die because she's not that person anymore. She hates the person she's been," she yelled at him, tears in her eyes.

"I hate her too," the soldier said.

She let go of him. "Well, she cares for you," she told him and pushed another soldier out of the way as she started pulling boxes out of the wagon. The soldier she had reprimanded picked up his helmet, but then gave it to one of his fellow soldiers to help Emma lift a big box of apples out of the wagon. Everybody seemed a little bit more motivated after that and soon the wagon was ready. Four guards mounted their horses and two more horses were tied to the back of the wagon after Little John had put Regina inside.

Robin still wasn't back, but Emma didn't want to wait for him. She didn't have the time. They only had about ten hours to get to the castle and that would cut it very short. If there were any delays, they might not make it.

"You might wanna take everyone up the hill, John. Robin probably wants to attack as soon as possible," she said to him as she climbed into the wagon.

"Yeah, I figure as much, though we'll need those reinforcements badly."

"My father will have sent them as soon as he's gotten the message, I'm sure of it," she said. "They'll be on their way, we'll probably meet them."

He nodded. "Well, good luck, Emma. I hope Regina makes it, she's a lovely lady," he said and grabbed Emma's arm in a goodbye.

"We'll make it, we'll have to," she gave back and then she called to Mulan on the driver's seat. "Let's go, Mulan!"

The wagon jerked into movement and Emma sat down next to Regina's sleeping body. She took her hand in her own, feeling the steady beating of her pulse.
The shaking of the wagon was terrible. Emma had already felt sick earlier when she had pushed her hand into the thug’s chest and this ride made her positively seasick. She pulled Regina's upper body into her arms and pushed herself to the middle of the head of the wagon, both her legs stemmed into the sides of it. The shaking lessened and she pulled Regina tightly against her, whispering soothing words unto unconscious ears.

"You're gonna be all right," she whispered. "I promise, I'll get you to Henry in time. He's gonna save you, Regina." She repeated these words over and over. Her mind focused on what had to be true. She trusted Mulan, she would do everything in her power to help Emma save Regina. Because she understood.

But it took so long, waiting in the back, not even able to look outside as the wagon was like one of those things you saw on westerns, with a roof because people slept in it. She could only look out back and nothing looked familiar and nothing looked in the least note-worthy.

"You know I thought about what you said on Easter, that we should have all our holidays at your house because your kitchen is bigger. I don't think so. My kitchen's big enough to cook in it. We're only three. I know you only want to be at the mansion 'cause you know where everything is and everything is there and it's where you put it. You have to give up some control sometimes, Regina," she rambled and she didn't care.

"I know that you need that, control. I know because I feel the same way. We're pretty alike in some ways. Don't scowl, you know it's true. We both have abandonment issues from our childhood. Your mother's never been there for you and, well, my parents weren't simply there. And I know that you blame yourself for that, but, please, don't. I've forgiven you, you know. I really have. You have to forgive yourself for some of the things you've done because... because I know you think that people can't love you if they know. But the thing is...," Emma stopped, not even sure she could say it while the other woman was unconscious and couldn't hear her.

"The thing is Henry loves you. And he wouldn't if you weren't loveable. You know how smart he is. He's a lot smarter than either of us. I don't know where he gets that, really. Probably from all the reading he does 'cause let's face it, I'm not that smart, Neal's not that smart... and you sometimes lack a little sense. Don't be mad, you said so yourself, on Henry's birthday. I think you're smart. And I think you're loveable 'cause.... 'cause I love you, Regina." Emma closed her eyes. She was breathing heavily into Regina's hair from just the exertion of having made the confession.

"I love you. I know you think I'm crazy, and obnoxious, and disorganized, a little lazy. I'm not saying you're wrong. And I know... I know you couldn't love me 'cause of all those things. But that doesn't mean that I can't love you 'cause I do. You're amazing."

For a while, Emma simply held Regina. She stared out of the back and thought about all the ways Regina was amazing, about the things she had admired her for pretty much from the first. And, yes, she had admired her, even though she didn't want to.

"You did a great job with raising Henry, you're still doing it. I know it hasn't been easy on him with the curse and I know you have regrets but he turned out good... I know 'well', he turned out well. Stop correcting me all the time. It's annoying, but it's okay. I know you do it for my own good and for Henry, so that he doesn't grow up butchering the English language like I do. You're good at scrabble. I know I say I hate you for it, but I don't. I don't hate you at all. Do you know that I still have that shirt of yours? I'm not wearing it anymore but it hangs in my closet. I'm afraid I've gone all
'Brokeback Mountain' on you with that shirt. I love it. I'd actually thought of wearing it on Christmas, you know, just to see your face. And then I thought you wouldn't like it, or wouldn't recognize it. Do you even know what I'm talking about?" 

Emma smiled to herself, thinking about how she'd ended up wearing one of Regina's shirts. This made her think of Regina wearing it, how she always looked just perfect. "You are so beautiful. I know you know that. Nobody who dresses like you wouldn't. You know exactly what to wear and how to wear it. You have great taste but I like you best in jeans and a simple top. When we're at the mansion or at my place, just hanging out, relaxed. When you smile, and when you laugh. When you tell me something I didn't know about you. Sometimes I can't breathe properly because you take my breath away, especially when you smile. Or when you... when we tease each other and you go all 'what did you just say to me?' And sometimes you roll your eyes at me, you do that a lot. Am I really that horrible? I know you like me, don't even try to deny it. You like me because Henry loves me and you trust his judgment. And because I make you laugh. And because I love your food. You love to cook for me, I know that, even though you always complain when I come for dinner. I know you like me." 

Emma shook her head. "I know you can't love me, Regina. Not like I want you to, but you like me. I'll always be your friend and somehow we'll get back to how we were before we left Storybrooke the other day. When you'll be all right, if you want we can leave tomorrow, right after Henry woke you up. If you want to leave just wake up, Regina. I need you... to wake up. Henry and I need you. Can you imagine the kind of student he will be if you don't. He'll turn more and more like me and then we'll just hang around the house all day, playing video games or watching movies without any motivation to do anything. You have to come back to us. We love you, Regina. We love you..."
Emma jumped out of the wagon, refusing to pay attention to her weakened legs. She had been stemming them into the side of the wagon for the better part nine hours and she knew that if it wasn't for the adrenalin, they would probably already have given out on her. But there wasn't any time for that. She looked at her watch before she carefully pulled Regina's unconscious body from the wagon and carried her up the stairs to the castle. They had minutes to save her.

During the last few hours she had felt Regina's pulse weaken, her heartbeat slowing until it was barely detectable. She had thought of CPR but was positive that whatever kind of poison Regina had been infected with was one of those magical concoctions immune to rational medical methods of keeping someone alive. Her world didn't register in the Enchanted Forest, you had to believe to save a life, she had to believe that Henry could save her.

And that's why she called his name as she entered the castle, carrying Regina in her arms.

"Henry!!" There was only silence thrown back at her. Then there was the noise of running feet, but they belonged to servants. "Get our son. Get Henry," she told them. "Henry!!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. Then she looked around herself. The door to the library stood ajar. "Bring him into the library," she called after the retreating maid who had was just now hurrying up the stairs.

Emma pushed Regina up further into her arms which wanted to give out on her. But she couldn't let them. She made herself carry her love into the library where she put her down on an ottoman. She knelt beside her.

"Stay with me Regina, please, we're here. You're gonna be alright," she said and wanted to call for her son once more when she saw something move out of the corner of her eyes. Someone had gotten out of an armchair facing a lighted fire in the fireplace.

"Ma?" he asked drowsily.

"Henry, come here. You have to save her. You have to kiss your mom!"

"What?!" He rushed over and knelted on the other side of the ottoman. He leaned over Regina. "What happened?"

"We don't have time, Henry. You have to kiss her. You're her true love, baby. Please!" she told him.

"But..." Henry looked up at Emma. She was distraught, she had tears in her eyes, she looked drawn, heart-broken. "You do it!" he said.

"Hen... what? I..."

"You have to kiss her. You love her, don't you?"

"Henry," she warned him. "We don't have time for this. You have to save her."

"No, you have to save her, you have to kiss her. I know it, ma. Just do it," he argued.

Emma's tears came in earnest now, she didn't know what to do. She had thought of kissing her, of making this real. But she knew better. Regina didn't love her.

"She doesn't love me, kid," she said and looked up pleadingly at their son.
"She does," he said. "Please, do it. You can save her."

Emma looked deeply into Henry's eyes. He believed in this, he believed that his mothers were in love. And maybe if she believed, too...

Emma wiped her tears from her cheeks and lowered her head over Regina's. She pressed her lips to hers...

A ripple went through the room, ripping Emma's reality apart. There was sunlight, a blue sky and her heart was filled with happiness. She could feel a notion of what life would be with Regina, the love that would fill them up for the rest of their lives.

It only lasted the fragment of a second but it had filled Emma with a sense of what life with Regina would feel like. She opened her eyes as she lifted her head and saw Regina slowly come back to life.

"Henry." It was a quiet plea coming from Regina.

"Mom, I'm here. You're all right," he said, his words choking on his own tears that were now coming.

Emma felt herself shaking. Regina would be okay, she was waking up.

"Henry," stronger this time. Regina lifted her arm and grabbed onto Henry's shirt. She pulled herself up and him into her arms.

Emma sobbed.

"You're okay, you're okay," she said.

Regina looked at her, but she didn't look happy, she looked frightened.

"It's okay," Emma said, rubbing Regina's arm to reassure her.

"I'm tired. I need some rest," Regina said.

Henry pulled back a little but didn't let go of her. He looked from her to Emma and back, not quite understanding what was going on.

"Would you help your mom up to her room, Henry? She needs rest," Emma said, looking at him pleadingly. "I'm a little tired out."

"But you..."

"It's okay. Regina needs some time to rest. She's been through a lot, okay?"

Henry thought for a moment then he nodded. "Sure, I'll help her."

"Thank you, Henry. I'll have to talk to David... or Snow. Do you know where they are?"

Henry shook his head. "Snow was playing with the boys before I came in here, in Killian's room," he then remembered as he helped Regina to stand. She was leaning heavily on him and he held onto her carefully. Regina seemed weaker, more fragile even than when she was unconscious and possibly dying. And she wouldn't look at Emma while Emma couldn't take her eyes off her.

Emma could see that he was confused, that he didn't understand how true love's kiss could not be what everyone had always told him it was. Emma hardly understood herself, but she understood that
Regina needed time. And Emma would give her all the time she needed.

"Take care of your mom, Henry," Emma said.

Henry nodded. He led Regina slowly out of the room. At the foot of the stairs, a male servant offered to carry her up the stairs. Henry nodded. Regina didn't seem strong enough to ascend the three flights of stairs with only his help.

Emma collapsed into an armchair and pulled her knees to her chest. She felt numb and yet everything hurt.

She knew that Regina loved her, and she knew that Regina was too afraid to face this love. She had seen it clearly in her eyes. She couldn't... wouldn't confess to it. And all that Emma had felt, what she was sure Regina had felt as well, meant nothing. It was a possibility, it wasn't the promise of eternal happiness she'd always thought it would be. With Henry it had been different. Of course, it had been different, it was a different kind of love when she woke him from the sleeping curse. And they had both wanted a mother-son relationship; they had been ready for it, open to it.

But that wasn't the way Regina felt. She had seemed shell-shocked, she hadn't known at all.

"Oh, God," Emma breathed and buried her face in her hands.

"Emma! Emma, are you alright?" a voice from the door asked. It was Snow and she rushed into the room to her side.

"I'm...," but the word 'fine' wouldn't come and how ironic was that? The mantra of everybody who wasn't fine but was constantly asked and she couldn't even form it. She just felt too 'unfine.' And there were those tears that just wouldn't stop falling. She brushed at them as her mother knelled before her, trying to look into her eyes.

"What happened?" Snow asked.

"Regina almost died," Emma said. "But she's going to be all right. Henry... it was Henry," she added, not quite ready to reveal that her love had saved the woman her parents hated... or feared, possibly both.

"How are you? You look..." Snow seemed unsure of what to say, but settled on, "Tired."

Emma pulled her face into what she hoped was a smile. "I'm tired but... where's dad? We found them, the men who terrorized those villages. They were Regina's guards from her castle. They thought, she'd do what she did then, become evil again. She refused and one of them cut her. She's gonna be all right, now, but she almost died," Emma repeated as her mind ran in that circle of despair of almost having lost her.

"I's okay, honey. She'll be all right. I'm going to send for Doc and he's going to have a look at her, make sure she's all right. Okay?"

Emma nodded, her eyes glassy.
"And you should... I'll have someone help you to your room," she said before she hugged Emma hard.

Emma clung to her in return. "We almost lost her, mom," she sobbed because she couldn't keep it in. "What would we have done without her? What would Henry... Henry..." But no more words would come, she couldn't get them through her pain, her anguish.
Emma stood in the doorway to Regina's room, watching her two favorite people. Regina was sitting up in bed in her nightgown while Henry sat at her side, holding onto her hand. They talked in low tones and Emma knocked at the door frame to make her presence known.

"Hey," she said, smiling shyly. She could see Regina sit up straighter as she looked up. But she wouldn't meet Emma's eyes.

"Hey, ma. How're you?" Henry asked.

He had tried to see her last night but Snow had told him that his mother was exhausted and needed rest.

That wasn't entirely true, because in Emma's case it had meant that she had cried a lot, that her mother had held her for most of the night, and that she felt frail and tired this morning. Things had gotten better after a long bath and seeing Regina and Henry now, alive and rested, made all the anxiety she still had about Regina's health go away. She looked well this morning as the color had returned to her skin and there was some fire in her eyes - even if those eyes wouldn't look at her.

"I'm good. May I come in?" Emma asked.

Regina hesitated before she nodded.

Emma walked into the room more confidently than she felt and then sat down on Regina's bed. She had formed a plan earlier in the day that she wanted to put Regina at ease, that she wouldn't pressure her and remembering that plan now she stretched herself out on the end of the bed. She gave one of Regina's feet a squeeze.

"How are you this morning?" she asked, smiling up at Regina.

"Doc says I'll be fine. He wasn't especially thrilled about the bruise on my back but the cut is almost healed," Regina answered and showed Emma her left arm which had sported an angry wound the day before. There was only a thin reddish line now.

"Only in Fairy Tale Land," Emma mused.

"Yeah, I wish that would go for all my injuries," Regina said and rubbed her back.

"Well, that wasn't your injury to begin with and if you had just let it go...," Emma chided and let the rest of the sentence hang.

"I didn't really make a conscious effort to rid you of the bruise, it just happened, okay? Let it drop, Emma," Regina told her.

"What're you guys talking about?" Henry asked curiously.

"You mom magicked my injury onto herself? Is that the proposition?"

"It was an accident," Regina argued. "I didn't mean to do it."

"But you did," Henry said and smiled.

"Henry," Emma said and he turned to her. "It's not a big deal."
"Yeah, it is. And I don't know why you..."

"Henry, please. I'm... I've got a headache. I think I should sleep a little more," Regina interrupted him.

Henry did what he had done the evening before, he looked from Regina to Emma then back to Regina in disbelief. It was plain to see he didn't understand. "But..."

"Hey, why don't we leave Regina to get some more sleep and I don't know, take a walk in the gardens?"

"It's raining," Henry pouted.

"Come on, we'll find something to do. After breakfast, that is. Man, I'm hungry," Emma said, while in truth her stomach was in knots.

Regina smiled at Emma thankfully.

Emma smiled back. She didn't really feel like it but she knew that she would have to give Regina some time and space, before she would try to talk to her. Before she would try to continue the conversation they'd started in the woods when Emma had wanted to tell Regina how she felt. Because that still seemed kind of necessary. A declaration. A vow of some sort.

Emma pulled herself into a standing position and then tucked at Henry's sleeve. "Come on, kid. Your mom needs her rest."

Henry got up reluctantly but he was probably hopeful that Emma would now talk to him, maybe explain what was going on. He leaned down over Regina and kissed her on the cheek. "I'll come back later," he said.

"All right, but give me a few hours, okay? Almost dying takes it out of you," she said in jest but neither of the three could even smile at her comment. They looked a little awkwardly past each other.

"Sleep tight," Emma then addressed Regina as she pushed Henry toward the door.

"Thank you, Emma," Regina said and her voice sounded serious.

Emma looked back at her and their eyes met for the first time since that kiss that had changed everything if not in the way Emma had hoped for. "You're welcome," she said and smiled at Regina. She had to pull herself from the intense look from caramel-colored eyes.

"I'm glad you're all right," she said softly before leaving the room and closing the door behind her.

They were descending the stairs together, mother and son.

"So what do you want for breakfast, kid? I'm sure if you ask nicely, Granny will make you some pancakes," Emma asked with more enthusiasm than she felt.

"I just wanna know what's going on between you and mom," Henry gave back and looked at Emma
darkly through his bangs.

Emma sighed.

"I'm not sure what to tell you, Henry. It's com..."

"Don't give me 'it's complicated.' That's just lame. I don't understand how you can go from true love's..."

"Shhhh," Emma made.

Henry lowered his voice as he continued, "From true love's kiss to nothing. That's not how it's supposed to be!"

"I know... I..." Emma was at a loss as to what to tell him. Would she have chosen this limbo of insecurity if she had had a choice? Certainly not. But this wasn't just about what she wanted. It was also about what Regina wanted and from the look in her eyes since they shared that kiss, Regina didn't want to talk about it.

"Let's go into the library, okay?" Emma asked.

Henry nodded.

They settled in the two high armchairs in front of the fireplace in which there was no fire burning at that moment. Henry leaned forward expectantly while Emma stared into the darkness where usually a fire would be blazing. There was a sizzle and a crack and suddenly flames shot up then settled down. Mother and son looked at each other.

"Was that you?" Henry asked.

Emma shook her head.

"Fairy Tale Land strikes again. It probably sensed that you should be staring into flames. This place is sometimes so odd."

Emma could only nod to this assessment.

"What happened in the woods between you two?" Henry asked because Emma had actually started staring into the flames by now.

"I'm not sure... a lot somehow, and nothing at all."

"Could you be anymore cryptic?" Henry said and he sounded angry.

Emma looked at him and sighed again. "Mainly we were just talking about things. We spend a little time together. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary, really."

"Well, I guess it was for here," Henry commented.

"What do you mean?"

"You never spent any time together here. The few times we've been visiting the Enchanted Forest together you always pretended like you hardly know each other. At dinner the other night, you didn't even tell her that she looked nice, and you always do that."

"I do?" Emma asked.
"Yeah, you do. But not when you're here. You treat her like everyone else does, as the evil queen," he accused her, his look dark once again.

"I'm not doing that," Emma said. "I always talk to her when we're here."

"Like 'pass me the potatoes, please'?”

"Henry, that's not at all the way I treat your mom," she tried to defend herself.

"But it is, ma. And mom doesn't... she pretends like she doesn't care but she does. I know she thinks she deserves this treatment and maybe she does from everyone but you. You weren't cursed by her, she didn't do that to you."

"I know your mom isn't the evil queen anymore, Henry."

"Why do you treat her like it then?" He raised his voice.

Emma fell silent for a moment. "I'm not...," but it came out as an unconvinced whisper. She knew that Henry wouldn't say these things if he didn't feel them strongly and she thought about dinner on their first evening here. How she had watched everyone giving Regina the silent treatment, how she had watched her leave. She had watched, she hadn't participated, but she also hadn't gone out of her way to make Regina feel more welcome. She hadn't talked to her, or even stood with her.

"God," she exclaimed and pushed her hand through her long hair. "I'm such a hypocrite. I watched everyone else do it and did nothing. I'm so sorry," she said, looking at Henry earnestly.

"It's not just you. Mom wouldn't say anything, she just takes it. But I know it hurts her - from you, not so much from everybody else."

"It's not gonna happen again, I promise you. And I'll apologize to your mom," Emma said.

Henry smiled at her. "Good," he said and then he started looking into the fire.

Emma watched him for awhile, the thoughtful young man their boy had become. The truest believer. He certainly still was that, even though it had cost him a lot.

"That wasn't what you wanted to talk about, though," she said.

He shook his head.

"After the kiss... when your mom woke up, she looked at me. And I could see that she was scared. That's not something I've seen a lot of, you know." Emma told Henry what was bothering her, what had made her act the way she did these last hours.

"She's scared? Of your love?"

"I think so. It's not easy for your mom to love, to accept love, I think."

"Because she doesn't think she deserves it," Henry said.

"That would be my guess," Emma confirmed.

"But she does. She deserves to be loved, just like everyone does."

"I know and, Henry, I do. I do love your mom," she told him looking deep into his eyes.
He smiled at her. "I know."

"How did you know, kid? I mean, why were you so sure that I should kiss her?" The question had been at the back of her mind, taking a backseat to other worries, but it had nagged at her.

"I watched you. I mean, not really consciously, but when you were gone I thought about the way you were with each other. Mainly, because it had bothered me how you two were so different here. And I talked to Snow about it--"

"You talked to your grandma about this?" Emma asked and her eyes went disbelievingly round at the thought.

"Yeah, I did. And she... well, I wouldn't say that she's cool with it but she says she doesn't mess with true love."

"Oh, my God!" Emma leaned back into her chair and stared at the ceiling. "Snow knows? She knows that I love Regina?"

"Calm down, ma. It's not that bad," Henry tried to reassure her. He lay a hand on Emma's knee and squeezed it. Emma looked at him bewildered.

"But--"

"She's going to get over it when she sees how much you love her. You know they're all about that," he told her.

Emma nodded hesitantly. If there was one thing her parents held in high esteem it was true love. And there was no doubt that Regina and she shared that. She couldn't have saved her otherwise.

"Are you going to talk to her, ma? Will you tell her?"

"Well, if Snow already knows there's really no--"

"Mom, are you going to tell mom?" Henry interrupted her impatiently.

Emma was about to tell him that Regina already knew, too, but she looked at his earnest face and nodded.

"I will talk to her, and yes, I will tell her. But I think it'll have to wait till we're back home."

"Why?"

"Well, we're leaving the day after tomorrow. Tomorrow's Killian's ball, there really isn't much time," Emma argued.

"And you want to postpone coming out to your parents as long as possible?" Henry asked.

Emma opened her mouth to argue some more but couldn't. Henry was right, Regina wasn't the only one who was scared. Only, Emma was scared of other people's reaction more than of her own feelings.

"You know, in fairy tales the prince and the princess usually get together at a ball," Henry said.

"Seriously? You're suggesting that I play by the rules of a fairy tale?"

"Like you've never done that before," he gave back. They looked at each other. "We call it
Operation Happy Ending and--"

"No," she interrupted him and raised her hand as he wanted to argue. "I already have a code name for telling your mom how I feel. It's Operation Cinnamon, and it's my mission, not yours. I have to do this alone, Henry."

"I could do recon," he suggested.

"You're not going to talk to your mom about this. I don't want you to pressure her. I'm sorry, but this is and has to be about Regina and I, son." She looked at him earnestly.

He nodded slowly and a little dejectedly.

"I love you, kid."

"I love you, too."

"You're okay with this, right? Your mom and me, together?"

Henry grinned. "It makes you happy," he said.

"It sure does... it will... it does," she stammered. Then she stood and so did Henry. They hugged.

"I think I'm hungry now," he said.

"And I'm right there with you," she laughed.

They left the library together in search of something to eat.

Regina stood at the open window to her room, staring into the distance. She had tried to sleep a little but she couldn't anymore. Last night she'd been too exhausted to stay awake but now that she was rested and clean and fed there was only her mind to bother her. And her heart, of course.

Regina sighed.

She had always prided herself in knowing herself well. She had, after all, spend a lot of time thinking only about herself. She had made sure that everybody suffered for how she felt mistreated, and she had also rewarded people if they were especially sensitive about how they could make her feel better. Ironically, some of those latter had been her guards. The same people who had made her realize what she was really feeling, quite undetected of herself.

She had fallen for Emma Swan. There had never been a greater irony in her life, and her life had certainly had its share of ironic mishaps. And now she was in love with her nemeses' daughter.

But not just that, Emma was more than just Snow White and Prince Charming's daughter. She was Henry's birth mother, she had been a constant irritation ever since she had come to Storybrooke, not to forget, her own downfall, the Savior. All of this should have ensured Regina's indifference, her hate, really, for Emma.
But there was something about her – a phrase so many had used to describe either Snow or David, their way to make everyone feel good, almost everyone. Combined in Emma, a dash of charm, a silly sense of humor, and those green eyes, and suddenly the evil queen found herself in love.

No, not the evil queen. The evil queen was dead. Regina Mills.

And to think that she had thought she might fall for Robin! But hadn't she been entitled to that love? Hadn't it been promised by Tinkerbell? Yes! Tinkerbell had promised her a new love and she had pointed at Robin. He should have been the one, so many years ago. But Regina had been scared then, and she was scared now.

She only needed to look at Emma and her throat closed up, her chest constricted, she couldn't breathe, she couldn't think. She just fell into that perfect moment of the kiss Emma had given her. One moment, there was darkness and confusing background noises, and then the darkness ripped and a blue sky opened for her... and Emma. Emma, her whole world suddenly seemed filled with her and what she wanted to give her. Her heart had swelled, her lungs expanded and she had been able to open her eyes again. Life – she had been suddenly filled up with it. And then she had seen Henry, his worried face. She'd seen the outline of a library behind him - not her library at the mansion but the library at Snow White's castle... and she'd known she didn't deserve it.

People had suffered again because of her. Because of her, her former guards had attacked people, raped women, beaten men and possibly children. In her name, they had stolen and burned houses down. She had taught them to do this, she had trained them to be merciless. And yet she had been saved... by love. There was no way she could accept this, there was no way she could just go and be happy with Emma and Henry when, once again, her evil shadow had made others to suffer.
Henry had left Emma earlier to see if Regina was awake yet. Emma had made him promise that he wouldn't talk to Regina about love, or anything that could make her uncomfortable. He had promised - reluctantly. She still doubted that he would leave Operation: Cinnamon completely to her but she knew that he would never do anything to hurt his mom and that was good enough for her.

As she was about to climb the stairs to get back to her room, she ran into her father.

"Emma, there you are," he greeted her and smiled.

"David, hey. It's good to see you," she told him as he stepped toward her and they hugged.

"I was looking for you, actually. I wanted to know what happened. Robin's message to me was rather vague, he just asked for reinforcements. And Mulan was gone so quickly last night, I didn't have a chance to talk to her either."

"Mulan's already gone?" Emma asked. She had paid little attention to anyone but Regina and had missed Mulan leaving.

"Yes, she only ate a sandwich and was gone again. That woman is truly devoted to protecting people. Or to Robin, maybe?" He grinned and nudged Emma in the side.

"She's devoted, but definitely not to Robin," Emma answered with a frown.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I... it all happened so fast, everything really. Let's sit down and talk." Emma looked around and once again the door to the library stood ajar. Of course, it did. Emma had never before realized how in the Enchanted Forest everything you needed had a penchant to simply turn up. And Henry was right, it was odd - and just a little creepy. "Library? There should be a fire in the fireplace," she said sarcastically.

"And if there isn't..."

"It will just appear out of thin air. Yeah, I know. How can you live in a place like this?" she asked.

David smiled. "You get used to it. It's actually really nice.

"I don't know," Emma said as they entered the library. "There're things I like to do for myself and not have some birds fly into the window and fold my laundry, or something. Although, that would actually be kinda cool."

David laughed. "That's not what birds do here, either, princess."

Emma rolled her eyes at her father as they sat down where Emma and Henry had sat earlier - in front of a warming fire.

"So, what's happening in the woods?" he then asked and looked at Emma expectantly.

"Well, we rode for most of the first day and then set up a base camp. We went out in small groups from there to search for the smaller camps. We found one with those six prisoners we sent here. Have you talked to them?"
"It was more like talking at them, really. They haven't said a word of who they are or what they want. They're pretty disciplined."

"Well, we know who they are now and what they want... erm. Let me just go on, I'll be getting there, okay?" Emma wasn't ready yet to tell her father what it had all been about. She needed to make sure he understood that Regina had nothing to do with it.

David nodded.

"All right. It seemed weird to me that there were only six men in that camp when Azeem had said that there were usually about thirty men who raided the villages, so I thought maybe they would have their own basis, just like we did. We looked at the maps and came up with a valley just where all four kingdoms meet. Regina remembered it and was sure it was only accessible from her former kingdom. So we set out but I had a bad feeling about it. I thought maybe they were expecting us, had planned some kind of attack, maybe. Regina and I took some men and we rode up that hill on your land that overlooks that valley, but that was when we ran into a trap, actually. It was so stupid, I should have known better. The men were killed, and I'm sorry, dad. I'm sure they were good soldiers. Have they been brought here yet?"

"Yes, they arrived about two hours ago," David answered. "I had hoped... I thought that maybe you didn't know about them, that they had died after you left."

"No, it’s my fault they're dead. I'm so sorry." Emma lowered her gaze.

David laid a hand on her arm, squeezing it. "These men gave their life to protect you, Emma. I know it sounds like just another flowery phrase but they've done their duty. Their families will get a pension. I know it's not enough to repay them for your life, but that's what they were trained to do."

"Do you think there's something I can do? Honor them in some way?" Emma asked sadly.

"Yes, I'm sure your mom will think of something you can do before you leave."

Emma nodded. "Well, Regina and I escaped from the attack but we fell down a slope. I fell on my back and Regina, she magicked my back so that it became her pain," Emma explained as best she could.

"Doc told us about that bruise she has. That was yours?"

Emma nodded. "She didn't need to do that but she did. Not on purpose, though I think... maybe..."

"She did it out of love?" David asked.

Emma nodded after a long moment. She wasn't looking at him, instead she stared into the flames of the fire. "Mom talked to you about that?" she asked but already knew that her parents talked about everything. She hadn't really been surprised by his words.

"Snow has talked to Henry and they both thought it was possible. I didn't want to form an opinion before you were ready to tell us. But it's true? You're in love with each other?"

Emma sighed. "It's a little more complicated than that, dad. I mean, sure, I woke her with true love's kiss but--"

"True love's kiss? Your mom said it was Henry who saved Regina," David interrupted.

"That's what I told her and I'm sorry for lying but... but this is hard. You hate her and I... I love her!"
Emma jumped up from her seat and put her hands on the mantle. The fire was very warm and she stared into it as the minutes ticked by. Emma thought that her father would just let her stand there, too shocked by her admission, too disgusted with her, angry.

But after a few minutes of watching Emma, David got up and put a hand on her back.

She turned instantly and buried into his arms.

They didn't say anything, for a long while they just stood in their embrace, David holding Emma like a child, his child.

"I'm sorry, I...," Emma began as she pulled away from him.

"Don't be sorry. It's such a rare occasion that I can actually be your dad, and not just David."

"I know it's not easy for you and Snow. I plopped into your life all grown-up."

"That's not your fault. We made that decision for all of us. But it's still nice to sometimes feel like a father to you, not just a close friend."

Emma smiled at David, she liked this part of their relationship, too, even though sometimes it felt awkward to her.

"Wanna sit again?" He asked.

She nodded and they sat down.

"I don't think we hate Regina, Emma. You know all about our history with her, but there's a part of us that understands, wants to understand what she's been through. And she's changed and that took a lot of..."

"Courage," Emma helped her father out.

"Yes, I guess 'courage' is the right word. She's shown everyone that it is possible to change."

"And yet nobody does for her. Nobody tells her that what she did was good and right. Everybody treats her like a ghost – the ghost of the evil queen."

David wanted to argue on behalf of everybody who'd been cursed, but Emma lifted her hand.
"Henry told me today that I'm doing that, too. I won't let her forget, either. But it has to change, David. I have to change that."

"I'm not sure it will ever change for some people, honey. She's done what she's done."

"I know, but she's not that person anymore. She... we hid from those guys who shot at us up on the hill but they found us and Regina recognized one of the men. He was one of her guards, most of them were. Her palace guards."

David made a surprised face. "Oh, my God," he said. "We never thought about... I guess I just thought they had gone home or been killed, maybe."

"They weren't. They lived in the woods, they recruited some other people who were dissatisfied or starving. I don't know exactly where these people who live in the woods come from, but they built a village in that valley and it's pretty well protected. I'm not sure if they were just waiting for Regina to come back or if they heard about it somehow and wanted to see what would happen. That guy she recognized, he asked her to rejoin them, to regain her former power."
David just looked at Emma expectantly. He didn't want to judge but he seemed far from just assuming that Regina would do the right thing.

"She told them to go to hell and then they attacked us. We were lucky, I guess, that Robin and Mulan came with soldiers or we would probably not have made it. There were a dozen against the two of us and one of them cut Regina with a poisoned blade. She fell into a coma, I guess you could call it. She would have died..."

"If you hadn't kissed her."

"I hadn't planned on it. It was Henry, he told me to do it," Emma defended herself.

"And you had no idea that... that you were in love with her before you kissed her?"

Emma blushed.

"How long have you known?"

"I don't know. I mean, have I noticed that I was always a little happier when I knew I would be spending the evening with Henry and Regina? Yeah, I did, but I thought it was about Henry. But then... Robin, he started showing an interest in Regina from the second they met and I got so mad, so irrationally suspicious of him. I told you I didn't trust him, but I guess I was just jealous," Emma confessed. "Well, I talked to Mulan about it and she pretty much had to tell me that I was in love with Regina."

David smiled. "Always with the stubbornness. You get that from your mom," he quickly added.

Emma rolled her eyes at him. She grinned, however. "Yeah, right, because you're not stubborn at all."

"That's right. Between your mother and I, I'm the compliant one." He grinned at Emma.

She smiled back. "Whatever, dad. But... erm, it seems Robin has found a way from that ledge we fell onto to the valley and he wanted to attack as soon as possible. He probably waited for the reinforcements you sent, but... well, that's pretty much all I know. I had to get Regina back here because I needed Henry to save her life."

David nodded.

"How many men, do you think, were in that valley?"

"About sixty, maybe? I'm not sure but around that number. It'll still be a hard fight. Do you think Phillip and Eric would send some more soldiers to help?"

"Only one way to find out: I will send some letters and ask them to," David said.

"That's probably a good idea," she agreed.

"Is there anything else I can do? For you, I mean. You said, things were complicated between you and Regina. Do you need something... can I do anything?" he stammered.

Emma smiled. "Thank you, dad, but I... there's actually something I need."

He raised an eyebrow at her.

Emma smirked as an idea formed in her head of how to win her love's heart.
True love’s kiss – Regina had never dwelt on the subject much. It seemed to be a concept made for princesses, not daughters of princes with older brothers. Kissing Daniel had been magical enough for her, her first kiss. It had been all she had hoped it would be, all she had ever wanted it to be. But it couldn’t last. And it could never be surpassed – at least, she had been sure of this until… Emma had kissed her. And with that one kiss her future had been sealed, her past had been deemed unimportant, mundane. And it seemed unfair that her great love, her first love – she corrected her thoughts – should be devaluated by… something that only Snow White and Prince Charming could be naive enough to believe was good and true and everlasting.

The Enchanted Forest was full of these outdated concepts, these beliefs that some things were right and others were wrong, for everybody. But she had never asked for true love’s kiss, she had never asked for Emma to love her in that all-consuming, all-encompassing, forever-and-ever way. Maybe it was the only way the Charmings could love, but Regina wasn’t ready to give herself away like this, to forget everything she had been. It was too much to ask, it was too much to give up. She couldn’t…

“Mom, it’s your turn,” Henry interrupted her thoughts, seeing that her eyes once again swam in tears as they had done quite a few times already all day. “Are you in pain?”

She only shook her head. "I was just thinking about…"

Henry looked at her expectantly.

"Love," she said after a long pause.

Henry lowered his gaze to the chess board that stood between them on a table. "What about love?" he then asked in a mere whisper.

"It's convoluted with all kinds of prepositions and expectations, especially here in the Enchanted Forest. And people here think they're entitled to it, much like Americans think they're entitled to wearing a gun," she decided on an analogy.

Henry looked at her in disbelief. "That's not really a good comparison, mom."

"And why not? Love can be dangerous," she said. "Love can change everything if you let it."

"Are you talking about your own love for somebody?" He asked not nearly as subtly as he hoped to.

"You know what I'm talking about, Henry. Don't play dumb," she challenged him.

"I'm not playing dumb. It's just Emma asked me not to talk to you about all of this."

"Why would she do that?" Regina asked.

"Because she thinks it only concerns you two. But it doesn't, it concerns me, too."

"And how does it concern you, Henry? Are you not happy the way it is right now?" Regina asked him.
"I am happy but I would be happier if... if you were happy, too. Both of you," Henry gave back. Regina seemed to think about this for a moment. "But there's no guarantee that we will be, Henry. Think about how different we are, how often we disagree."

"But you shared true love's kiss," he came to a point Regina would rather not name. "That is a guarantee."

"Maybe here in the Enchanted Forest, but not in Storybrooke."

"It worked for Snow and David in Storybrooke, mom. Why not for you?" Henry wanted to know. "Your grandparents are special that way. They believe that they deserve this kind of love."

"You deserve it too, mom."

Regina smiled at her son, but they seemed both aware that it didn't touch her eyes. "I have already more love in my life than I could ever deserve because I have you, Henry."

"But Emma lo--"

"Henry," she interrupted him and they both fell silent. Regina looked over the chess board and made some nonsensical move. She really had no mind for chess today. "I'm happy the way it is and I'm sure Emma feels the same way. Love... A love like that, it complicates things," she said.

"Because you're both women?" Henry asked with something that sounded like a scoff.

"Because we're not good at it."
Emma woke up happy. She smiled at the bright morning that promised to become a nice day for Killian's birthday - with a hopefully enchanting evening at the ball. Emma was planning on it, she was going to sweep her lady off her feet, make it all real - the possibility of true love's kiss would become a promise tonight, a reality. Emma whistled while she dressed and she took some dancing steps to a melody only she could hear as she walked down the hall to get some things done before breakfast.

As she walked by Henry's room, though, his door opened and he stepped out. He didn't look nearly as cheerful as she felt and she laid an arm around his shoulders. "Hey, what's wrong? You don't look like a young man who's going to his first ball tonight," she said.

Henry sighed. "When are you going to talk to mom?"

She looked at him surprised. "I actually have another plan, you know? The whole princess-thing at the ball – I'm gonna be her prince tonight. She's not gonna be able to resist me," Emma told him with a confident grin.

Henry didn't seem convinced by the plan, though. He frowned. "I don't think that'll work for her," he said.

"Why do you say that? Did you talk to her?"

Henry blushed, but before Emma could admonish him he held up his hand, "She started it, okay? She started talking about love and how it's dangerous and that you're both happy with the way it is," he explained quickly.

"Wait, she said that?"

Henry nodded. "I think you have some talking to do before she'll let you be her prince, ma."

Emma looked over at the door to Regina's room, her face now serious and just a little doubtful.

"Are you gonna talk to her? Now?" Henry asked and there was a note of pleading in his voice.

Emma looked at him and tried an encouraging smile. "Yes, I'll talk to her. Don't worry, kid. I'm gonna do this, I'm gonna convince her to give us a chance. After all, it's true love, right?" She had wanted to sound upbeat but her voice faltered a little on the last word.

"Do you want some help?" he asked.

"No, that's all right. I can do this, I have to," she answered and gave him a more convincing smile this time.

They walked the few steps to Regina's door together, then Emma kissed Henry on the cheek and send him on his way to breakfast.
"Come in," Regina called from her place on a chaise longue by the open window. She had already eaten her breakfast which had been brought up for her and she had been contemplating if she should go downstairs and take a walk. The day was looking like it would be beautiful and a stroll in the garden would probably lift her spirits. Her back also felt decidedly better today.

The door opened and Emma's head appeared around it, looking at her questioningly

"Hey, how're you this morning?" Emma asked smiling shyly.

"I'm a lot better, thank you. Was there something you wanted, Emma?" Regina stiffened, just like she'd done so often at the beginning of their very complicated relationship. It had been something she had thought would never change, but then it had, so gradually that she hadn't even noticed it. But it seemed her defenses were back up and while she scolded herself to be so frightened of something that could make her happy, she also couldn't help herself.

"I wanted to talk to you," Emma said.

"I actually wanted to... get ready for the ball," Regina said and then rolled her eyes at the stupid excuse. "There's always so much to do," she added lamely

"I won't be long, I promise," Emma said as she fully stepped into the room.

Regina watched her for a moment, then steered her eyes toward the window. She looked out as Emma came closer and finally sat down on the chaise longue, next to Regina's legs.

"You know, we have to talk about this sometime," Emma said.

Slowly, Regina turned her head back to her. "I thought you would wait until we were back in Storybrooke," Regina said in very much the same soft tone as Emma. There were no pretenses and no reproach in her voice, she sounded frail, however.

"I would have, but Henry thought we needed to clear some things up."

"Henry has become quite pushy, I blame your part of the family," Regina joked but only half-heartedly. "And I thought this was about you and I, not Henry?"

"Did he tell you that I said that?"

Regina nodded, wringing her hands nervously.

"Well, it's... some things, I think, they should be just about us."

"There is no us, Emma. There is you and there is me, we're both Henry's moms, but... well, we have grown close, but not that close."

"So, you're denying that you love me?" Emma asked.

Her look into Regina's eyes was open and vulnerable. Regina opened her mouth to say something, to give a quick answer, probably a lie, but then she closed it again without any answer at all.

"I hoped you wouldn't." Emma smiled softly.

Regina felt her resolve against Emma thaw. How could she look into those eyes and deny what had been going on for a good long while now? It wasn't even about True Love's Kiss, it was about the time they spent together, the feelings she'd pushed aside, because she'd thought they were madness.
"I love you, Regina," Emma said, scooting a little closer on the chaise but refraining from touching her.

"Why?" Regina asked as tears filled her eyes.

"Why? Because you're an amazing woman, caring, strong, intelligent. And you can cook. And you're beautiful and courageous and..."

"Okay, that's enough, Emma. You have to stop this," Regina told her but her voice lacked her accustomed sharpness. Heat flushed her cheeks at the happiness she felt at Emma's words.

"I have to stop loving you?" Emma asked. "Why?"

"Because we will never work. You must know that." The words came out automatically, while her whole body yearned to touch Emma.

"Relationships don't just work if you don't work on them, Regina. I know I'm not an expert. The only real relationship I ever had was with Neal and I was barely more than a kid then, but I guess I learned a lot from watching the relationships around me."

"You parents' relationship, Emma? That's not how it is in the real world. That's not how it is for normal people," Regina argued.

"Like we are normal," Emma gave back. "We're not. And I don't mean because we're two women but because of the things we've gone through together, against each other, too. But despite all that we... we've fallen in love. And I think we'll be able to go from here, work on it, learn together how it can be between two people. I'm ready to try, Regina." Emma took one of her hands squeezed it.

Regina looked at their hands, caressing each other. It was almost like she watched it without being part of it, but she could feel Emma's hand. It was soft, it was tender, it made love to her.

"I'm not sure I am, Emma. I'm not sure I'm even able to... love," she said honestly and a tear fell from her lashes onto her cheek.

Emma reached up and brushed it away. "You're so full of love, Regina. I can see it every time you look at Henry."

"That's a different kind of love and he was patient with me."

"I can be patient, too," Emma promised.

Regina closed her eyes. Her hand was holding onto Emma's, her shoulders weren't lifted in an attempt to defend herself. She sat for a few minutes with her eyes closed, letting the emotions roll over her without fighting them, without drowning in them, either.

She opened her eyes. "I'll need time."

"All right. As I said, I can be patient," Emma said.

"This is crazy, Emma. We should just--"

"Admit defeat and not even try? No, Regina. I won't let you just give up on something good. You deserve to be loved, we both do. And I have an inkling that we'll be actually really good at loving each other," Emma said and grinned.

Heat flooded Regina's body, and she knew she was blushing.
"Wherever did your mind just go, Regina?"

"We don't know each other well enough for me to tell you that, savior," Regina teased and smiled.

"Oh, you're gonna make me work for it, won't you?" Emma teased back.

"Whatever did I do to deserve this?" Regina sighed overly dramatic.

"You've been good," Emma told her and the teasing had gone completely from her voice.

Regina looked at her surprised, but not quite believing. "Not for long," she said.

"But for the rest of your life," Emma stated.

"That's the plan, at least."

Emma looked at Regina proudly. "I guess that's good enough for whoever hands out happy endings around here."

"Don't talk of endings, Emma, especially not happy ones. That's not a very reliable concept and... well, if anything, this is a beginning."

Emma smiled. "Good, a hopeful beginning, I take that. And...," she stated with a great dramatic flourish. "I hope you will agree to let me sit next to you at dinner tonight?"

"I thought Henry would be my dining partner."

"He's on his own for tonight, and I don't think he will mind." Emma said with an adorable puppy-eyed look. "Please?"

"Do you think that's a good idea? Your parents will be there, too, you know?"

"Yes, I know. And they also know... about... us," Emma stammered.

Regina could hardly believe her ears. Did Emma just say that Snow and Charming knew about whatever was happening between them? Damn, those Charmings were like one of those annoying TV-families from the Eighties. "They know about... the kiss?"

Emma nodded.

"But wait a minute." Regina eyed her breakfast tray suspiciously. "I don't feel like I've been cursed or anything, but when did you tell them?"

"They'll not gonna try and murder you, Regina."

"If you think your mother will take this lying down, you'll have another thing coming. She hates me, we hate each other," Regina argued.

"Is that really how you feel?"

"That's how she feels. She'll never forgive me and maybe rightly so, but she'll never let me love her daughter."

Emma gave a laugh, it seemed to bubble out of her. "It's nice to hear you say that."

"Focus, Emma."
"She'll be all right, I promise you. She told Henry that she wouldn't mess with true love. That does make sense, don't you think?"

"She talked to Henry about us?"

"Long story, but listen, my parents are not gonna be a problem. They won't interfere with us," Emma said. She leaned forward and caressed Regina's cheek.

And Regina let her, leaning into the soft touch of Emma's hand. But just for a moment, then she took Emma's hand in her own.

"There's no us as of yet," she said, but she wasn't really determined that it should stay that way.

Emma pulled their combined hands toward her and kissed Regina's. "There will be," she vowed.

"You're awfully confident about all this. And you promised me that you wouldn't be long and now you've been here over half an hour," Regina said to regain some sense of control over the conversation. The mushy part was over; Regina needed time to think. Maybe they could have time for more mushyness later.

"I apologize. One thing, though: what color are you gonna wear tonight?"

"My dress?"

Emma nodded.

"Wouldn't you like to know," Regina teased. In truth, she was curious why Emma wanted to know.

"Please tell me."

"Burgundy."

"That's red, right?" Emma grinned. "It's your color."

"I know."

They smiled at each other.

"All right, I leave you. I'm looking forward to tonight."

"It's just your little brother's birthday, Emma."

"It's a ball," Emma disagreed. "It's going to be magical," she added and grinned. She seemed giddy as she walked to the door. Then she turned and bowed deeply. "I'll see you tonight, Regina."

Regina inclined her head in a regal manner, but felt unable not to smile. Emma was adorable, besides annoying and completely off her rocker.

Emma left her.
David quietly stepped into the room and watched Snow play with their son for awhile. She seemed happy and relaxed around Killian this morning when he knew that she had lain awake for most of the night.

"Hey, you two. How is the birthday prince?" he asked Killian and squatted down beside him. He kissed his son on his sandy-haired head, then he kissed Snow on the lips. "How’re you holding up?"

"Well, Killian is excited for his first ball and I’m... excited, too," she answered but not very spirited.

David put his hand on her cheek and rubbed it with his thumb.

"Hey, little buddy. Can you play a little by yourself? I need to talk to mommy, okay?"

"Okay," Killian said and grinned. "And then you both come play?" he asked hopefully.

"You ride a tough bargain, son. But okay, we both come play after we talked."

Killian nodded enthusiastically.

David helped Snow up. He could tell that she was tired just by looking at her, but helping her to her feet he realized that it ran deeper than lack of sleep. She seemed exhausted and sad, he would almost say depressed.

David led Snow over to a couch and they sat down. "We need to talk about it."

"Oh, David, I--"

"I know you don't want to, you didn't want to last night and I let you think it over. But you have hardly slept and you haven't eaten. If we don't talk about this now, it's just gonna get worse. You can talk to me, Snow. Whatever it is you're feeling, I'll listen and I won't judge you, okay?"

Snow sighed. "I wish they had never met," she said. "I wish we hadn't left Emma in Storybrooke - with her. And I wish we could do something to stop this now."

David laid an arm around his wife's sunken shoulders and hugged her to him. "We can't. It's true love." He didn't sound too happy himself.

"I know, and that's the most ironic part of it, isn't it? Who would have thought Regina was capable of any kind of love – I'm being unfair. She did love Daniel, and she does love Henry. It's just..."

"You wanted someone better for our daughter. Don't think I didn't," he agreed with Snow.

"And yet you seem resigned to her choice."

"Well, it's not like I can change it and I saw her face when she said that she loved Regina. She looked so happy," he said, smiling just a little.

"And that's another thing, she's talking to you, she's talking to Henry, but she's not talking to me. I'm her mother." Snow pouted.

"Yes, but you're also the one with the most complicated history with Regina," he phrased it diplomatically.
"I know, but I invited her, didn't I?"

"You did and that was very sweet of you. You also talked to Henry about the possibility of them having feelings for each other and that didn't seem to bother you so much. What changed?"

"I didn't think it was true, or maybe I didn't let myself think it was true. But now that she told you, now that Emma saved Regina with true love's kiss, it's real. It's happening."

"Okay, let me ask you one question: do you want Emma to be happy?"

Snow looked at David, offended. "Of course, I do. I want her to be as happy as she can possibly be. Do I want the same for Regina? Not so much. I don't want her to be unhappy, or anything. She's been through a lot and some of that was my fault. But..."

"But you don't want her to be happy with Emma?"

"I'm a horrible person," Snow said.

"No, there's just still a lot of unresolved feelings between you and Regina. And believe me, I still have plenty of issues with her too, but she loves Emma. She has to or Emma couldn't have saved her. And we both know how fiercely she protects the people she loves, right?"

Snow nodded.

"So we know she'll not let anyone harm her, including herself."

"Are you sure about that?"

David nodded.

"It won't be easy for them. Storybrooke is a small community and as soon as people realize they're dating... Do you think they will treat Emma differently?"

"They won't treat her like they treat Regina, Snow. But I guess things will change in Storybrooke."

Snow buried into the warmth of her husband's arms. "It will make Henry very happy," she said.

"Yes, and it will make Emma happy. And it's not like she has been especially lucky in love before."

"She could have made it work with Neal," Snow argued a point she had argued before with her daughter – who wouldn't listen.

"She didn't want to make it work with Neal. He abandoned her and maybe I'm being judgmental here, considering what we've done, but sending her to prison? That's not really the kind of person I want for my daughter," he argued back.

"All right, I'm not going to remind you of all the things Regina has done," Snow said testily

"Besides saving our lives?"

"You're defending her. How did that happen?"

"I just want you to remember that the woman Emma loves isn't the woman who's done all those horrible things. She changed, she couldn't love Emma if she hadn't. We need to remember that. Okay?" David spoke in a calm voice. He knew that this discussion was far from over, that they would talk about it again and maybe then he would be the one fretting over their daughter's
relationship and Snow would be the one defending it. It was possible. But whatever they argued, they wouldn't be the ones making the decisions, they wouldn't be in a position to change anything. They would just have to accept Emma's choice, Emma's love for Regina.

Snow nodded reluctantly.

"You wanna take a nap before the ball?" David asked Snow, rubbing her back.

"I could fall asleep right here, right now," she murmured sleepily. "I love you, David," she added after a moment and lifted her head to look into his eyes.

"I love you, too, Snow. And I love our amazing and beautiful children."

Snow smiled. "So do I."

"And one of them wanted to play with his parents. Hey, why don't you lie down here and take a nap and I go play with Killian?"

"That's a very good idea. But not with swords again. I would like to see him build something one of these days that he doesn't afterwards hack to pieces, okay?"

"Whatever you say, my queen," he promised and stood from the couch.

Snow stretched out on it and David pulled a blanket over her. He kissed her before walking over to his son to play with him.
Killian's Ball

Snow smiled at the sight of her son sitting on his father's throne, as people bowed and curtsied to him, bringing him gifts. Killian smiled and laughed and - as his heritage ensured - charmed every single one of his guests. Then he would look at his mother sometimes and she would smile encouragingly at him. It seemed all so perfect, except for the fact that two members of Killian's family had yet to make an appearance – David and Emma.

Earlier, Snow had just made her last round to check on things in the kitchen when she'd heard a disturbance outside. Riders had arrived in the courtyard and at first she had thought that it was another request for reinforcements from Robin Hood, but instead it had been the man himself. He and David had gone into David's study to talk.

Snow had gone upstairs to change but she hadn't seen her husband or their guest since. And she hadn't even caught a glimpse of Emma all day, it seemed she was still avoiding her.

Snow was talking to Grumpy and Doc when her husband finally entered the ballroom – in his red dress uniforms when they had talked about him wearing the whites like his son. Snow frowned as she excused herself and went to meet her husband halfway through the cluster of guests. He smiled apologetically at her.

"You're late. What's the news with Robin and the fighting in the woods?"

"It's all over, we won," David told her.

Snow hugged him. "That's wonderful news. How's Robin, I thought I'd seen his arm in a sling?"

"Yes, he was wounded. His arm is broken but it'll heal. And I talked him into staying for the ball," David added.

"That's great then everybody can hear the good news from him. You haven't by any chance given your white dress uniform to him, have you? Because, if I recall, you wanted to wear them. Not that you don't look very handsome in your reds, but..." Snow pouted just a little because she really preferred her Prince Charming in white.

"No, I haven't given them to Robin. I--" but before he could finish the sentence he saw someone enter the ball room out of the corner of his eyes. He turned to Emma entering – in her father's white dress uniform, altered to her slender form.

"Emma asked me if she could wear them," he finally said.

Snow looked Emma over. Her mouth opened in wonderment, forming a surprised 'o.'

David looked proudly at his daughter and then at his wife. "What do you think?"

She slowly regained her composure, but then she smiled. "She looks almost as handsome as her father," she said and she meant it, too.

Of course, there was no mistaking why Emma had chosen the pants over the dress she and Snow had agreed upon and which had been especially tailored for this occasion over the course of several weeks. And right now Emma was walking towards that very reason – the stunning presence of Regina Mills in a burgundy dress. She was standing with Henry a little to the side, a little out of sight of everybody else.
"Good evening," Emma said and bowed deeply to the woman who had taken her breath away on first sight. She was still a little short of breath and her voice betrayed some of her nervousness.

Regina smiled and blushed just a little at Emma's gallant gesture. "Good evening."

Emma took her hand in hers and blew the gentlest of kisses on it. "You look very beautiful tonight, Regina," Emma said with a sidelong glance at their son who grinned.

Henry was wearing much the same outfit as she was, only, his pants were black while hers were white to go with the jacket. Both pair of pants, however, were sporting burgundy stripes at their sides. These very same stripes had made Emma late tonight as she had insisted on having the red of her father's colors changed to the burgundy of Regina's dress - and the official color of her former coat of arms. She had made a statement with wearing both her parents' colors and Regina's. Emma was aware that behind her, people were already wondering at what kind of statement that might be.

"And you look very handsome, savior." Regina touched the collar of Emma's jacket.

There might have been a held breath in the room at the intimate gesture, at the evil queen touching the savior, smiling at her and Emma smiling back.

"Henry, you look very handsome tonight," Emma complimented their son.

He blushed a little. "Thank you. Are you wearing David's clothes?" he asked with an amused grin.

Emma frowned at him. "The castle's tailor is good but he couldn't just conjure up these dress pants out of thin air, so he made some changes on dad's. Do they look too big on me?" she asked with a note of insecurity in her voice.

"They fit perfectly," Regina told her and her tone of voice didn't allow for a discussion.

Henry grinned. It seemed to Emma that he could hardly hold in a jubilant laugh, and she could appreciate the sentiment. She had deliberately come over to Regina and Henry to show that she had taken his concerns to heart, and because she wanted to show both of them that they would always come first with her, from now on.

"I think I'm gonna get myself something to drink. Can I get you two something?" Henry asked but they both declined.

"You're not getting any alcohol, Henry," Regina said, before Henry took off. He turned back to her with a pleading look but she only raised an eyebrow at him.

He was about to saunter off pouting when Emma said, "One small cup of wine, but that's it, kid."

Henry beamed at her and quickly went away before his mom could protest.

"Well, since you allowed him to drink, you'll be the one keeping an eye on him tonight, dear," Regina told Emma.

"He's gonna be fine, Regina. It's a party, his first ball. He deserves something special tonight. He's a
good boy," Emma gave back. She smiled just as brightly as Henry had. She felt Regina's gaze on her and turned. "What?" Emma asked.

"Nothing," Regina said and turned her head.

"Is that why you're blushing?" Emma teased.

"I was just... Henry has your smile," she then said.

Regina's honesty surprised Emma, but she smiled proudly. "He has your manners," she said. "And your sense of fashion. And I'm pretty sure his precociousness comes from your side of the family, too."

"My son is not precocious, he's wise beyond his years," Regina told Emma who laughed.

"And right now he's drinking beyond his years, excuse me," Emma said as she saw Henry get a second cup from one of the waiters.
Emma had sent Henry back to Regina and was talking to some other guests as she tried to make her way over to her little brother to congratulate him on his birthday. But people were insistent on talking to her. Regina watched this bemusedly. She was actually almost giddy with happiness just because Emma had made it a point to come over to her and Henry, to talk to them, to show the assembled room that things between them had changed, were still changing.

"How did you like the wine, Henry? Was the vintage to your liking?" she asked Henry as he rejoined her.

"It was only a small cup, it's not that big a deal," he said grumpily, but when he chanced a look at her, he must have seen her smile. "You're not mad?"

"You know, I remember a different ball when your grandma first boozed. It was quite amusing," Regina said with a smirk.

"What did she do?" Henry asked eagerly.

"She... no, I really can't tell you, not until you're a little older," she teased.

Henry rolled his eyes. "Well, I'm not trying to get hammered or anything, I just....," he looked over to where a small group of young women stood, giggling among each other. Regina couldn't say which of the doubtlessly royal teens had caught his fancy, they were all beautiful - the way they were supposed to be.

"Ah, just a little bit of liquid courage? Henry, it'll still be awhile before there will be dancing and if you want to impress any of these ladies you will have to dance," Regina informed him.

He looked back a little queasy at her. "Dance?" he asked.

She confirmed it with a wide smile. "Courting is an old art, Henry. Dancing is the first acceptable advance on a woman - or a man. The first touch of hands, the first embrace. It's been too long since I've done it," she mused and was once again looking over at Emma. She wished that Emma would have the courage to ask her to dance later.

"Don't worry, mom, I hear it's like riding a bicycle," Henry interrupted her thoughts.

Regina whipped her head around at him. "Dance?" he asked.

"Very clever, sonny. You'll watch that mouth of yours," she told him but her good mood wasn't challenged at all by his joking with her.

"Are you gonna curse me if I don't?" he asked, still grinning.

"I might. How would you like to have acne for the rest of your life?"

"MOM!" Henry exclaimed.

Regina laughed. She pulled him to her by his arm. "Don't challenge me, son. I may not be evil anymore but that doesn't mean I'm all good," she said with a twinkle in her eyes.
Henry lay an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close for a moment, then he let her go again a little self-consciously. "You're better than you think you are," he whispered.

Regina looked up at him. "I guess I'm better than I thought I could ever be again, that has to be enough for both of us."

"For the three of us," Henry corrected.

Regina's eyes strayed to Emma and she smiled. She patted Henry's shoulder but didn't comment on his words.

"So, which one of the young ladies has caught your fancy, son? The blonde, the brunette, the redhead or the raven-haired?" Regina asked looking at the group of giggling girls again.

"Well, I guess you could say we have a similar taste: I like blondes, too," he said boldly and took a step back. "I think I'm going to talk to Granny a little, excuse me," he added quickly.

Regina squinted her eyes at him. "Akne," she threatened and he retreated even faster.

Emma had finally made her way to the thrones and knelled down on the lower of the two steps leading up to them.

Killlian giggled as she did that. "Emma," he said.

"Prince Killian," she gave back formally and he laughed some more. "I wish you a very happy fourth birthday, health and comfort, and the love of your family and your people, always."

Killian crawled off his throne and came to stand before his still kneeling sister. They smiled at each other, they were matching smiles, matching green eyes.

"You look like me," he said indicating their similar attire.

"You like it?"

He nodded.

"Do I get a hug?" She then asked and he practically fell into her opening arms. They both laughed. Then Emma picked her little brother up and placed him on her hip. "I want to introduce you to someone special, okay?"

Killian nodded.

Emma walked them over to where Regina stood. "Prince Killian, Lady Regina. Regina, Prince Killian," she introduced them formally.

"I know her," Killian told her quietly.

"You do?"
"Yes, Prince Killian and I are old friends," Regina said and smiled.

"She gave me that huge present over there," Killian let Emma in on the secret.

She looked over to where Killian's birthday presents were piled up. Next to the table stood a present on the floor that still reached higher than the table and Emma lifted a questioning eyebrow at the other woman.

Regina smiled.

"That was very generous of you," Emma said. "How did you get it here from Storybrooke?"

"You might have noticed that Archie is here tonight. He came this morning and brought it with him," Regina told Emma who looked around for the tall, red-headed psychiatrist. She discovered him and he waved at her momentarily. She smiled and nodded at him.

"That was very nice of him," she commented.

"He is a very nice man," Regina gave back and they looked at each other for a long moment.

Then Killian brought Emma's attention back to him when he leaned toward her ear and whispered, "Regina is really pretty."

Emma looked at him and then smiled brightly. "That she is, little brother," she agreed.

Killian grinned. Emma tickled him as Regina looked on quizzically.

"I am what exactly?" she asked as no answer was forthcoming.

"Pretty," Emma simply said.

"Oh, that is sweet of you... Killian. I knew there was going to be a Charming I would like some day," she stroked his fair hair.

He giggled. "You like Emma, too," he said in a loud little boy's voice.

Emma laughed. She ignored the faces that were turning toward them all around and squeezed Killian. "You little rascal," she murmured and tickled him some more.

He squawked.

"Did you pay him to say that?" Regina asked smiling bemusedly at the two.

"No, though he would probably have been susceptible to the bribery. He just says what he sees," Emma informed Regina with a wide grin.

She wasn't paying attention to their surroundings at all, all she saw was Regina. And Regina was looking back. Time ceased to matter, so did space. It felt like floating to Emma, until Killian spotted someone in the crowd he knew, "There's Robin," he called out, right into Emma's ear.

Emma flinched, but turned as the outlaw entered in what must have been his best clothes. His arm was held in a sling but he still conveyed all the strength of a true hero and he smiled easily as some people started applauding him. He went over to where David stood with Snow, Phillip and Aurora, with Mulan a little to the side looking over her queen and king.

"What is he doing here?" Emma grumbled, then looked a little embarrassed because she had said it
out loud.

"Haven't you heard, the fighting is over? The kingdoms won, my former men lost," Regina informed Emma about the news.

"Who told you?" she asked.

"I overheard two maids talking about how heroic Robin has been, that he was injured during the fight and still fought on," Regina said with a smile.

Emma noticed how Killian teetered nervously in her arms. "You want down?" she asked him.

Killian nodded. "I wanna go talk to Robin."

Emma put him down.

He instantly bolted towards his parents and as David saw him coming he crouched to pick him up.

Emma used this moment, when everybody was preoccupied by the hero and the royal family, to turn to Regina.

"Would you join me on the terrace, I think I need a little bit of fresh air," Emma asked.

Regina looked at her curiously. Then she inclined her head in the affirmative and Emma took her hand, laying it into the crook of her elbow. They maneuvered through some guests toward one of the double doors that led out onto the terrace.
They stepped out into the mild evening air, illuminated by the pearly light of the moon that didn't yet show her full face. Emma led Regina to the far left corner of the terrace where steps ascended onto a balcony. They climbed the steps and stood at a railing, overlooking the beautiful gardens of King James’ castle.

"It's really beautiful and quite... romantic," Regina commented leaning both hands on the railing, facing away from Emma.

She watched Regina's profile for a long moment. "Really beautiful," she repeated.

Regina turned her head toward her. "A little cliched, don't you think?"

"Well, look where we are? It's the Enchanted Forest all around us, cliches is what this place thrives on," she reasoned.

"Why did you bring me here, Emma?"

"Maybe I wanted to escape the stuffy atmosphere of a hero being honored by my parents?"

"Why don't you like Robin?" Regina asked directly.

"Because he was meant for you," Emma answered honestly.

They looked at each other in silence.

"Jealousy is not a very attractive trait, savior."

"Stop calling me 'savior.' It always sounds like you're mocking me," Emma said.

"I am," Regina admitted. "You've never been a typical hero, Emma. For once, you're a woman. Then you are a convicted felon, a thief who became a bounty hunter? And then a sheriff..." Regina turned her head toward the scenery again.

"I broke your curse."

"You broke a lot of things," Regina said quietly.

Emma reached out her hand and laid it on Regina's. To her surprise, Regina wrapped her fingers around her own. Her hand was cold, she seemed to shiver.

"Do you want my jacket?" Emma asked.

Regina lifted an eyebrow at her. "Are you even wearing anything under it?"

"A bra," Emma answered, smirking.

Regina rolled her eyes, but she also blushed just a little.

"And a tank top," Emma added.

"Yes, the signature white tank top. You were wearing one the first time we met," Regina said.

"I wasn't just wearing a tank top if I recall correctly."
"No, but it was still peaking out from under your other clothes."

"You noticed," Emma said with a lazy smile. "But you didn't really see it until the next morning," she reminded Regina.

"In all its glory and only accompanied by a pair of panties. I meant to ask, are you always opening your hotel room door in your underwear?"

"Are you always taking baskets of apples to people in hotel rooms at the crack of dawn?"

They looked at each other in silent challenge. Then Emma took their combined hands from the railing and pulled Regina a little closer to her. She didn't want to play anymore.

"That's a lot of water under the bridge, Regina," she said.

"Not so much water for some people."

"What people? The people in the ball room?"

"Them, the people of Storybrooke, Maine, my former palace guards. They all remember me the way I was when you first met me."

"You weren't the evil queen back then, Regina. I don't believe that. There had already been other things in your life – Henry. You knew what love was even then," Emma argued.

"I just couldn't show it? No, Emma, I was still the queen when we met. I was still full of hate," Regina gave back.

Emma shook her head. "I don't believe that."

"I threatened your life."

"I threatened yours. I threatened to take Henry away from you."

"You didn't even come to Storybrooke to take him away from me; that was all in my head at the time. You returned him to me," she argued.

"We both knew that that wasn't the only reason I came to Storybrooke. I wanted to know who Henry was, where he lived, who his parents were. I wanted to know everything, I wanted a say in his life even then. You were right to be scared."

Regina closed her eyes, another attempt at shutting out truths.

But Emma didn't want her to do that anymore. She pulled the other woman closer, pushing an arm around her waist. "Regina," she whispered.

Regina opened her eyes again. They looked at each other from a closer proximity then they probably ever had.

"I'm in love with you," Emma said.

Regina's hand ran over the length of the arm that held her, leaving goosebumps in its wake. It came to rest on Emma's shoulder.

Emma leaned her head to the side, drawing Regina inexplicably closer until they both leaned in for a kiss. It was soft, breathless, a whisper onto each others lips. They parted but couldn't stand the loss
and came back together, hungrily, passionately. They kissed, and for a while it seemed to both, that they wouldn't be able to stop. It felt just too good, too right and it had taken them far too long to get here.

But then Regina put her hand against Emma's shoulder, pushing her away, at the same time clawing at the jacket to get a grip on something.

"Why do you love me?" she asked desperately but before Emma could answer, she asked another question: "And why do you make it so hard for me to not love you?"

"Because you deserve it, Regina. You deserve love. I want it to be my love, it has to be mine," Emma breathed the answer into the air and it only barely reached Regina, even though they were standing so close.

"Robin was meant for me," Regina said.

Emma recognized it as an attempt to push her away emotionally while Regina was still unable to do it physically.

"No... no, he never was."

Regina looked at Emma questioningly. "I told you--"

"What if... what if the pixie dust had it wrong, what if... I wasn't even born then and the pixie dust only pointed out the person through which you would find love. If it hadn't been for my jealousy of Robin, I might never have realized that I love you," Emma rambled and looked pleadingly at Regina for her to believe it.

"That sounds pretty constructed. The pixie dust could have shown me Snow White, we lived in the same castle, and she is your mother," Regina said.

"Yes, but that would have been awfully confusing, wouldn't it? She was a child... and a girl."

Regina stopped and thought about it for a moment.

"It would have been confusing," she admitted.

"Robin brought us together, Regina, it makes perfect sense. And I even hate to give him that much credit, believe me," Emma said with a reluctant smile. She put her forehead to Regina's. "Please, believe it."

Regina gave a small smile, then she put her hand to Emma's neck and drew her in for another kiss. It wasn't quite as needy as the one before but it grew deeper than either had expected.

When they parted they were breathless once again.

"I'm in love with you, savior," Regina finally admitted.

Emma closed her eyes as the beating of her pulse quickened. She felt like crying, and laughing and dancing.

They stood like that, in a tight embrace for a long while. Just feeling everything. When they finally pulled back a little to look at each other, they both smiled.

"We're going to change a lot of lives tonight," Regina said.
Emma nodded. "For the better," she agreed, though the look she received in answer was doubtful. "Henry will be happy."

"And that's the most important thing," Regina consented.

"I think we're both fairly important too. In this, at least." She grinned.

Regina rolled her eyes once again. "In this," she agreed after a moment and drew Emma in for another kiss. "I like this," she whispered against Emma's lips.

"There's going to be a lot of it in the future," Emma promised.

They both started giggling.

"This is so ridiculous," Regina said.

"No, it's love."

"Love's ridiculous," Regina argued.

"Love's just love, it's us who're ridiculous."

"People will notice."

"They should."

"Your mom," Regina reminded Emma who nodded.

"She'll get over it or with it or whatever. She's strong," Emma sounded like she needed to convince both of them. "It's not gonna be easy, Regina. Not everybody will understand, but it's not like they ever tried to understand you. And I don't care. If they're being mean, we're leaving Storybrooke. There are other places to live, not just in America, in other realms. We'll just find the place where we can be perfectly happy."

"As long as it's not here," Regina said.

Emma smiled.

"I mean... I will be happy anywhere with you," Regina tried to sound sincere, but it came out a little sarcastically.

"Are you turning into a genuine princess on me?"

"I'm a queen, Emma, you're the princess."

Emma laughed. "Let's just be Regina and Emma. And let's find Henry to tell him the good news." Emma tugged at Regina's hand, suddenly eager to share her love with the world, but especially their son.

"He won't be surprised."

"He knows us very well," Emma agreed. She led Regina down the stairs and onto the terrace.

Regina pulled at her hand and they embraced once more. Then they kissed.

"I'll have to tell Robin," Regina then said.
"You don't owe him an explanation."

"No, I don't. Just some consideration. He deserves that."

Emma nodded. "He brought us together."

"Don't blame him for something you're solely responsible for. I know you had an eye on me from the start," Regina teased.

Emma laughed. "You're not wrong, you know," she teased right back.

Regina made a surprised face.

"I always thought you were beautiful - even though I didn't want to," Emma confessed.

"I always thought you were obnoxious, but I guess I tried hard to overlook those... eyes." Regina said, leaning into Emma's arms a little more fully. "It's been so long, Emma," she murmured against her cheek.

"I hear it's like riding a bicycle," Emma joked.

Regina looked at her sharply for a second before her eyes melted against Emma's smirk. "Well, at least we know where Henry gets it."

They parted reluctantly and went back into the ballroom.
Regina's hand rested once again in the crook of Emma's arm as they re-entered the ball room. Heads turned towards them but mostly everyone was preoccupied with the heroics that had happened in the woods these last few days and few people paid any mind to the women and their peculiar friendship.

They had just started looking for Henry when Mulan intercepted their way and bowed before them. Emma smiled at her. "Mulan, it's good to see you back. I heard the fighting is over?"

"It's good to be back, Emma. Our enemies fought valiantly but together with our allies we defeated them. It was a good fight," Mulan said as she shook Emma's arm. Then she rested her dark eyes on Regina. "King Phillip has expressed an interest to meet you. He wants to thank you for your bravery."

Regina looked surprised then suspicious. "My bravery?" she repeated and looked over at Emma. "I wasn't very brave, Emma did most of the fighting."

"Phillip already knows Emma and now he wants to meet you," Mulan said and gave Emma a small apologetic smile.

"But--" Regina wanted to argue.

Emma laid her hand on hers. "It's okay, Regina. You should meet Phillip and Aurora, they're lovely people," Emma encouraged and smiled.

Regina smiled nervously, but she inclined her head toward Mulan who turned to lead Regina to her king.

Emma nodded at her.

"I'll go tell Henry. Go mingle," Emma said.

Regina followed Mulan who led her over to a foursome that included Eric and Ariel.

Mulan made formal introductions and Regina curtsied to the kings and queens, most of them looking curiously at her.

"Thank you, Mulan," Phillip said.

Mulan bowed and took her place to the side from which to overlook the room and make sure her king and queen were safe.

"It's good to meet you, Lady Regina," Phillip said, using a formal title that didn't quite belong to her. Regina saw it as a compromise and didn't comment on it. "Mulan told us about your help in defeating the band of offenders in the woods."

"All I did was cook for the men and advice them on the layout of the land," Regina said uncharacteristically modest.

"I think we all know that that isn't quite true. You were a target of these men and yet you fought valiantly against them."

"I was a target because I was their queen. They wanted me back to either reign, or destroy me which
they almost did," Regina gave back without any false pretenses. She looked at each of the royals in turn but none of them looked back at her shocked or distrustful like she had expected.

"We know who your were, Lady Regina," Aurora said with a sidelong glance at her friend Ariel. "But Mulan and Robin told us that you've changed and I guess you wouldn't be here if that wasn't true."

Regina didn't know what to say to that. She felt strangely touched by Aurora's words, her sweet smile. She answered it with her own shy one.

"Please tell us what happened in the woods. You and Emma were on your own for a while, if I understood correctly. And nobody seems sure what happened to you at that time," Eric prompted her.

She told them about Emma saving her life on that hill and them hiding from their enemies. She didn't tell them about Emma's wound and how she took it from her, she didn't tell them about any of the conflicting feelings she'd had for the blonde, how her nearness had affected her in their hiding place under the tree. Those were things she would only share with one person ever. She told them about their flight, about the confrontation, about her surprise. And she apologized because she still felt responsible for the damage her former guards had done.

"But they acted without your knowledge," Ariel argued.

"And yet in my name, as part of their former duties," Regina gave back.

"That is not your fault. The rumors about your change have reached all the kingdoms in this realm years ago. Those guards would have known about it. Whatever they did, they did it despite the fact that you may have changed, maybe even to challenge that rumor or to challenge you to come back. You can't take on their guilt, they were grown man and knew what they were doing," Phillip said, his brown eyes quite adamant that this should be the way they saw it.

Regina didn't agree but she saw that it was useless to argue her point. She could always start an argument about the person she'd been, the things she'd done and told others to do. Nobody would fight her on that front, except for Henry maybe, and Emma, but she didn't want to fight with these people. They had gone out of their way to be civil to her, and she wouldn't repay them for being headstrong.

"I can't quite see it that way, your majesty," she said and raised a hand before he could argue his point further. "But I'm grateful that the terror my former men instilled in your people is now over. We should think about the soldiers who lost their lives and their families. I would like to give something back," she heard herself say.

They smiled at her, all four of them.

And it was so strange to Regina that she turned automatically to look for Emma. She found the green eyes looking back at her proudly from across the room where she stood with Henry. Emma smiled and she found herself smiling back.

'So this is love,' she thought before she turned to her present company to talk about what could be done for the families of the fallen soldiers.
Emma followed Regina's way through the room with her eyes. She smiled because there wasn't any reason not to. She trusted Mulan and was sure that whatever she had said to Phillip would have been praise for Regina, and that Phillip would act like a gallant king and acknowledge that because he, too, trusted Mulan.

When Emma looked around the room, she noticed other people watching Regina. She wasn't a ghost anymore, people turned, people stared. Not all of them looked friendly but at least they saw her and didn't step away. It was a change and Emma was glad for it. She wasn't sure what had brought it on, maybe it was her own acknowledgment of Regina as part of her family, maybe Phillip hadn't been the only one who had heard of Regina fighting her own men in the woods, maybe it was the fact that she was here, that she was smiling, that they saw her as she really was for the first time. Or all of the above. It made Emma happy and she turned to look for Henry with a giant smile on her face.

She finally caught sight of him in a quiet corner of the room where he stood with a young lady, talkinganimatedly, his ears glowing a bright red.

Emma smiled mischievously as she walked over.

"Hey, sonny," she greeted him and put an arm over his shoulders.

Henry looked up at her as if being caught, then he frowned. "Ma, hey. I--"

"And who is this young lady?" Emma asked. She pushed her hand out. "I'm Emma, I'm one of Henry's mothers," she told the young girl who blushed lightly, but took Emma's hand to shake it timidly.

"This is Doria. She's a cousin of King Eric," Henry told Emma.

"Then you are a princess," Emma stated.

Doria nodded.

"Yeah, just like you," Henry said testily.

"Not quite like me, I guess," Emma gave back with a grin. "Are you living at the castle?" she asked Doria.

"I'm living with my parents in my cousin's kingdom but not at the castle," she said.

Emma now saw clearly why her son was enchanted with her: besides being a beautiful girl, she also had a lovely voice.

"Would you excuse us for a moment, Doria. I have to talk to Henry about something important. I'll send him right back when we're done, I promise."

Doria blushed a deeper shade of red, but nodded her head. She looked up shyly at Henry.

He cleared his throat. "Excuse me." He bowed.

Emma smirked. As she and Henry walked away from the girl, she could see that he wasn't at all happy with the interruption. She felt bad about the way she had teased the young people.

"Henry." She touched his arm lightly.
He pulled it away as they came to stand next to one of the doors that led outside.

"I'm sorry, kid, I... she's really quite lovely," she said in apology.

Henry looked at her through his long bangs. "She is," he said. "And now she will probably not talk to me again because you humiliated me in front of her."

"I'm really sorry, but I think that she'll be happy to talk to you again. From what I saw she is pretty smitten with you."

"You think so?" Henry asked and looked back to where Doria was now surrounded by her friends again. They whispered among each other and giggled and then Doria looked up and over to him, she blushed.

He grinned.

"Oh, yes, definitely," Emma assured him.

Henry seemed to grow several inches before her eyes, smiling happily.

'Oh, boy,' she thought. 'Please don't tell me he's in love.'

"What did you wanna talk about?" Henry then turned to her with an appeased expression.

"Your mom and I, we love each other," she told him and grinned rakishly.

"Duh," he made and rolled his eyes at her.

"You don't understand, she told me, she was in love with me," Emma said and grinned even wider. It just made her so happy to say it, to know it.

"But you knew that already," Henry argued, not quite seeing what the fuss was about.

"Yes, but she said it, son," Emma grabbed him by the jacket and looked at him intently.

Henry grinned. "You guys are so nuts," he said.

Emma let go of him and looked at him disappointed. Was he even listening to what she was saying? Didn't he understand how amazing this was?

"So, what does that mean, exactly? Are we staying here?"

"Why would we be staying here, Henry?"

"Well, if you love each other then Snow will lift the ban from mom, right? And we could live here," he reasoned.

"We never planned to live here, Henry, you know that. Storybrooke is our home," Emma told him. Then her look went back to the girl her son had just talked to. "Do you wanna live here?" she asked bewildered.

"I never really thought about it, but why not? It's beautiful here, I'm some sort of prince or something and--"

"You are not the heir to the throne, you know that, Henry."
"I know, you are," Henry gave back.

"No, Killian is. I'm not going to be queen here, this is not my home, and it's not my kingdom," she tried to explain.

"But it could be."

They looked at each other.

"I know it can be tempting to think about it, Henry. But we don't belong here. We come from a different world."

"That doesn't mean we couldn't live here. I bet Snow and David would be happy if we stayed."

Emma was confused about the turn this conversation had taken, but Henry seemed serious about it.

"This is... not what I wanted to talk to you about," she said. "I mean, we can talk about it. But I would rather do that when we're back at home, okay?"

Henry shrugged noncommittally, but there was a definite pout in the way he did it.

Emma turned to look for Regina, to see how she was faring. Regina was talking to the four royals on the other side of the room and she seemed a little bewildered, too. And then she turned, seemingly finding Emma's eyes immediately through the whole room. She smiled and Emma smiled back.

'This is love,' she thought, laying her hand on her stomach to tame the wild fluttering of the butterflies there.

She turned back to Henry.

He was looking over at the assembly of princesses, smiling brightly at Doria. And she was smiling back.

'Uh-oh,' Emma's inner voice warned and she took a deep breath. 'There's something in the air tonight.'

"Henry," she said and touched his arm.

He looked back at her reluctantly.

"We're gonna talk about this, I promise. Okay?"

He nodded.

"With your mom, we will talk about it all together, as a family," she emphasized.

"Are we? A family, I mean?"

Emma nodded. "We've been a family for a while now, haven't we? And well, I think we'll need some time to figure it all out but I think... I hope that's where we're headed."

Henry smiled. "Good." He hugged Emma.

She hugged him back, tightly. When they parted, Emma looked at Henry with tears in her eyes. She took his face between her hands and looked at him intently. "I can't believe how much you've grown," Emma said and meant in the last half hour, in that short amount of time she had seen him as
something other than just her son, as someone who would someday love a woman - or man - and
want to have a family. She didn't think that it would be with Doria, she didn't think that it would
happen this soon. But one day, not so far away, he would be a man. Panic and love hit her hard at
that moment and she would have liked to lock him away from that part of his life. She didn't feel like
she had had enough time with him yet. It was selfish, she knew...

"Ma?" Henry asked into her thoughts because she made him feel self-conscious.

She could feel his cheeks heating as he blushed furiously. "I'm sorry." She let go of him. "I just love
you so much, kid."

"I love you, too, though I really think you should stop calling me 'kid,'" he said, not for the first time.

"I'll try to remember that," she promised.

Henry smiled, shaking his head a little. "Thank you. May I go back now?"

Emma nodded.

But then he hugged her again, quite impulsively.

She laughed.

"I'm happy for you and mom," he whispered to her before he pulled away from her. He walked over
to where the young women stood and shortly after, he and Doria were once again alone, talking to
each other, seeing only each other.

Emma sighed and closed her eyes. 'Love,' she thought and then opened her eyes to look right into
Snow's.
"Do you have a minute for me?" Snow asked, working hard at masking her emotions.

Emma nodded and they looked around to see where there would be a good place to talk. There was a door to their left, leading to an antechamber. Snow pointed it out to Emma and they entered the small room, Snow closing the door behind them.

There was a table and two settees, Emma sat down on one and Snow on the other. Then Emma got up again and started pacing the room.

"I know you hate her," she said after a while.

"Let's not start this conversation with assumptions of who I hate, please," Snow asked of her. She looked up at Emma in silent request.

Emma sat down at the edge of the settee she had just vacated, hands stemmed into the soft cushions beside her. "I'm in love with Regina and she's in love with me," Emma said looking directly into Snow's eyes.

Snow felt the words like a knife cutting into her. The confirmation settled heavily onto her chest as something akin to sorrow. "Did she tell you this?"

Emma nodded. "Yes, we... she... God, Snow, don't make this... this should be a good thing, I'm so happy. Can't you just be happy for me, for my family? I shouldn't feel guilty about this. Don't make me feel guilty about this," she begged. She stood and came over to Snow, kneeling before her and taking her hands into her own. "Please, mom," she said.

Snow's eyes filled with tears and she extricated one of her hands from Emma's to lay it on her cheek.

"I want you to be happy, Emma, I do. But Regina..." Snow heaved a sigh, a desperate plea for Emma to maybe reconsider, to maybe take it all back. Then she realized how ridiculous such a plea was. How could you take back love? How could you unlove? You couldn't. Love didn't give you that choice.

Snow lowered her gaze to the hands that were holding one of hers. Strong hands, capable hands. The hands of a grown woman who could only ever depend on herself.

Snow didn't want to make this more difficult for Emma, she didn't want to say anything that would sever the fragile familial bond that existed between them.

"Regina deserves happiness too, Snow. She deserves to be loved," Emma said.

Snow looked up again. "I'm not so sure about that," she said.

Emma shook her head, hurt by Snow's words.

"And even if... why does it have to be your love?"

"I don't know, it just feels right," Emma said. "We've spent so much time together, in Storybrooke. I mean, we did it for Henry first, of course, but then we would just meet sometimes, or we had something to talk over, sheriff stuff. And we would just talk about the job, and then about life, and then about the town, about the people. She would make plans for Storybrooke, she's so ambitious
and enthusiastic. She would pull me in and then we would talk about Henry and his future, about our lives, our pasts. She regrets so many things, Snow. She talks about that time, she talks about her feelings."

Emma's eyes swam in tears now. "I wish you could hear her talk about how much she regrets hurting everyone."

"Everyone? Did she ever say that she regretted poisoning me?"

To Snow's surprise Emma nodded. "It was just the other week that we talked about it. We sat down together after dinner. Henry still had some homework to do so he was upstairs. We had some wine and we talked about you. I'm not saying that she doesn't have... hard feelings, she does. I was arguing your side and we were kind of fighting, but not in an angry way. We just kept on and on. It was around three in the morning when we looked at each other and said that we wouldn't agree on everything, but she did say that she regretted some things. Maybe some day you two will be able to talk about these things, too."

"I'm not sure that'll be possible," Snow said.

"But maybe it will be. Maybe we could start being a family?" Emma's eyes were once again pleading.

Snow had a hard time denying her anything, but she couldn't really imagine a future where she and Regina would sit down and talk about their hurt feelings. "I'm not going to stand in your way, Emma. If you really love her and she loves you. I can't stand in love's way, nobody can or should even try. I just wish I was convinced that she won't hurt you."

"We all get hurt in love sometimes, mom. I have been, Regina has been. You only ever loved one man and he loved you back. It's not always that... easy."

"Your father and I had it anything but easy, Emma," Snow argued.

"But you knew that you loved each other. You always did everything for each other, you always found each other and you knew. You just knew."

"Regina took that knowledge from us when she cursed everyone."

"And yet here you are. More in love than ever before, in your kingdom, with your heir. You are lucky, Snow. It hasn't been that way for me or Regina. We've been hurt and now, we're trying to heal each other. With love. And we already know that things won't be easy, that things won't be smooth. We know that people won't like it, that they will say things, possibly do things. I will have to say all the things I just told you over and over again to convince people that Regina is worthy of my love and I'm already sick of it. Please, don't make it harder for me yet. Trust me. If you don't trust her, trust me."

Tears fell onto their combined hands and Snow wondered for a second whose tears they were before she realized that they were both crying. For a moment all the things that Emma had said melted together to an undecipherable mass of just words, meaningless, something Snow couldn't possibly understand. But then those last words jumped out on her, that last plea. And she knew if she could do nothing else, not understand, not consent or be happy, she could in the very least trust Emma. Because Emma had learned how to protect her heart, to survive life as an orphan. She had instincts and abilities beyond whatever life threw at her and she was still here, still able to feel and be happy and love.
"I trust you," Snow said with conviction.

Emma smiled through her tears. "Thank you, mom," she said. Emma kissed Snow before she pulled her into a tight hug.

Snow cried and she smiled and she held onto Emma tightly.

After a while, Emma pulled back and looked at Snow with a small smile. "We should probably get back."

"Yes. I should see that Killian gets to bed. It's way past his time."

"I think he was already nodding off on dad's throne," Emma said and rose from the floor she'd been kneeling on.

Snow rose also, but still held one of Emma's hands in hers. She pulled at it. "Honey? Promise me something?"

"What's that?"

"If things with Regina shouldn't work out, don't be too proud to come here and... mourn. Don't be too proud to talk to your dad or me," Snow asked of Emma.

"Only if you promise that if things between Regina and I do work out you won't be too proud to visit, or too proud to invite us. I want to see more of you, I want Henry to be able to come here if he wants to. I think he might want to."

"You're always welcome here. This is your home, as far as we are concerned," Snow assured Emma.

"My home is Storybrooke but if we should ever want to live here, Henry, Regina and I... do you think that would be possible?"

"I don't know, Emma. There would have to be some kind of... I can't promise you that just now. We would have to agree to something like that, your father, the other kings and queens. And Regina wouldn't be--"

"A queen?" Emma asked and smiled ironically. "She wouldn't want to be – though she'll always be a queen to me."

"You understand, though, don't you?"

"I guess. But the other things, visiting and all..."

"And you coming here if..."

"Things will work out, I just know it," Emma said, but nodded.

"I promise," Snow said smiling.

"I promise," Emma answered in kind and they hugged once again. "But things will work out," she couldn't help but say.

Snow laughed at Emma's stubbornness - something she had inherited from her father, no doubt - and caressed her cheek.
They left the antechamber together.

Regina was circling the room, contemplating her talk with the two kings and queens. She was puzzled by their civility, by their willingness to see the good in her, to believe that she had changed. It was certainly different from how she'd been treated by mostly everyone else. She wasn't sure if that was a good thing, she felt doubtful if she could live up to that kind of blind trust in her goodness, she felt a little like a fraud. They had said that they knew who she'd been, but could they really comprehend what that even meant?

Regina let her eyes drift over the assembly, her eyes seeking assurance in a look from green eyes, but Emma wasn't standing where she had been talking to Henry before. And Regina couldn't see her anywhere else in the room.

"Regina?" a voice to her left said and her head turned. Smiling blue eyes looked back at her and she felt herself relax into the admiration she found in them. "I'm so glad to see you're all right," Robin said.

"Well, I'm glad to see you back and alive, if not all right," Regina returned with a nod toward Robin's injury.

"It's a minor scrape compared with what you had to endure," he argued.

Regina nodded thoughtfully, not because she agreed but because she felt it was useless to argue with him. He wasn't going to confess to his own vulnerability, men rarely did.

"I'm healed except for a bruise on my back which is still a little tender but not bothering me much," she told him.

"That's good news," he said and offered her his healthy arm. "Should we walk?"

She smiled, inclining her head in the affirmative. Regina took Robin's arm and they started a stroll around the room.

"What happened in the woods?" Regina asked after they had talked about the ball for a short while.

"You really want to know?" he asked.

She looked at him in silent challenge. "I've been there, Robin. I'm not some hot-house flower that needs to be spared gory details."

"Of course not, I... well, I'm not sure how much Emma told you after your recovery, but we were able to detect a way down into the valley from the ledge we found you on. But we couldn't advance until reinforcements arrived. We sabotaged some of their defensive posts, traps they had set up. Emma was certainly right about those, she has good instincts when it comes to people on the run or in hiding."

"That she most certainly does," Regina agreed.

"After the reinforcements arrived, we launched an attack by the archers we had. They were to keep
everyone busy while the rest of us advanced from both sides, from the hill and from your kingdom. That's how we got into the valley but that was only the first stage. The fighting only intensified after that. The men were certainly a match for us and only after the reinforcements from Eric and Phillip arrived, were we able to defeat them. Those who surrendered are still in that valley. We haven't decided on what to do with them yet," Robin finished his tale.

Regina sighed. "How many deaths on our side?" she asked quietly.

"21 during the battle. That number does not include the dozen men on the hill and the soldier who had been brought back here after we found the first camp. I was told he died this morning of an infection."

"34 dead," Regina counted and shook her head. "Another 34."

"They were brave men," Robin said. "I'm sure their kings will honor them accordingly."

"None of your men died?"

Robin shook his head. "We were once again lucky not to have lost a friend."

"I was wondering if there was anything I could do to ease the guilt, I guess you could say. They were my men, most of them were. Do you have an idea how one might help the families of the fallen soldiers and the villages that have been raided?" Regina asked in low tones, her eyes seemingly searching something on the floor of the ballroom.

Robin halted their progress around the room and looked at Regina. She didn't look up so he pushed his finger under her chin and lifted it until she would meet his eyes.

"You're not responsible for the deaths of these soldiers, Regina. You're not responsible for what those men did. They had long been on their own, they had learned to make their own decisions and they were bad ones."

"I showed them the way to bad decisions a long time ago," Regina argued.

"You gave them jobs, you didn't raise them and you didn't force them to work for you instead of any other regent of this land. They had choices before they met you and they had them after you left."

They looked at each other, and like before Regina didn't argue with Robin because she could see that his gallantry would never allow her to take the blame for anything that happened in the woods or what led up to it.

"I still want to help," she said instead.

Robin smiled. "Of course, you do. What I think these people need more than anything else is food. That's one thing there's never enough of. Food provides energy and with energy things can get done," he stated.

"Food," she said and then she smiled. "Food and vitamins to ward of diseases," she then added.

"What are vitamins?" he asked suspiciously.

"They're... well, it's hard to explain but they're good for the body, keeps it healthy. And I think I know just the fruit to provide some of them. Do you think we could plant orchards? With apple trees? Do you think that people would like that?"
Robin smiled at the idea. "Apples? Yes, apples are good. I don't know a single person who doesn't like apples. They taste good, are relatively easy to harvest. Every child can climb a ladder... and there are a lot of things you can do with them."

Regina nodded. "I will provide the seedlings and whatever is needed to take care of them. It will take time, though," she mused.

"Well, it's something that will help them in the long run. The kingdoms will provide for the more pressing needs, anyways, so it's a good thing, a lasting thing. I think people will appreciate it," Robin enthused.

"Thank you, Robin."

They resumed their way until they stood in front of one of the glass doors that let outside.

"Would you like to catch some air outside?" Robin asked.

Regina shook her head. "I already did that tonight."

He looked at her questioningly.

"It's a lovely night for... lovers," she said.

Robin frowned. He seemed to catch her meaning but was probably wondering who might have accompanied her. Then his face cleared some, though his eyes still spoke of his puzzlement.

"Emma?"

She nodded.

"I'm surprised," he said.

"I was too," she assured him. "When she... kissed me and healed me."

"Emma? Emma healed you? But I thought..."

"She didn't plan on it but Henry told her to try. To see what would happen and it revealed more than either of us had anticipated," Regina tried to explain the situation and found that it sounded strange and constructed. But that wasn't how it had felt at all. "Emma and I shared true love's kiss, something I didn't even believe existed for people like me. But she loves me and I love her."

"And it is what you want, too?"

Regina smiled at the question. "Isn't love what everyone wants?" she asked Robin.

He seemed surprised by the openness of her smile, the sheer happiness behind it.

She wondered if his surprise stemmed from the fact that she was admitting to loving... wanting a woman like that or if he had thought her incapable of feeling so deeply.

"I can't speak for everyone, but I had that kind of love and I lost that kind of love. It nearly destroyed me. I guess, I'm looking for a companion, now, someone to share life with, not get overwhelmed--"

"I don't think that's true," Regina said.

"I couldn't survive loving another woman that way," Robin argued.
"Is that how you thought of sharing your life with me? Someone to raise your son and warm your bed at night?" she asked bluntly.

Robin blushed. He didn't answer for a long while, his eyes darting across the room.

"You did think of sharing it with me, you said so yourself," Regina reminded him.

He nodded. "I'm not sure what I wanted now and I guess it doesn't matter anymore since you don't want any of it with me," he finally answered.

"Did I lead you on?" Regina then asked because she wasn't sure of the things she'd shown him, the signals she had sent out.

"No, you didn't. I don't think you did. I just saw someone strong and beautiful who might have been a suitable companion and I led myself on."

"I saw some of that too, but what I really wanted was a friend. Can we be friends, Robin?"

He looked at her and his eyes lit up before his lips could follow. But then he smiled. "We already are, Regina," he assured her and put his uninjured arm around her.

She hugged him and kissed him on a bearded cheek. "I'm glad," she told him.

"Let's drink to our friendship," he suggested and hailed a waiter. They both took a cup of wine and toasted to what was so common for him and still so extraordinary for her: friendship.
Could Have Danced All Night

"Can I get your attention for a moment," David called out to his guests from the platform where the two thrones stood behind him. He had his arm around his wife and a glass of champagne in his hand. Everybody turned toward him and the chatter died down. "Thank you. I want to say, well, thank you, for one. My son who is now either fast asleep or sitting on the stairs outside eavesdropping," he smiled as most of the guests laughed. "had a wonderful evening, thanks to all of you. He's a happy little prince with a lot of friends and Snow and I are glad that so many of you could come tonight. We're especially grateful that our daughter, Emma, is here tonight with her son, Henry, and... Regina."

Emma smiled at her dad for including her lover, even if a little awkwardly.

"Now that the kids are in bed, it is time for the ball-part of the ball to begin - the dancing," David continued and some people clapped their hands. "My wife and I would be happy if you joined us for a waltz." He bowed to his wife and led her down the stairs toward the dance floor. The small orchestra that had been playing quietly in a corner so far, played up, as Snow White and Prince Charming faced each other, arms around one another and started dancing.

Emma moved quickly through the admiring guests toward Regina and finally stood before her, smiling. "Regina," she said, bowing.

"Emma," came the prompt answer accompanied by a bright smile.

"Would you like to dance with me?"

"Nothing I would rather do," Regina answered and slipped her hand into Emma's.

People were looking at them, they were staring and some not very friendly, but Emma and Regina ignored everybody around them as they joined Snow and Charming on the dance floor. Other couples did the same, but none seemed quite as remarkable or elegant as the two women who danced in perfect harmony.

"You are very good at this," Regina said surprised.

Emma grinned. "Who would have thought," she commented, leading Regina lightly yet purposefully around the floor.

"Someone took dancing lessons," Regina gave back delightedly. "When did this happen?"

Emma laughed. "When I was around... 13 to 14."

"Tell me," Regina asked of her.

"I was with a foster couple. They were former ballroom dancers, if you can believe it, and had a dancing studio in Boston. They taught pairs, naturally, and there were usually more women than men, so they taught me how to lead and lead I did. I also learned the female steps, by the way," she added.

"How long were you with them?"

"A little less than a year. I liked being with them, actually. They were nice people, strict sometimes but fair. It was my fault they sent me away. I don't even remember what it was about, I wanted to do
something, maybe go out on a Saturday, I don't know. They wouldn't let me so I... had a temper tantrum and destroyed all the mirrors in the studio," Emma confessed to the wide-eyed expression of her lover.

"Mirrors? You destroyed mirrors, of all things?"

Emma nodded.

"How many?"

"It was a whole wall of them, about 8 to 10."

"Meaning 70 years of bad luck. I think I'm about to rethink that relationship-thing with you," Regina said, but there was a teasing note in her voice.

"Are you superstitious?"

"Remember who you're talking to," Regina said. "Mirrors are part of my tale."

"Well, I guess they're part of mine, too," Emma grinned. "I went back, years later, to apologize. The studio wasn't there anymore. My foster dad had died and his wife had left Boston for Florida. I would have liked to talk to her but I didn't have the money at the time to travel. But I will always be grateful to them because they introduced me to one of my passions - dancing," Emma ended the story.

"With girls?" Regina asked with a mischievous smirk.

Emma laughed. "Well, as far as dancing was concerned, I liked that, but other things came later."

Emma whirled them both around, pulling Regina just a little closer. The former queen smiled.

"How did you learn - to dance, that is?" Emma asked after a couple more turns.

The smile vanished from Regina's lips immediately and her eyes took on a pained expression.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to--"

Regina shook her head. "It was my father."

Emma understood. "I'm sorry," she said again.

"He was a very good dancer but my mother didn't usually dance. I guess you'd have to have a heart to enjoy it. Anyways, I was a little girl and he--"

"Let me guess, you danced on his feet," Emma interrupted.

Regina smiled. "Yes, I did. And you will probably think this very cliched, but it was sweet. Of course, at some point my mother insisted that I take dancing lessons from someone more professional so she hired someone."

"A dashing young man with a mustache, maybe?" Emma guessed and they both laughed.

"No," Regina said.

"Oh, well. A gay man, then?" They giggled.
"No, again. It was actually a young woman, a girl, really."

Emma opened her mouth to show her surprise.

Regina laughed at the silly expression. "I was fifteen at the time and Lorelai was 17. My mother was drilling me for my first ball and, well, the only young men she allowed around our home were the ones she... employed."

"She had affairs?"

"I didn't know it back then, I guess, I didn't want to know. But yes, my mother always had a thing for strapping, young men like Hook," she said.

Emma nodded but didn't let her mind drift off to think about the pirate. She rarely ever did, he was someone she once knew but who didn't leave a deep imprint on her life - other than her brother being named after him.

"And Lorelai?" Emma asked with a smirk.

"She was lovely. A very elegant dancer, a good teacher, and a friend." Regina's voice was dreamy, full of admiration for the young woman. Her eyes shone a little brighter, and her cheeks turned a darker shade.

Emma laughed. "What else besides dancing did she teach you, then?"

Regina practically bubbled over with laughing. They giggled as their first dance came slowly to an end.

"Well, she was prepping me for the ball and she said that a young woman should know how to kiss," Regina said, a flush reddening her cheeks.

Emma was delighted and as the orchestra played their last chords, she dipped Regina and leaned over her.

"She taught you well," she told the other woman as they looked deeply into each other's eyes.

As Emma pulled her back up, Regina's hand found its way to her neck where it remained. They didn't leave the dance floor but swayed detached from the music in the middle of the room. Emma's hands pulled Regina closer by the waist. She looked down frowning at Regina's dress. "Hm," she made as her hands felt the corset. Petticoats kept Regina from her from the waste down.

"Do you still like my dress," Regina asked, teasing.

"It's quite lovely, and a lot...cumbersome."

They laughed together, their faces brushing against each other as if to caress. Their eyes found each other again, gazing longingly. They might have even kissed if there hadn't been someone clearing their throat next to them. It was Henry.
"Hey," he said blushing. "Do you mind if I cut in, ma?"

"Actually, I do," Emma grumbled but let slowly go of Regina.

Regina smiled at her. "Only for a little while," she promised Emma who bowed and then winked at their son.

"Have fun," she said as Henry took her place as his mother's dance partner.

Emma walked off.

"Are you still trying to kill grandma? Because you two almost gave her a heart attack. She didn't look happy at all," Henry told Regina.

She rolled her eyes. "I'm not going to let someone who slept with Whale wave moral superiority over me."

"Okay, I didn't need to know that," Henry answered a little disturbed.

"Says the boy who told me it was like riding a bicycle," Regina teased.

"You're never gonna let me live that down, will you?"

"Don't worry, son. I will get over the fact that you're growing into a man in another decade or two," she promised.

"By then my feet will probably have stopped aching, too," she added as Henry stepped onto her toes for the second time already.

Henry moaned an apology.

"Here, look up at me, into my eyes. You lead in this dance. You take one step forward with your right, then you sidestep with your left and pull the right back. The left goes next to the right, and repeat."

He did as instructed and they muddled through the rest of the dance with her telling him what to do.

"Do you think I should take dancing lessons? I mean that's something I should be able to do, right?" Henry asked.

"Well, if you want to impress the ladies, that's never a bad strategy. Especially here. But dancing is not all that formal where we live, so Emma might be able to help you with that."

"Really?" He seemed as surprised as she herself had been.

"She's lived with dancers for a while, in a foster home," she told him the short version.

"I think she mentioned that once," Henry remembered and smiled.

Regina was sure that there was more to this than her son wanting to learn to dance. She had watched him with the young woman, princess Doria. They seemed to like each other a lot. And dancing was part of the ritual in the Enchanted Forest, part of the fairy tale. Of course, Henry lived in another imaginary realm and the distance that would exist between them couldn't even be measured in anything as conventional as miles or kilometers when they left the next day.

She would talk to Emma about this, maybe she already knew something Regina didn't. Or maybe
she had a haunch what this was about.
Aurora watched Emma and Regina dance. It was later in the evening and she was standing alone at the side of the dance floor. She would have liked to dance, too, but Phillip was talking earnestly to Robin Hood at the moment and most of the other men were already engaged. Aurora looked back to the two women who were so obviously in love.

That was the moment, she felt another presence to her left and she turned her head to smile at Mulan.

"Can I get you anything, something to drink or eat, my queen?" Mulan asked formally. She didn't smile, her expression seemed impassive as it was most of the time.

However, Aurora could read her friend's face well and to her it seemed a little sad tonight.

"You're not here as our guard, Mulan. We're among friends and you're a guest, too," she admonished her.

"I'm asking as a friend, not your guard," Mulan gave back and gave Aurora the smallest of smiles.

Aurora shook her head, still smiling. "I don't need anything right now, thank you."

Mulan nodded and looked at the dance floor. She, too, watched Emma and Regina, Aurora noticed.

"They look lovely together, don't they?" she asked.

Mulan nodded.

"Did you know they were...," but Aurora didn't have a word for what Emma and Regina were, her upbringing hadn't provided her with one.

"Emma did everything in her power to save Regina's life. They belong together," Mulan said.

"They look very happy," Aurora agreed and saw Mulan smile more fully now.

Aurora looked back at the dance floor. After a short while, she slipped her hand into her friend's. Mulan held it silently for the remainder of the dance.
They were holding hands as they neared the door to Regina's room. And even just this simple gesture made Emma giddy and smiling like an idiot, as she was sure she did. She turned and walked in front of the other woman who raised an eyebrow at her.

"You smile like the cat that ate the canary," Regina said.

"Strange, I always thought of myself as the canary in your company," Emma gave back.

"You can't fool me, I know all about Tweety Bird."

They snickered quietly so as not to wake anyone, namely Henry who slept not so far away from where Emma now leaned in the doorway to Regina's room.

"Quite the party, huh?"

"It was certainly different than the kind of balls we used to have around here," Regina agreed.

"Figures that the thing Snow would bring from the Real World: Storybrooke to the Enchanted Forest is sheet music. I almost fainted when they played Bohemian Rhapsody."

Regina simply smiled.

Emma could see that conversations about Snow with Regina and conversations about Regina with Snow would always be difficult. She took a step closer to Regina and leaned in for a kiss. It was the first one since those they shared on the terrace and Emma couldn't quite believe how much she'd yearned for them over the course of the evening. How could she ever have stopped doing this?

She pulled Regina close.

Regina laid a hand on her collar where two buttons of her jacket were already undone. She put her hand on the heated skin of Emma's neck, as they deepened the kiss.

Both women moaned as Emma pulled Regina closer, once again annoyed at the lack of contact she could accomplish through Regina's dress.

"I can't wait to get back to Storybrooke. How do people even deal with corsets and all those skirts?" she murmured into the kiss and felt the lips pressed to hers smile.

"Half the fun is in uncovering what lies beneath, Miss Swan," Regina teased as she undid a button on Emma's jacket, then another, and another before she pushed her hand inside the garment.

Emma gasped. "Hmmm... then again, a jacket over tank top arrangement can be fun, too," she whispered hotly in Regina's ear.

"Don't tell anyone but I'm getting quite fond of your tank tops... hmm-mh."

They kissed deeply while Regina opened more buttons on Emma's jacket.

Emma simply held Regina tightly to her, there was no way she would get under her clothes standing in a doorway.

"I really like doing this," Regina admitted as they came up for air.
"Me, too. That's why I'm so scared to mess this up."

"If this gets messed up, I'm pretty sure, I'll be the one doing it," Regina argued. She put her forehead to Emma's and they both closed their eyes for a moment, just feeling the closeness, breathing each other in.

"We could just mess it up together, then we can blame ourselves and each other. Best case scenario," Emma suggested.

"Or we could not mess it up at all..." but Regina didn't finish the sentence.

"And live happily ever after?"

"I don't think we're quite there yet," Regina said and took a step back. She sighed, reaching out her hand and nestling at Emma's jacket.

"I know we're not, but I would still like to have dinner with you when we're back home. You know, in a restaurant with the good people of Storybrooke staring at us because we look so amazing together."

Regina smiled at the sweet teasing.

"And then we could watch a movie--"

"Storybrooke doesn't have a movie theater," Regina reminded Emma.

"Then I guess I'll have to hand in a request with the mayor to see what can be done about it. Or..."

"Or?"

"Or we rent a movie and watch it on that big-ass tv you have," Emma said taking the step Regina had retreated back from her.

"Are you trying to get into a compromising position with me on my couch?" Regina asked innocently as she held Emma off with a hand to her stomach.

"No, I just like your tv so much," Emma gave back and leaned forward for another kiss. Regina gave in and pulled Emma to her. The kiss got heated once again, the two women just barely fighting their urges to open the door to Regina's room and find a more comfortable position on her bed.

"This is not yet the time," Regina whispered against Emma's lips.

"I know," Emma answered.

"I was wondering--"

"I'm not an idiot, Regina. Yesterday you barely allowed me access to your room, I didn't think you'd just open up... bad analogy. But I know you need time and, well, I like taking it slow. I like going on dates and groping each other in a car--"

"My car, I'm not gonna get into that tiny vehicle of yours, ever again."

"You're so bossy. But sure, let's make out in your car," Emma teased.

"I wasn't saying that that was ever going to happen," Regina argued but couldn't keep the smile off her face.
"Oh, yes, you did. You said you wanted to grope me in your car," Emma snickered. Then she grew serious again. "We have plenty of time to do all kinds of stuff in all kinds of places." Maybe not quite as serious but still serious enough to reassure Regina.

"Except for your car," Regina said and tapped Emma's nose.

"Stop dissing my bug."

Regina nodded. She gave Emma a small peck before she reached for her door handle.

"Is this goodnight?" Emma asked and gave Regina a little more room.

"We have a busy day tomorrow, packing and leaving and falling through a portal back home."

"Right," Emma half-heartedly agreed.

"I wanted to ask you something, though. About Henry?"

"I really don't know how much he had to drink. I kinda lost track of him at some point," Emma quickly said and looked contrite.

"That's not what I wanted to ask, though, by the way he walked and his heightened color when he left for bed it was plenty. No, he... I thought he behaved a little weirdly tonight. Did you notice anything?"

"I think he might have a serious crush on some princess, the blonde. Her name's Doria. He said something about living here, maybe?"

"Really?" Regina's face showed clearly how little this news pleased her. "The little fiend. He knows I'm not going to come back here. We've talked about this when it became possible. He knows about the exile, of course, but he also knows that I don't want to come live here. And now he's trying to manipulate you into talking to me about it."

"Well, I told him that we could talk about it back home, but I don't wanna live here, either. I'm not gonna give up women's basketball and arresting the dwarfs every other weekend for drunkenness for a princess' tiara, no way."

Regina grinned. "Well, this almost sounds like us agreeing on something concerning parenting," she said.

"I know, scary, right?"

They laughed quietly.

"Of course, if Henry wants to come here and visit your parents more often... that should be possible. During school breaks."

"And as long as he comes back and finishes school and goes to college. He's going to want to go to college, right?"

They looked at each other then at the closed door to their son's room.

"Let's hope so," Regina said in an ominous voice. "But I guess we'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Parenting is so scary," Emma said.
"Tell me about it," Regina agreed.

They smiled at each other.

"Good thing, we have a great son."

"Yeah," Emma agreed. She leaned forward to once again kiss Regina. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Drop by before you go to breakfast and we can go together."

"Are you going to sit next to me and hold my hand under the table?"

"It is far too late to listen to your silliness," Regina decided and opened the door to her room.

"I wanna hold your hand," Emma said and reached for her price. She caressed Regina's hand and then blew a kiss on it. "Always."

"You're going to break my heart, Emma Swan, I just know it."

"I'm gonna protect your heart, Regina Mills, that's a promise."

And then they kissed goodnight.
Two Months Later

Emma entered Granny's diner smiling in anticipation. She would meet Regina, of course, but that was pretty much the only thing she knew would happen this evening. Two months ago, they had agreed to date but they never seemed to be able to agree on what to do together. Eating was something they could agree on but Emma would suggest Granny's while Regina would rather try the restaurant with the French chef that had opened a couple of months ago. It had never been so difficult for the two women to plan some kind of entertainment. So Emma had suggested, and Regina had agreed, that they would not plan, they would just do. That's why they would meet at the diner whenever they could both make it, maybe eat something, maybe not and then just go from there. They had taken a romantic stroll on the beach one night, they had ended up at Emma's and necked on the couch in front of a fire, they had stopped at the bar and played pool - Emma instructing Regina until she noticed that Regina was quite the hustler.

Emma looked around the room, smiling at people. She knew where Regina would sit, she could already see the back of her head out of the corner of her eyes, sitting in their regular booth. She was on her way over when she noticed the woman Ruby was talking to over the counter, the woman she was laughing with, actually. And it had been so long that Emma heard her friend laugh like this that she knew instantly who that other woman was.

"Belle," she exclaimed.

Belle turned and smiled easily at her.

"Emma, hey." She slipped from her stool.

Emma walked over and hugged her.

"It's good to see you again. Where've you been?"

"Ah, you know, here and there. I'll tell if you really wanna know and have a little time," Belle said.

Emma looked around at the table where Regina sat waiting, her eyes already on her, an eyebrow raised in challenge.

Ruby picked up on Emma's dilemma.

"Your date is waiting, Emma," she said.

Belle looked back at Ruby. "Date?"

Ruby nodded in the direction of the booth Regina occupied.

"You're dating the mayor?" Belle asked after following Ruby's nod.

Emma just grinned.

"Well, I'd love to hear everything about your newest adventures but not tonight. Why don't you come by the sheriff's office one of these days. I usually got some time... whenever."

"Yeah, sure, I'll drop by. Have a nice evening," Belle said, but her face seemed puzzled. Emma didn't know whether it was because she was dating Regina or simply another woman. Some people in Storybrooke seemed to have a problem with either or both these facts. She wouldn't have thought
that Belle would be one of those people, though.

"You too," she gave back before she went over to Regina. She kissed the other woman's cheek before she slipped onto the bench across from her. "You look lovely."

"Thank you, dear. I like the shirt," Regina smiled at Emma flirtingly.

"Of course you do, you gave it to me for Christmas." Emma reached over the table and took one of Regina's hands. She held it loosely. "Are you hungry?"

"Not very. Are you?"

Emma shook her head. "Let's get out of here then." She slipped out of the booth again. She turned to the counter to wave at Ruby. "Catch yah later," she called as Regina joined her.

"Bye, girls," Ruby gave back and grinned widely as Regina lifted an eyebrow at her.

"I'm thinking of raising the property tax on eating places and I should probably get a health inspector in here sometime soon," Regina murmured as she left the diner in front of Emma.

"She's just trying to be friendly, Regina. There's nothing wrong with that," she said, laughing, as she put her arm around her.

"Hm, I don't know. I always thought that she would have liked to get very friendly with you."

"Are you jealous?"

"No," Regina answered a little too quickly.

Emma snickered.

They walked arm in arm down Main Street now, the air was mild, the sky clear. It was a perfect evening for a walk.

"Believe me, there's someone else Ruby has her eyes on and it's not me."

"Really? Who?" Regina asked curiously.

"You really don't know?" Emma asked surprised, it had always been obvious to her.

"Not Snow, right?"

"Oh, God, no. Belle, of course," Emma said.

"Oh. No, I guess, I didn't see that."

They walked in silence for awhile. Emma pulled her arm from around Regina's shoulders as they crossed the street and entwined their fingers.

"What is Henry doing tonight?" she asked.

"Knowing our son, he's probably mirror-skyping with the princess," Regina answered with a roll of her eyes.

"She has a name, you know."

"I know. You usually growl it whenever we talk about her," Regina said and smiled at Emma.
"Yeah, well. I still don't think that giving him that mirror-thingy was a good idea. He seems to spend an awful lot of time talking to her through it."

"It's simply a mirror, Emma, and I apologized that I didn't talk to you about it before I gave it to him. I just... I just wanted to take his mind off of the idea of moving to the Enchanted Forest for a while," Regina argued.

Emma pulled Regina to a stop. She sighed. "I know. It's just that I thought that we could spend his next vacation together, the three of us as a family for the first time. But he's already making plans with Snow and David to go visit them and we know what that means. He'll be out to meet with Doria all the time."

"I don't like this any more than you do, Emma. But he's 16 and he's got... a girlfriend." Regina stepped into Emma's personal space and lay her head against her shoulder.

Emma put her arms around Regina. "You don't wanna go back to my parents' just now, do you?"

Regina shook her head.

"Where would you like to go?"

"Well, it's not like I can just up and leave whenever Henry's got a school break, and you can't either. I guess we could go somewhere for a long weekend but not for a week."

"Or we could just stay in. That is, at my place and..." She looked into Regina's caramel-colored eyes, seemingly drowning in them.

"And?" Regina asked sexily.

The low vibration of her voice hit Emma in all the right places. She leaned forward and simply kissed Regina in answer.

They stood there for awhile, kissing each other, holding each other, not caring who might see them. They had tried to keep a low profile, but the town which was so used to routines noticed quickly that something was going on. Gossip had spread before their first date had even been over and now it was common knowledge that the mayor and the sheriff, the evil queen and the savior, Regina and Emma were an item. Not everybody liked it, not everybody disliked it. It was more a matter of coming to terms with the fact that there were all kinds of minorities living in Storybrooke now, and not all of them originated in a fairy tale.

"Would you like to come to my place?"

"Yes," Regina answered as Emma stepped back a little. She took both of Regina's hands in hers.

"Would you like to spend the night at my place?" Emma asked nervously, biting her lip.

"Yes," Regina said again.

Emma smiled. "Really?" She stepped closer again so that their faces were already touching. Emma kissed Regina at the corner of her smiling mouth.

"I already told Henry that I might," Regina whispered.

"What did he say?" Emma put her hands to Regina's cheeks, caressing her face softly.

"He said: 'Oh... Okay.' Then he looked me up and down and asked: 'Is that what you're gonna
wear?' and I said, yes. And he said: 'Keep it simple,' and I went back to my bedroom and changed," Regina told Emma.

"What were you wearing before?"

"A dress."

"Hmmm. You know I like you in jeans," Emma said as she looked down at her, drinking in the worn denim Regina was wearing. "I also like you in a dress.. even if it takes me an hour to get you out of it," she continued with a mischievous smile.

"It won't take you an hour to get me out of these," Regina whispered close to Emma's ear, close to Emma's body.

Emma sighed. "Unless I want it to," she whispered back and pulled Regina to her.

Their bodies met and passion overtook them. They were kissing deeply, hungrily, pulling each other as close as possible – until a honk close by pushed them apart. They both looked at the offending vehicle, it had the sheriff's insignia on the door.

Emma crouched to look through the window. "Deputy Tinkerbell," she said.

"Oh, it's you sheriff. I thought it was just some teenagers steaming up the windows of the library," the fairy grinned.

"Very funny, deputy. I suggest you get back to your job," Emma said a little testily, but then she smiled.

"Well, I suggest you two get a room," Tink answered and then quickly rode away.

Regina laughed at Emma's dumbfounded expression. "I couldn't agree more," she said as she took Emma's hand and they made their way toward Emma's home.

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