Penance

by SgtMac

Summary

Now Complete: Ten years ago, Regina was kidnapped by the Home Office, and put through three years of horrific torture. When she finally returns home, she's been dramatically changed - both mentally and physically. With the Home Office now threatening to return for her, it will be the ties she has to her son and to her family that will keep her safe, sane and strong.

Post THE EVIL QUEEN.

Deals heavily with three relationships: Regina/Henry, Regina/Emma, Regina/Snow. SQ.

Notes

I am finally starting to post a story that's been moving around Tumblr for a few weeks. Over there, it was jokingly called Regina Torture Thingee. Over the next week or so, I'll be editing and cleaning up those chapters. The next new one will be up once we're completely caught up here.

The MATURER rating as listed is due to themes dealing with torture of both the physical and psychological nature. While this does deal heavily with the R/E relationship, it's very slow burn romantic SQ and deals far more for a long while with their friendship for reasons that should become quite clear quickly; this is a story about healing, friendship and family.

Please note, each chapter will contain specific as is relevant warnings.
Warnings: Some language, violence, death and torture aftermath.
There are tire tracks leading away from the Cannery, and that’s their first sign that whatever they
discover inside of it probably isn’t going to be what they want to find. She lifts her phone up, and
speaks softly into it, her eyes on Neal the whole time. “How’s Mary-Margaret?” she asks.

“She hurts and she wants to throw up,” David replies. “But she’s okay. We’re on the side of the
building so whenever you’re ready.”

“Right,” Emma replies, her eyes on the tracks. They look to her like a bigger vehicle made them.
Perhaps something like a van. Considering that none of the rescue party had seen it come or go, it’s
likely it’s long gone now.

“What’s wrong?” David asks after several moments of silence.

“There was a car here already. A truck or a van or something.”

“So she might not be inside, anyway,” David sighs. “Hang on.” There’s a shuffling sound as he
drops the phone down and away from his mouth.

“What’s going on?” Neal queries, frowning as he stares at the door that leads inside the Cannery.
He’s still trying to process the idea that his fiancée might be somehow tied into this mess, and
though he’s vehemently denied the suggestion every time that it’s been brought up, there’s
something about Emma’s certainty that sways him.

“He’s asking my mother if she still feels the connection to Regina.”

He nods. Then, “Why do we actually care what happens to Regina? She tried to kill everyone - us -
just a few weeks ago.”

“It’s more complicated than that, Neal. I won’t defend what Regina did and what she’s done. She is
a lot of things, some of them very bad, but in the end, the most important one - the only one that
actually matters to be right now - is that she’s Henry’s mother, and he loves her. She was there
when we weren’t,” Emma shrugs. “I gave him up and you gave us up.”

“It wasn’t like that,” he protests. “I didn’t know.”

“You shouldn’t have needed to.”

He swallows hard. “I know.” He gazes back at the door, and then sighs.

“What?”

“I don’t know what I’ll do if you’re right.” He shakes his head in dismay. “I’ve made a lot of bad
choices, but...I figured I’ve always been able to tell a good person from a bad person. I mean, look
at who my dad is.”

“Neal, whatever happens inside of here, we’ll figure it out, okay?” she assures him.

“Together?”
“There’s no us together,” she tells him. “But I don’t want you hurt so for your sake, I really hope I’m wrong about this. For Regina’s sake, too.”

“What’s your relationship with her? Are you guys friends?”

“No, definitely not,” Emma chuckles. She pauses for a moment to listen to the muffled voices coming from the other side of the phone, and then follows up with, “Most of the time we’re at war with each other, but I think we get each other, and in the end, what we’re always fighting over is the fact that both love the same kid more than anything.”

Neal opens his mouth to answer that, but gets halted by Emma holding up her finger to pause him. She indicates towards the phone as if to suggest that David is speaking to her again. He nods, and just waits.

“She said she’s only feeling slight sensations from Regina now,” David says suddenly, his voice breaking up. “Whatever Gold gave her, it’s starting to wear off. She can tell that Regina is in pain, but not a lot more.”

“Well then I think it’s time we stop focusing on feelings and get down to the action,” Emma tells him. “You took the back, we have the front.”

“Right. Be careful, Emma. Please.”

“You, too.” She hangs up the cell, jams it into her pocket and then nods at Neal. She sees him take a breath. “Hey,” she says. “It’s going to be okay.”

“Okay,” he agrees, and then pushes the door open. He lets her step in front of him – not like she asks for permission, and besides, she has the gun – and then he follows behind her as they move through the dark damp building which smells horribly of dead fish. He thinks that it might be a long while before he has the urge for any kind of seafood after this.

“Neal,” Emma whispers. “I think there’s some kind of foreman’s office or something like that up there,” she says, gesturing with her empty hand.

“You know, horror movies start like this,” he grumbles.

“Have a lot of time for those did you?” she shoots back.

“When you’re an idiot who lets the woman they love go, actually yes.”

She shoots him a look meant to tell him that this is neither the time nor place for this conversation, and thankfully, he nods his acceptance of this.

“I don’t see anyone in there,” he says instead.

“We should still check it out just in case,” she insists as she starts moving towards the little office before he has a chance to argue. She hears him grunt in protest but then he’s right behind her, his fingers wrapped around a metal length of pipe that he’d found on the ground.

It’s when they reach the office and look inside the window that she feels an icy cold chill go through her blood. Inside of the little room is an empty metal gurney with thick brown restraining straps drooping down from it, an old looking machine with massive dials and levels on it that reminds Emma of something out of – yes – a bad horror movie and several wires with tiny little suction cups on the end of them.
“What is this?” Emma queries as they move to stand behind the gurney.


“Are you sure?” She asks as she lifts one of the wrist restraining straps. It’s slightly bent as if to suggest that someone had been surging against it.

“Yeah. I…well, it doesn’t really matter why or how, but I got pretty well acquainted with some of the terrible ways that this world fucks over people once I returned here from Neverland. Thankfully, I never had the pleasure of having to experience this stuff myself, but yeah, that machine there is meant to electrocute someone. To torture them, basically.”

Emma lets his words and their awful implications wash over her like ice-cold water. Finally, her voice low and trembling, “Okay fine, this explains what Mary Margaret felt, but where is Regina now?”

“Dead,” a man’s voice replies from the doorway. “I killed her.”

“Greg?” Emma snaps as she and Neal turn to face the mysterious outsider who’d swept into all of their lives week earlier.

“She should have let me die when I crashed on my way into town,” he chuckles as he aims a gun at the two of them. “But you didn’t, and she did and now you will. It’s nothing personal. Well, I mean it was with her, but you two, it’s about the mission, you understand, right?”

“I understand that you’re completely insane,” Emma growls. Her eyes flicker around the room as she tries to find a way to escape; there’s an open door behind them, but getting to it will cause both she and Neal to have to completely expose themselves to Greg and Tamara. Then again, right now the only thing separating them from the two lunatics is the metal gurney. If shots start getting fired, someone is going to get hit.

“I’m not insane,” he assures her. “I’m just a heartbroken son who wanted vengeance and found a way to get it against a monster woman who frankly deserved far worse. I had that right, and I took it.”

“And do you feel better now?” Emma demands.

“Actually, I do,” he grins. “Knowing how much suffering she will go…” he cuts off, shakes his head and then corrects with, “How much suffering she did go through before she died, well yeah, I feel pretty much like my father was finally avenged. I feel…I feel good.”

“Where’s Tamara,” Neal blurts out, his frustration bleeding through; he has to know if she is part of this. Has to know if he really was so wrong.

“I’m here,” she says softly, stepping out from behind Greg, a small pistol settled in her own hand. “I’m sorry that you had to find out this way.”

“Where’s Tamara,” Neal blurts out, his frustration bleeding through; he has to know if she is part of this. Has to know if he really was so wrong.

“I’m here,” she says softly, stepping out from behind Greg, a small pistol settled in her own hand. “I’m sorry that you had to find out this way.”

“You lied to me,” he yells, his eyes wide. He looks at Emma who is still wearing a look of shock and then back over to Tamara, “I trusted you.”

“You’d think by now you’d know better that to do that,” Tamara replies gently. “But for what it’s worth, Neal, I never…I don’t want to hurt you.”

“It’s worth nothing because now you’re planning to kill me, right?”
“I have to. It’s the mission.”

“This is absurd,” Emma states. “What mission?”

“To get rid of magic,” Greg replies, seeming giddy. “And today, we did exactly that by killing the Evil Queen. She’ll never hurt anyone ever again; you should be thanking me for ridding this world of her evil.”

“She had a child, you stupid bastard,” Emma tells him, her anger mounting into something explosive. Her finger clenches around the trigger and it takes everything she has not to start firing away.

“And I had a father,” he snarls. “One that she took from me.”

“Do you really think that killing her makes you better than her?”

“I know that it does,” he announces, lifting his chin and staring at her, his blue eyes insane. “I stopped her, and I’m going to stop everyone in this town. Including you. I’m going to put you in the ground next to her.”

“You can try,” Emma snaps back.

“Enough,” Tamara says, her voice calm. “You don’t have to explain yourself, Greg. They can’t possibly understand.” She lifts her gun up, and points it right at Neal. “I am sorry for this; I hope you know that.”

“You don’t have to do this,” he pleads. “Tamara, come on, think about this, please. You loved me at least a little bit, right?”

“As much as you ever loved me,” she answers, smiling at Emma. “And I think if I had loved you, that would have bothered me.”

And then she fires her gun at the same time that two other shots go off. It’s chaos after that; on the opposite side of the door that Emma had been looking to make her escape through, David is crouched down with Mary Margaret, using the wall as cover as he fires back at Greg and Tamara.

“Emma!” David calls out as he pulls back, just barely missing getting hit by a final bullet being fired from Tamara’s gun before Greg grabs her arm, and the two of them turn and flee like the cowards that they are.

“David!” she calls back as she sags to the floor. She can feel Neal’s dead weight rested against her body, and there’s something wet inside of her clothing, something that smells a lot like blood. “I think Neal’s been hit.”

“So have you,” David notes, seeing blood on the sleeve of her jacket. She feels her mother's hands on her, soft and gentle, and she knows that she’s safe, but right now, all she knows is that everything inside of her hurts.

“It doesn’t matter,” Emma whispers as she leans down and presses her mouth to Neal’s forehead, her lips warm against his rapidly cooling flesh. She doesn’t even need to search for a pulse to know that he’s already gone; when Tamara had fired the first shot – directly at Emma’s heart – Neal had jumped in the way and taken a bullet to the chest.
Perhaps the stupid fool had seen as it as a form of a redemption or penance or something equally idiotic and unnecessary like that.

All she sees it as is losing another person.

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BANGOR, MAINE – MAY, 2013

“You’re late,” she says coolly, her eyebrow arched as she regards the driver as he steps out of the van, his hands jammed in his pockets and his head appropriately lowered to show the expected amount of reverence. “You were due here two hours ago. What happened?” Before he can even think to answer, she glances towards the van and then continues with, “Is the Queen all right? Were there problems in transit?”

“There were,” the driver says. “Her heart stopped about twenty minutes outside of Storybrooke. Don’t worry; the doc got it going again.”

“Very good.” She looks behind her. “Get her moved to the medical bay. She’s to be treated with the utmost care. She is royalty, after all.” She chuckles when she says this. Then, in a more serious, “Be mindful not to adjust the cuff she has on; in this building, her magic will be available to her again, and we certainly don’t wish to allow the Queen access to it.”

“Got it,” one of the guards who’s been standing by the doorway answers. He and his partner slide around to the door of the van, and then yank it open to reveal Regina's unconscious form. She’s on an ambulance gurney now instead of the metal one that she’d been on before, but it’s doubtful she cares much about the so-called comfort being offered. She’s pale and sweaty, and there are signs of burst blood vessels around her eyes.

“Careful,” the doctor who is sitting next to Regina says. “The Queen is quite fragile right now, and it wouldn’t take much to inspire another cardiac episode that she might not survive.” He moves a stethoscope around, and then stands up. “My dear,” he greets as he steps in front of the woman who runs the Home Office. “It’s been an entirely too long.” He offers her a cocky smile, but she simply stares back at him. As unimpressed as ever.

He’s reminded again that this is a business deal; he’d being handsomely paid to ensure that the Queen had made it here alive, and now he’ll be further compensated to help everyone back home believe that she’s dead.

Something inside of him feels just the slightest pang of guilt at this; while she certainly deserves to be punished and perhaps even lose her life for all that she has done, and all that she has taken away, he wonders if she deserves the sheer amount of hell that she’s about to be forced to endure.

Does anyone?

His head cocks to the side and he watches as the gurney is lifted out of the van. He sees Regina’s pain glazed dark eyes open for just the briefest of moments and he wonders if she actually sees him, wonders if she recognizes him as she seems to stare right back at him. But then her head is lolling to the side and she’s letting out these unnerving troubled gasps of air as she desperately tries to breathe, and though life and death and all such things have always fascinated him far more than they probably should, he finds himself looking away from her clear agony.
“Does her pain bother you?” his employer asks with a knowing smirk.

He forces a sneer across his lips and then waves his hand dismissively. “Of course not. All I care about is that you keep your promises to me.”

“Worry not about that, darling; all of the deals that we’ve struck will be honored. Now, if we’re done speaking of such trivial things, you should be getting back to Storybrooke promptly. Your absence is sure to be noticed if my operatives do as they’re supposed to do.”

The doctor reacts with surprise. “What are they doing?”

“Killing as many people as they can,” she answers with a smile that causes his blood to run cold; even Regina hadn’t treated life so carelessly.

“Wait, that wasn’t part of –”

“Now you’re deciding to be morale, are you, Doctor?” she chides.

“The Queen deserves her fate,” he answers, ignoring the part of his mind that is continuing to scream at him that no one deserves the nightmare that Regina is about to undergo. "Others in Storybrooke don’t.”

“Then I’d say you best be getting back there so that you can play hero.”

He studies her for a moment, thinking about how he’s turning over one monster to another, and wondering if the Queen’s way hadn’t been better. But what’s done is done, and the revenge that he’d sworn he’d have, he now has; whatever else happens here, Regina will never be the same.

“When will I hear from you again?”

“When I need something from you. All of your promised supplies and equipment has been delivered to your lab in Storybrooke, and thus, there should be no further need for communication. At least for now.”

“Fine by me,” he says. “How do I get back? We're a couple hours away.”

She nods to the driver. “Take him to the line of Storybrooke.” She smiles at him as she then as her eyes slip over the medal attached to his shirt. “Do be careful, darling,” she urges. “We wouldn’t that to fall off. I’d hate for you to lose your memory and become your cursed self again.”

“That sounds like a threat,” the doctor notes, his jaw clenching.

“Hardly. Be well, Doctor.” And with that, she turns and walks away.

“Relax, lad,” the driver chuckles. “If the Boss had wanted you to be Dr. Whale again, she would have done it herself. She’s just playing with you, because she enjoys watching people squirm and shiver. Even allies.”

“Right,” Victor growls. “Get me back to Storybrooke.”

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STORYBROOKE, MAINE - JUNE 2013

She’s standing in the cemetery, glancing down at the gray tombstone when she hears the squish squish of footsteps coming up behind her. They’re uncoordinated and heavy, and it sounds to her
like the person fast approaching is at the very least slightly if not completely inebriated.

“Hello, love,” she hears and then Hook is standing next to her. He smells terribly, and looks even worse, his hair uncombed and his beard unkempt.

“Hook,” she notes. “Where have you been for the last month?”

“Laying low,” he says before he lifts a flask up to his lips.

“I buy the low part,” Emma states, her tone dry. She reaches for Hook’s flask, and then stops immediately, her sore arm sending a shot of pain through her. The bullet wound that she’d suffered in the initial fight with Greg and Tamara is mostly healed now, but her movement is still fairly limited and according to Doctor Whale, likely will be for awhile to come.

She’ll heal eventually; Whale had assured her in the most unusually sympathetic tone she’d ever heard from him, but only with time.

A perfect analogy for Storybrooke.

“Just rum,” he sighs, his eyes following hers.

“Right. Were you looking for me in particular or…”

“No, happened to be wandering by on the way back to my ship, and I saw you here. Over him.” He looks down and then, quietly, “I’m sorry.”

She snorts derisively. “What are you sorry for? For drinking yourself into a stupor thanks to some pity party while the rest of us were fighting for our lives against the lunatics you teamed up with or you’re sorry for…”

“I’m sorry for letting this happen, for letting him die,” Hook answers, his voice trembling softly. “I didn’t…I didn’t even know who he was until after…until I heard he was the first one to get killed. You know, all I wanted was my revenge and I didn’t care how that happened, and now it’s all lead to the death of Milah’s boy and…it wasn’t worth it.”

“Seems like that’s the story of this town. Regina wanted revenge on my mother for not being able to keep her mouth shut, you wanted revenge on Rumple for killing your lover, Greg wanted it on Regina for murdering his father, and no one cared who got caught in between all this hatred. It wasn’t worth it for anyone. Greg is dead and Regina…”

She stops when she sees Hook bring the flask to his mouth and take a long drag, his haunted blue eyes admitting entirely too many things.

“Hook, do you know what happened to her?” she asks gently.

“They tortured her,” he says.

“We know.”

“No, you don’t. You think they pumped a little electricity into her and let her die, but that’s not how it went down. They took her to the edge of death over and over, and each time she came close to falling over, they pulled her back and then started it all over again. And the scary part, love, is that I’m quite certain that they were capable of some much worse than even that. Whoever their employers were, they are sociopaths.”
“I think we figured that out for ourselves over the last several weeks,” Emma replies grimly. “Do you know if they killed Regina?”

“They must have,” Hook replies, his expression somber and haunted as he considers his own part in her certain death. Yes, she had betrayed him, but horrific lines had been crossed that even had repulsed even a man who had doled out many a terrible punishment during his days on the high seas. “Because no one – not even the Queen – could survive that kind of hell,” he continues. “That Mendell boy, he was as angry as I’ve ever been, and he wanted her to hurt as much as he did. And she did.”

“We never found a body.”

“There’s a thousand horrible ways to humiliate someone after they’re dead,” Hook reminds her, his expression vaguely sickly as he likely considers his own ugly past. “I imagine Mendell found a few of them.”

“Right. And that just made this all a little bit worse.”

“I’m sorry,” Hook tells her. “I tried to walk away when they started doing what they were doing to Regina because that’s not what this ever supposed to be about and…I just wanted to avenge Milah. And I failed.”

“And now? Do you go after Gold? Do we just keep going on this path until everyone has failed at getting at vengeance but everyone else has paid the price for it?” She gestures around the cemetery and then down towards the tombstone. “Neal died protecting me. Please, no more.”

“It’s over,” Hook assures her. “I don’t want…I just want her back.”

“You have to let her go and you have to live. Someone should.”

“I don’t know how.”

“You’re asking the wrong person,” Emma replies with a self-deprecating snort. “I’m trying to figure how to help my son through losing the person he loved more than anything else in the world – even if he didn’t know it or show it like he should have – and the father he wanted to get to know. I don’t know how to do right by him, but I have to try. I’m not cut out to be his only mom, but that’s what vengeance has left me with. You?”

“I have a bean,” he says.

“You have a bean? As in like –“

“A portal creating one, yes. I think that maybe it’s time for me to head back to where I belong. Time to return to the Enchanted Forest. There’s nothing for me here. Maybe there never was.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Emma tells him after a moment. “And maybe help some of the people who actually want to go back. Offer up your ship for the journey. Be a good guy, Hook, and lead these people home.”

“You have a lot of faith in me,” he muses, his hand slipping into his pocket. She sees him something dark out, but it’s hard to make out what it is thanks to how shadowed the cemetary is right now.

“Maybe, but mostly I just think that none of us were meant to be standing in a cemetery drinking away our pain. I have my family, and that’s…well that’s something. It’s time to find something for
yourself, too, Hook. It’s time to move on and let go and find your happiness.” She wrinkles her nose. “And maybe take a shower and get yourself a change of clothes.”

He chuckles and then offers her what’s probably meant to be a charismatic smile intended to charm her her pants off of her. Because of his intoxication, though, it comes off as mostly rather sleepy and slightly lecherous. “And what if you’re my happiness, Swan?”

She snorts. “Probably not going to work out for you, Hook.”

“No, probably not,” he agrees. “How’s the arm? You’re favoring it.”

“It’s better.”

“Good.” He shuffles his feet and then takes one last hit from his flask before pocketing it and turning to her again. “Do me a favor?”

“Depends?”

He smiles at her wariness. “This favor one isn’t for me, Swan; it’s for Regina. It’s something that I think you need to know, and maybe eventually, your boy does, too.”

“Okay,” Emma says softly. “Tell me.”

He holds up his hook and she sees now that there’s a black diamond settled into the loop of it. "The Queen was desperate at the end. She believed that she was going to be abandoned by your parents and that she would lose her son, and she was willing to do something terrible. After they took her, I had a few minutes alone with her, and she told me exactly what her plan had been. And then she told me how to stop them by taking this away from them. This is a trigger that would have destroyed all of Storybrooke and killed everyone inside of it except for Henry.”

“Jesus,” Emma mutters, unable to hide to disgust.

“She stopped it. She saved everyone.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Greg and Tamara had taken the diamond from her. She asked me to steal it back, and told me how to deactivate it permanently before it could be activated. She believed that she was going to die, and she could have taken everyone - all of her enemies - down with her; your boy would lived, and that’s all she cared about, but him not being alone, she cared about that more. Regina did horrible things, and so have I, but when it mattered the most, she loved her son and that was strongest in her.”

"Thank you," Emma says, accepting the black diamond as he drops it into her hands.

Hook nods, and then steps away from her. His eyes drop down to Neal’s tombstone one last time and he holds them there for a long moment – his face full of grief and sadness - and then she hears the retreating squish-squish of his boots as he walks across the wet grass of the cemetery.

She stays for a few more minutes, talking to Neal and hoping that somehow, he can hear her. Hoping that he knows that she forgives him.

As she turns to leave, her eyes settle on the Mills Crypt. Regina isn’t there – and part of Emma doesn’t believe she’s dead – but just seeing the building makes her think of how much Henry has lost recently.
Far too much.

“You and I were never friends and I think that most of the time we pretty much hated each other, “Emma says, her eyes on the word MILLS. “But I think we also respected each other underneath of that so I’m going to need your help now. I need you to help me be strong enough for Henry. If you were strong enough to not break with Greg and Tamara after what they did, then I know you can be strong enough for our son. I don’t even care if you do it in your typically asshole way, Regina, but he needs you and so do I. So do me a favor, all right? Make sure that you’re watching out for us somehow or another.” She chews on her bottom lip for a moment, then adds, “And if you are still alive somewhere out there, then hold on because I’ll find a way to get you home to your son. I will.”

She waits for a response that she knows isn’t coming, and then, with a loud sigh of irritation and a resigned chuckle, she turns and heads home.

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BANGOR, MAINE – NOVEMBER, 2016

His name is Connor Matthews, and he’s already having a pretty damned weird day thanks to spilled coffee on a keyboard, his three year old son biting the dog, and some of the neediest customers on the face of the planet, but absolutely nothing compares to what he sees when he looks up from his cell (hey, he’s stopped at a red light) just in time to see a naked woman stumble right into oncoming traffic like she’s drunk.

She’s small, maybe about five-four or so, and she’s almost abnormally thin. She has dark hair, he thinks, but it’s cut so strangely close to her scalp that it’s hard to be sure. What he call tell, though, is that her eyes (they look brown or black) appear to be glazed over and unfocused.

He doesn’t hesitate; he puts his car in park, and jumps out and then races towards the woman just as a truck comes to a hard screeching stop just inches away from slamming into her. The driver is yelling at her, but she seems completely oblivious to him and yeah, she’s got to be drunk. Or high. Or crazy as a hatter. So to speak, of course.

Either way, she’s going to get herself killed.

“Hey,” he calls out as he approaches her. “Are you all right?” He’s already pulling off his jacket, but he does it even faster when he starts to actually see her; this isn’t a matter of seeing a naked woman and thinking maybe it’s his lucky day because there’s little attractive about this lady.

No, the truth is that the closer he get to her, the more he sees the heavy lines of fresh cuts, old scars and dark bruises that wrap every part of her body like someone has been using her skin as a canvas for their paints.

Someone has hurt this woman terribly, and it makes absolutely ill. He thinks of the sweet girl that he loves, and then his mind goes no further than that because if someone ever tried to do what’s been done here to her, he would…he doesn’t know, but he thinks it’d be awful.

His eyes narrow as he sees purple and blue marks circling around her wrists and ankles that look like they were made with thick ropes. There are deep and shallow cuts across her face, and temple, and yeah, she’s definitely dark haired. And though he tries not to look, he can’t stop himself from
seeing a long red scar that stretches from her left shoulder to the swell of her exposed breast.

“Hey,” he says again.

She looks up at him and she seems surprised, perhaps even alarmed by his sudden proximity.

“Don’t,” she says. She looks around, then, and it’s like something switches on in her brain because she seems to abruptly realize that she’s somewhere that she shouldn’t be.

Around him, he can feel others gathering, their irritation with her having faded and turned to curiosity as they, too, take in the disturbing damage that has been done to entirely too small body. Someone moves to his side, and whispers that he’s called for assistance, and Connor just nods his thanks, and keeps slowly moving towards her, hands out in front of him.

“I’m going to put this over you,” Connor tells her as he holds up his jacket so that she can see it.

“It’s pretty cold out here, and you look like you’re freezing,” he adds, and that’s absolutely the truth – Maine in mid November is absolutely grigid – but this is more about keeping others from staring at her (he doesn’t know why he cares, he just does and that’s enough) because she’s clearly suffered enough already.

He moves closer to her, and he can see the way she tenses in anticipation, her broken body tilted and oddly angled, but still somehow standing up.

It occurs to him that she’s expecting him to attack her.

“My name is Connor,” he says softly as he gets right up next to her. “And you’re going to be okay.” When she doesn’t protest his closeness more than by continuing to be tense, he slides the jacket over her; he’s over six feet tall, and it’s a thick winter coat so it falls over her body completely.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

He allows a small smile of relief. “Yeah, of course.”

Somewhere behind him, he hears the sound of an ambulance. Judging by the way she flinches at the loud noise, it clearly hurts her ears. Or maybe it triggers something in her because she seems to retreat from it like she’s afraid. He’s vaguely reminded of video he’s seen of dogs trained to fight.

“It’s okay,” he starts to say again as he pulls the sides of the jacket closed around her. He’d like to zip it but he figures the medics will want access to her in case there’s some significant damage they need to address,

But then suddenly she’s falling to the dirty asphalt of the ground, her unsteady legs having finally given out from beneath her, and it takes everything he has to catch her before she hurts herself even more.

Many years later, when he allows himself to think back on a woman that he knew for all of thirty minutes – and not even knew so much as encountered in the strangest possible way of all – he’ll remember the strange burst of relief that had shot through her red-rimmed dark eyes.

“I can see the sky,” she says as she lies in his arms staring upwards. “It’s so blue.” She laughs, and it sounds strangely hysterical, oddly completely out of character for this woman, and he hasn’t the foggiest clue as to why that is considering he doesn't know her at all.

“Yeah,” he agrees, looking over at the EMTs as they approach. “It’s a beautiful day.” He stands up and moves out of the way as the paramedics take over, each of them saying ugly sounding medical words.
He hears one of the medics ask her for her name, and the haunted look she responds with chills his blood. “I don’t have one,” she responds dully before her eyes roll backwards and she collapses into unconsciousness.

He doesn’t ask for his jacket back.

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NOVEMBER, 2016 – STORYBROOKE, MAINE

He’s just a hair over fifteen years old, and he’s entirely too tall, lean and gawky these days, but as Henry Mills stands in front of the full-length mirror in his bedroom (one of his mother’s favorite ones), smiling just slightly at his reflection, he can’t help but be appreciative of what he sees looking back at him. He’s in a charcoal colored suit and a green tie, and he thinks to himself that right now, he looks pretty damned good indeed.

“So do we have the talk now?” Emma teases as she steps into the room.

“Please, no,” Henry laughs as she approaches and gazes at his tie. He can tell that she’s wondering if she should call Snow or David for help so he rests a hand on her forearm. “Don’t worry,” he tells her gently. “I got this. I think I was three when mom showed me how to tie one of these.

“I’m getting better with them,” she tells him.

“You are,” he agrees. “Last time you only choked me for ten seconds.”

“You really are a little shit,” she tells him. “But you’re a handsome one.”

“Yes, I am,” he grins. It falls away for a moment, though, and his eyes track back to the mirror. “My first date at my first high school dance,” he says with a wistful sigh. “I keep expecting her to come into the room and start brushing lint off my jacket and fussing like crazy. Stupid, right? I mean it’s been over three years now. I know she’s not coming back.”

“It’s not stupid to miss your mom, kid.”

“But it is stupid to keep hoping she’s alive when we know she’s not.”

Emma pauses for a moment. Everyone has been telling her that she needs to start moving Henry down the path of letting go and accepting Regina’s death, but it seems strange to her that in a town that has rebuilt itself numerous times on the very idea of having hope, that should be asked to tear the last bit of it away from Henry. Maybe it’s the right thing to do as an adult, but as his mother, she can’t do that to him and won’t.

“You’ll know when it’s time to stop believing, Henry. Until then, follow your heart and I believe in whatever it believes,” Emma replies. “And what I believe right now is that Regina would think what I think, which is that you are the most handsome man in Storybrooke, and Anna is going to be blown away.” She wrinkles her nose. “Not too much, though.”

“Was that a sex joke?” he asks.

She groans. “No. Yes. I’m just saying, I know how things can get.”

“And I’m just saying chill. I’m a good boy who knows better, and I’m going to be a gentleman tonight,” Henry assures her. “Don’t worry.”
“I’m not. I don’t. Not about you. Not about her. I just…”

“Want to make sure I’m prepared for everything. Be calm, Ma, I am.”

“Yeah, all right, fine. You sure you don’t want me to do your tie.”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay. Curfew at eleven. I’m working late, but if you need anything…”

“I won’t, but if I do, I’ll call.”

She nods, smiles at him once more, and then starts from the room before coming to a stop. “Kid, I don’t know if your mom is alive out there somewhere or not, but what I do know is that she loved you more than anything in this world or any other, and she’d be so damned proud of the man you’re becoming. She’s be over the moon at seeing you like this.”

“Then take a picture.”

“What?”

“For her.” He shrugs his shoulders like it doesn’t mean as much as it clearly does to him. “In case she is out there. Because if she is, then we both know that someone is keeping her from coming back, but I know my mom, and she’ll find her way to me whatever it takes. However long it takes. So yeah, when she comes home, I want her to see today.”

“Okay,” Emma nods. She pulls her cell from her pocket. “Smile.” She laughs when he gives her his best player grin, something that looks like he’s trying to seduce her. “Like she’s your mother, jerk.” And that does the trick; his smile softens into something wistful and lovely.

She looks at the picture and nods.

“Good?” he asks.

“Perfect,” she confirms. “And for what it’s worth, kid, I love you more than anything in this world or any other, too. And I’m just as proud.”

“I know,” he tells, a bright smile on his face. “Now get out of here, I got to finish getting ready to make a grand entrance. Because you know that I have to.” He wiggles his eyebrows. “I am the Queen’s son, after all.”

“I know,” she drawls. She shakes her head in amusement, and then turns and leaves his bedroom, shutting the door quietly behind her.

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BANGOR, MAINE (ST. JOHN’S HOSPITAL) – MARCH, 2017

She’s in the middle of a particularly frustrating therapy session (the movement in her leg remains poor and the pain severe enough to require a nearly constant stream of narcotics in addition to the use of that awful cane) when a blinding headache suddenly overtakes her – thanks to an explosive fit of rage that had seemed to come from somewhere deep within her chest - and when it finally eases back and she can see again, she finds herself able to remember her own name for the first time since she’d woken up in a hospital room a few days before Christmas.
Since then, everyone has been calling her Jane; it’s a name she doesn’t much care for, but until now, she’s never quite understood why.

The answer is simple, of course; Jane is a commoner’s name. It’s so very

*And you are a Queen, Regina.*

Mother, she realizes, and then quickly retreats from the other memories. Though she doesn't know exactly - or even vaguely - why yet, she knows that these are ones that she doesn't actually want back.

She feels the doctor’s hand settle on her shoulder, and she can hear him asking her if she’s okay. He keeps saying the name Jane over and over.

“Regina,” she whispers, looking up at him with tears in her eyes.

“What?”

“My name is Regina. Regina Mills.”

“You remember?”

“My name,” she says again. “I remember my name.”

“Okay, Regina, that's...that's great,” he replies, and he’s smiling so widely because he thinks that this is a major step for her on the road to recovery for her. He thinks this is the way back home, and that this is progress.

She knows the truth, though; some things are better left forgotten.

And being Regina Mills once again – and remembering who she was (right now, it’s more vague sensations and emotions than actual distinct memories, but she can feel the dread as though it’s tangible) isn’t hope.

It’s a nightmare.

Hers.

And now, she’s returned to it.

TBC...
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Some chapters are shorter than others. And nicer. Consider this setup.

No real warnings for this segment.

For anyone interested, my tumblr can be found at sgtmac7 - the first 7 chapters of this story (unedited) can be located there, but will eventually be here.

1.

STORYBROOKE, MAINE – JANUARY, 2023

She’s sitting at the kitchen counter grading ninth grade history essays when her husband steps through the front door, snowflakes on his jacket and a thick stack of envelopes in his hands. He’s frowning rather intensely as he looks down at them, the soft lines around his blue eyes deeper than usual. His thumb runs across the white paper of one of the letters, and even if she didn’t know this man as well as she does, Snow would know that something is bothering him deeply right about now.

“David,” she prompts as she puts down her red pen. Though she still has another dozen or so papers to review, this break is probably for the best considering just how poor of a grasp on history most of these kids have.

This world’s history or the old one’s.

She’s pretty sure one of the kids just claimed that Christopher Columbus and Abe Lincoln discovered Wonderland while smoking peyote together.

So, yeah, a few minutes away from grading is more welcomed. Then again, though, judging by the pensive look on David’s face, perhaps not.

“What’s wrong?” she pushes as she stands up to move towards him.

"Mail's here," he tells her, his voice quiet. After a moment of hesitation, he almost reluctantly offers his wife the thick bundle of envelopes, gesturing after a brief moment to the one on top. "There’s one addressed to you in there," he comments, his brow furrowing again. "The real you, I mean."

Without him having to explain, she knows why this worries him: while people in Storybrooke have finally - eleven years after the curse was broken – returned to calling her Snow, all of the legal correspondence that she receives is still addressed to Mary Margaret Nolan.

She slowly takes the stack from him, and then looks down at the one that he was pointing to – a plain white envelope that simply reads: SNOW.

Somehow, without even opening it, she knows exactly whom it’s from.
She looks up at him. “It’s been ten years,” she says softly, her eyes wide. “You really think it’s her?” he asks, swallowing hard.

“We never found her body,” she reminds her husband unnecessarily.

“I know,” he says, and he does. Of course he does. Because though everyone has preached moving on from Regina’s disappearance and the pain that had followed it until they’re each blue in the face, none of those who had actually known her ever really had moved on or let go.

Instead, Regina had remained this strange rarely talked about ghost that had walked the imagination of everyone Storybrooke, someone that they’d always looked for whenever there’d been the slightest amount of craziness; any time there felt there were unpredictably winds sliding through town, Snow had wondered if Regina had been nearby.

And over the years, she’d been unable to stop herself from hoping time and time again that one of these days, she might even be right.

Snow nods, and then looks back down at the envelope. There’s no return address on it and her name is the only thing printed - in deep pressed in blue ink - on the white paper. The handwriting is in neat block style, and not at all like that which her former stepmother had been taught to favor.

No, Regina had utilized a far fancier and more elegant kind of penmanship.

A Queen’s sophisticated and well trained hand, as it were.

Still, even though the handwriting is completely wrong for Regina, Snow feels it deep down in her gut; she knows exactly whom this letter is from.

Ten years ago, Regina had disappeared into thin air. She’d been believed dead because the one person who had been with her while she’d been being tortured – Captain Hook – had been certain that she’d gone through too much to survive. Still, for Henry and for her mother though Snow had never requested it, Emma had searched relentlessly for Regina.

For over two years, Emma had called in every favor that had ever been owed to her from her bail bondswoman days and pulled on every tony string she had been able to find to try to discover where Regina might have disappeared to. She’d been insistent that the van tracks that she’d seen at the Cannery the night everything had gone bad had to have meant something; why drive Regina off just to bury her body in the woods?

Still, each lead had come up empty, and they’d all had to turn to the desk of ensuring that Henry Mills had grown up safe, loved and happy.

Snow likes to think that as a family, they’ve done a good job of that.

All the same, though, Snow has never forgotten the woman whose life has tangled so completely with her own from the very moment that their manipulated first meeting had occurred on a beautiful green hillside.

She finds it impossible to forget Regina or the impact – both good (Regina had taught her about love) and bad (Regina had taught her about hate) that her former stepmother had made on her life as she drives down the street where the mansion still sits.

It’s unimaginable for her not to think about Regina when she looks at twenty-two year old Henry home from college in Boston, his wit so very sharp like his mother’s. He’s a fairly happy boy with a big smile, but sometimes she sees the past in his green eyes, and she knows that there’s a reason
that he doesn’t come back home all that often.

Maybe it’s the apple trees that seem to grow along every street.

"Are you going to open it?" David asks gently. Then, as if remembering how invested their daughter is in all of this, "Should I call Emma?"

"No, not yet," Snow replies. "But could you make me some tea?"

"Of course." She hears rather than sees him slide over to the kitchen area; they’re still in the loft that they’d lived together in ten years ago. Emma has long since moved out, and she now owns a two-bedroom townhouse near the sheriff’s station so this place is more than adequate for them.

With a sigh, Snow unseals the letter, all the while trying to control the rapid hammering in her heart. She has no idea what Regina might be about to say in this letter, but she thinks that if this is some kind of threat, it’s a rather unspectacular one considering their rather dramatic past.

The first line of the letter, though, well it changes everything.

_I’m sorry, Snow._

She blinks and swallows and then licks her lips. She feels David come up behind her, the cup of tea appearing next to her hand. He leans just slightly over so that he can read the letter, too, and she adjusts her shoulder to make it easier on him. This is between she and Regina, of course, but David is her rock, and with that kind of opening, she has a damned good feeling that she’s going to need him tonight.

She takes a breath, a sip from the tea and then keeps reading.

_I know that it has been a very long time, and I’m quite certain that seeing this letter from now is something of a terrible surprise. You’re probably already skimming through looking for the grand threat, I would imagine, and though I am loathe to admit it, you are justified in doing so. That said, fear not, dear, this letter isn’t about that at all. I have no desire to cause you or anyone else pain or suffering. Simply put, this is an apology, and I hope you’re willing to hear me out even if I ill deserve it._

_Ten years ago, as you’re well aware, I was kidnapped by agents from an organization that calls themselves the Home Office. They are an anti-magic group of sadistic thugs that use rather radical interrogation and torture methods to steal and destroy anything that they don’t understand. That was me. I was their Holy Grail of magic. I put myself into the situation with my own pride and arrogance, and they were there to allow me to fall to the deepest depths of hell possible. Suffice it to say, what I’ve gone through thanks to them…well, I suppose that doesn’t really matter; this isn’t about that. This is about us and this is about Henry._

_Since escaping from their imprisonment a few years ago, I’ve been living in Bangor. Not willingly, at first, though. I was badly injured and was in the hospital for quite a length of time. I tell you this not to gain sympathy, but so that you understand why I seemingly abandoned the child that I love more than anything. In the beginning, I simply could not do much more than fight my way through various physical therapy appointment._

_After I was finally able to leave the hospital and resume having some semblance of a life, though, I found that I had limitations that made it so that attempting to return to Storybrooke would have been foolish. I missed - miss - my son dearly, but I wasn’t willing to put him in the position of_
having to take care of me. That’s not what a child should do.

Even then, though, my initial plan was always to return to Storybrooke – and to Henry - once I felt like I was strong enough to do so, but with each day and each month and each year that passed, I came up with a new creative reason – some of them valid, and some of them the absurdity of a coward who doesn’t realize that they are one - not to be a burden to a son whom I was quite certain had already happily moved on from me.

What made it easier was that for the longest time, I couldn’t remember where to return to. You see, aside from my physical limitations, I had some memory loss, and trying to convince doctors that I needed to return to a town that doesn’t exist wasn’t exactly helping me to sound sane.

But then, Snow, I think we both know that sanity has never been my best friend, anyway. I’m not sure that I fully realized how truly disconnected from reality I had become until I foolishly started trying to convince my psychiatrist of who I was and he told me that if I was indeed that person - the Evil Queen that I claimed to be - that I’d have been locked up for life.

She’s right. I knew it the moment she said it.

That was when I decided that I wasn’t ever coming home.

So many years have passed since that horrible day and I suppose that you could say that I’ve lived as well as I can manage. I think if not for a recent trip to Boston for work reasons (so much for being the mayor, I tend books to pay the bills now), you wouldn’t be seeing this letter at all.

But I did make that trip to Boston and while I was eating lunch at an outdoor cafe, I saw a twenty-two year old boy (if my memory is correct and these days it sometimes is, he would have just recently turned that) waiting tables. He had an impish smile, messy brown hair and your daughter’s green eyes, but the posture that I always demanded of him.

Snow, I saw my Henry.

He didn’t see me, but I wanted him to.

I couldn’t allow him, too, though.

I didn’t know what I’d say if he recognized me.

I didn’t what I’d do if he didn’t.

So I got up, paid my bill and left before he came over to pick up my plate. I watched him the rest of the afternoon, and then I forced myself to get in a taxi and go to the airport so that I could return to my apartment. I knew if I didn’t, if I dared to stayed around, I couldn’t stay away from him.

I’ve tried so very hard to be strong enough to stay away from him since I saw him in Boston. I have tried to tell myself that he has a very good life now, and doesn’t need or want me back in it, but all I think about these day is him now. I want to hold him and touch him. I miss him.

Snow, I want my son to see me again.

I know that after everything that has happened between us - and I have had so much time to think about the mistakes that I’ve made and the people that should have been truly blamed and weren’t - that I don’t deserve your help in this, but I miss my baby boy.

After I returned home, I tried to find Henry on the Internet, but his name came up empty. I assume
that this is something Emma did to protect him from those who might know of his bloodline. What this means, though, is that my only chance of seeing him is through your mercy.

Make no mistake, Snow, though I not the same woman that I was before, I still have my pride. I come to you with an honest heartfelt apology for the nightmare of our shared pasts, but I won’t grovel. I’ve been on my knees too many times in my life, and even for this, I will not be there again.

I hope that you understand - mother to mother - that I miss my son, and if he’s so willing, I would like to speak to him again, even if only for a few minutes. I have no more desire to force myself on him than I did a few years ago; I promise you - and Emma, if it matters to her - that I won’t be trying to take him away from anyone. Those days are over for all of us.

The choice is yours and his, and my information is on the business card enclosed. I'll understand if you don’t respond, but I hope that you will.

I’m tired, Snow; I miss my family and I miss my home.

And I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.

Snow gasps as she completes the letter. It’s not signed, but it doesn’t need to be. Her eyes are filled with tears as she folds it up and then unfolds it.

"Snow?" David says softly, his hand now in hers.

"Call Emma," she tells him.

"Are you sure?"

"Ten years, David," Snow responds. "Ten years that she’s been hurting and away and…and it’s time for Henry to have his mother back."

“She’s different,” he says. “The Regina we knew would never have written this letter.”

“I know,” Snow replies. “And that’s what scares me, David. What did she go through? What did they do to her?”

“I’m guessing we’re about to find out.”

She nods her head, and says again, “Call Emma.”

TBC...
Chapter 2

2.

STORYBROOKE, MAINE - JANUARY, 2023

It’s just after four in the afternoon, and she’s standing in the middle of the park, a gray and blue beanie on her head, and a thick parka wrapped around her. Her green eyes are focused with frightening intensity on the strange symbols that have been splashed in bright red spray-paint across every available surface in this typically sedate little part of Storybrooke. Little asshole delinquents, she imagines, and there was a time when she’d been one of them, but those years are far behind her now, and mostly, Emma’s just irritated because this is going to cause her a lot of paperwork.

What's even more annoying to her, though, is the fact that these strange symbols have been popping up all over town for the last few days, and she has no idea why. Which irks the shit out of her. It's probably just a bunch of idiot kids being idiots, but if it's something more than that and Storybrooke is developing some kind of fairytale kid gang problem, she's going to be incredibly pissed off about it.

Her phone rings and she glares down at the sound for a moment before shoving her gloved hands into her pocket, and after some degree of fumbling thanks to cold fingers, finally manages to answer it. “Yeah?”

“Hey,” David says softly, and immediately Emma knows that something is wrong. It’s his wary tone and his unusual hesitance, and well she’s a lot like her father, and neither one of them tend be very cautious.

“A bull in a china shop is a more accurate way of describing both of them.”

“Is everything all right?” she asks while he searches for words. “Is —“

“Relax; you mom is fine and I’m fine and Henry is fine,” he replies immediately because he understands her desperate need to verify the safety of family first. Which brings him back to the whole reason for the call. He sighs. “But something has happened. You really need to get over here as soon as you can. There’s something that you need to see, and no, it can’t wait until this evening.”

“Okay,” Emma replies. “I’ll wrap up here and be on my way.”

“Good.”

“Everyone is okay, right?” she pushes again.

“We’re okay,” he replies, and she knows a dodge when she hears one.

*** ***

“All right, what’s going on now?” Emma demands as she rushes through the front door of the loft. At almost forty years of age, the sheriff is a little bit less spry than she used to be, but she’s still lean and tall, and still she carries herself in the same defiant way that she always has. To this day, she still hasn’t quite accepted her role as the Savior, but she fights being the daughter Snow White and Princess Charming a whole lot less now.
They're her parents, and she's proud of them and she’s proud of her family.

David offers her the smallest of smiles. He’s sitting on the couch with Snow, an arm looped gently around her waist. "Hello to you, too." He comments before standing up and crossing over to the bar. He picks up a sheet of white paper off the counter, and then thrusts the letter into her hands.

“Read it,” Snow says after a few seconds have passed.

Hearing the urgency in Snow's voice, she doesn't bother arguing with her. Instead, She drops down her head and starts doing exactly that, emotions rapidly playing across her face as she takes in the words printed neatly onto the paper. Words from a woman she’d thought long dead. After a moment, she looks up at David and then flicks her gaze over towards Snow, her eyes wide and a question sitting on her lips.

David nods his head in the affirmative. "It's her."

"Regina's alive," Emma murmurs. "I'd given up. He told me that he'd finally given up, too."

"Well now he doesn't need to," Snow says, making it clear what her answer to Regina's question will be. "I want to bury the past, Emma,” her mother practically gushes out. “I want to bring Regina home, and make our family whole."

"Yeah," Emma agrees. “It’s time. Henry is going to be…wow."

"He’s going to be ecstatic," David concurs. He gestures to the letter again. "But I think we should see her before Henry does. Maybe I'm reading that wrong, but it sounds like she might not quite...look like she used to."

"You think she's got some kind of permanent damage," Emma notes, her eyes scanning back to the lines where Regina had mentioned limitations. It certainly suggests that there had been damage, and the very fact that the Home Office had kept her captive for as long as they had reinforces that thought to her in a way that makes her stomach do a brutal flip-flop.

"I don't know, but if she does, we should know about it in advance so that we can prepare Henry. He may have told you that he'd given up, but -"

"But I think we all know that he never did," Emma replies with a smile and wry chuckle of bemusement. "I guess I'm taking a drive to Bangor."

*** ***

**BANGOR, MAINE - JANUARY, 2023**

The address listed on the business card (one that rather blandly reads MILLS ACCOUNTING) that Regina had put in the envelope leads Emma to a small condominium complex in the heart of Bangor. Her specific unit appears to be on the bottom floor (which seems strange to Emma because she'd have thought Regina would prefer the safety of being higher up) and it’s clearly upper-scale. The doorman just stares at her when she tries to beg and plead her way in. Finally, with an agitated sigh that she doesn’t hide well at all, she agrees to let him check to see if the "Ms. Mills is up for visitors today".

A strange statement and one that immediately sets Emma on edge.

"Tell her it's Emma Swan," she tells him as he lifts up the phone and brings it to his ear, all the while wondering if such an announcement will get her an invite inside or a quite denial. Neither
would surprise her at this point.

After a moment on the phone - presumably with Regina, the doorman nods. "All right, apparently you’re good, Miss Swan. Hers is the second door on the left. You can’t miss it since there's only two condos down that way."

“Thanks,” Emma says, and then, because she never really was good at just accepting what’s been given to her without asking for more, “It’s been a very long time since I’ve seen…my friend. Is there anything I should know?”

He chuckles. “Nothing that’s my place to say. If you’ll excuse me.” And with that, he turns his back on her, and moves to assist someone else who has come to the door. If he notices her staring at his back, he doesn’t show it.

Swallowing her irritation and the growing trepidation she feels in her gut, Emma finally makes her way down the long hallway. Once she reaches the plain white door marked 103, she takes a deep breath and then she knocks.

There's a brief pause - one where she's quite sure that Regina won't open the door to her, and then suddenly, it does open, and the former Mayor of Storybrooke, former Evil Queen of the Enchanted Forest is standing in front of her, smiling thinly at her. "Miss Swan," Regina rumbles, and damned if there isn't a hint of what almost sounds like familiar affection there.

"Regina," she replies, her eyes sweeping rapidly over the older woman.

Regina is about six years older than her, in her early to mid forties (she'd be about 44, Emma believes, though she's not exactly sure), and though her posture isn't nearly as straight and she looks far from the imposing leader of before, there's still something indescribably undeniably regal about her.

That is until Emma sees the cane rested uncomfortably in her hand. And that is until she sees the way that Regina leans heavily on the cane simply so that she can step out of the way and let her former enemy into her condo.

"I take it Snow received my letter."

"She did."

"Good. I wasn’t sure…well." Regina nods as she limps her way over to the couch and sits down. She gestures to Emma to join her. "Please." Then, as if remembering her manners, “Would you like something to drink, dear?”

“No, I’m good for now.” Emma replies as she seats herself a few inches away from where Regina is on the astoundingly comfortable sofa. Once settled there, the sheriff finds herself suddenly unable to stop herself from blurring out, "What the hell happened to you? How did you get hurt?"

She's greeted with a sharply lifted eyebrow from the former queen, and she almost sighs in relief because it means that despite whatever injuries Regina might have suffered during her captivity, the snarky sassy spicy woman who'd infuriated her is still in there. Amazing how much she’s missed that.

"Still as tactful as always, I see, Sheriff."

Emma shrugs unapologetically. "Sorry. How about, how are you?"
"I'm fine, dear. As for what happened, well those idiots found a few unique ways to torture me over the three years that I was their guest. The ironic part is that I think that the boy who originally kidnapped me –"

"Greg Mendell?"

"I knew him as Owen Flynn, but yes. I think he would have killed me quickly; he was in it for pain and revenge. The Home Office, though; well, I was lab rat to them and they wanted to see..." she shakes her head and then waves her hand dismissively. "I survived, and in the end, that's all that matters."

"But you have nerve damage, I take it."

"Significant nerve damage,” Regina corrects. "Enough where some days my body doesn't work as it should. Humiliating, but again, I survived."

"Yeah, you did," Emma nods. “So, now what?"

"You tell me,” Regina replies. “Why are you here?"

“Because my mother received your letter.”

“But why are you here, Emma?"

“People still can’t leave town. Well except for me and Henry.”

Regina frowns deeply. “I have a feeling that I should understand exactly what you’re referring to, but, I’m afraid that there’s much locked away inside my mind. All to say, dear, you’ll have to explain what you mean.”

“After the curse broke, we found out that anyone who crossed the town line would revert back to their cursed personalities. Gold had a way for people to get outside when they absolutely must, but it’s risky and not used very often because if something were to go wrong, they’d be stuck outside.”

“Ah. I see.”

“Memory loss?” Emma prompts, forcing herself not to contort her face; she knows that the last thing Regina needs right now is pity. This woman in front of her clearly isn't the Regina from ten years ago, but her pride is still strong.

“Some.” She lifts her head. “So you’re here because Snow sent you?"

“Yes and no. My mother wants you home, but I do as well.” She laughs humorlessly. “You know, I searched everywhere for you for a couple of years, but I kept coming up empty, and every time I had to tell Henry that I’d failed him again, his heart broke a bit more. He’s a strong kid because he's ours, but...we he needs you, Regina. He needs his mom."

“How is he?"

“You saw him,” Emma notes with a smirk.

“For a few minutes. Waiting tables. Why is he doing that?"

“You mean because of the trust fund you had set up for him?” Emma shrugs. “That’s where he’s my kid. He wants to do everything himself, and that means paying for whatever he can. Right now it’s just his apartment there, but he’s an independent kid, Regina; he doesn’t mind a little work.”
“Is he happy?”

“I think so.”

Regina smiles at that. “Good,” she says. Then, the joy falling away into something sad, she says, “Then maybe I shouldn’t –“

“However happy he is doesn’t change the fact that Henry misses you like crazy, Regina,” Emma tells her. “He’s never given up hope that we’d find you one day, and now we have. There’s no chance – no way – that I’m not bringing you home. Not unless you really don’t want to go. And I think we both know that you do so how about you pack a bag, I grab a soda and then we hit the road and head back to Storybrooke. And our son.”

“So much has changed,” Regina muses, her hands coming together atop the cane in a way that reminds Emma uncomfortably of Mr. Gold.


That earns her a short bark of laughter. “So I am, dear. So I am.”

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STORYBROOKE, MAINE - JANUARY, 2023

The drive back to Storybrooke is quiet, but that's mostly because Regina sleeps through most of it thanks to the painkiller she takes before she gets into the car; long drives hurt her badly, and she doesn't want to look weak when she sees her son for the first time in ten years. She won't be able to hide the cane or her limp from him, but she'll be damned if she looks frail.

"I know you’re probably thinking of grabbing a room at the inn for the night, but why don't you crash at my place instead," Emma offers. "Henry will be in town tomorrow morning; I asked him to come in for a party."

"You have a spare room?"

"I have his room, and I promise you, he'd be fine with you staying in it."

"Very well," Regina allows. Partly because the idea of being so close to the things that had meant - and perhaps still mean - something to her son is so very enticing, and partly because she's already damned sore and tired.

What she gets in return from Emma is a small smile.

An infuriating smile.

The kind that tells her - has always told her - that Emma sees right through her, and knows exactly what she's thinking right now.

*** ***

Regina is sound asleep when the car slides over the town line, and though she really should be keeping her eyes on the road, Emma can't help but spare a look over at the uncomfortably dozing former queen. She'd been wondering if the return of magic to her blood after so many years away would cause a reaction – perhaps a sudden awakening – but there's nothing.

So Emma keeps on driving.
Henry’s bedroom is clean enough for a college boy who no longer lives in it, but it looks like the abode of a high school student with schizophrenic interests. There are comic books everywhere, but also video games and a baseball, and a drawing pad and comics and then there are pictures.

Of him standing in the middle of this very room dressed in a charcoal suit and a green tie. He looks like he’s about fifteen years, and he’s smiling at the camera in a way that feels like he’s looking right at someone specific.

There are other pictures, too. Of him with friends and family.

Of him with Emma.

Of him with Regina.

She picks the photo up, pulls it to her breast, crosses over to his bed, drops down onto the soft mattress and then - with watery tears shining bright in her dark eyes - falls asleep with the picture of him against her heart.

To say that Regina is nervous in the morning would be an understatement.

Her anxiety is off the charts, and for a few frightening moments, this fear causes her brain to short out and everything goes cold and numb and fuzzy.

Frantically, she forces herself to remember her breathing exercises, the same ones that the doctors had urged her to utilize after she'd woken up in the hospital in severe pain and unable to remember her own name.

She takes a pill and then curses herself for the need to do so.

And then she inhales and exhales again. And reminds herself that Henry deserves to see the best part of her after all these years. Not the wrecked and still broken and still terribly lonely and sad part of her that remains.

"Need water?" Emma asks from the doorway, a cup in her hand.

She almost tells the sheriff off, but the look Regina sees there - not pity, but understanding - silences her and she takes the cup of water instead. "I get headaches," she says by way of explanation. "When I get stressed."

"Today is stressful," Emma allows, never one to bullshit anyone with false statements. "But you know what? All Henry is expecting is his mother."

"Do I really look like the mother he remembers?" Regina snaps back, her face reddening with frustration. She gestures angrily towards the cane.

"Actually, yeah, you do. That cane doesn't change who you are to him. Or that you love him and he loves you. Neither do your headaches." Emma says the last word like she understands that the headaches are just a symptom of the overall anxiety, but isn't willing to actually embarrass Regina with the truth of her knowledge. It's enough that they both know she knows.

"When will he be here?"
"He just called from the city limits," Emma replies. "He's going to pick up my parents and then come over. They're expecting breakfast."

"You can cook now?"

"Ah, there's the Madam Mayor I'd missed so much."

"You really missed me, did you, dear?"

"Everyone needs a sparring partner, Regina."

"Well, I suppose that's true enough," Regina chuckles, some of the panic finally sliding away from her. Then, quietly, "So, how do we do this?"

Emma grins. "I say we surprise them."

TBC...
At just a few months over twenty-two years of age, five-foot-ten Henry Mills is quite the handsome young man now. He's lost almost all of the boyish sharpness in his face, and has instead has taken on the lean build and body of a college student who can never quite stay still. His shaggily cut brown hair is still messy and uncombed, but his constantly mischievous eyes have brightened up to an almost vivid shade of green.

Right about now, Snow is seeing those bright green eyes turned on her as her grandson grins out at her from the driver's seat of his mother's vintage Mercedes Benz. After Regina had disappeared ten years earlier, the car had been stowed away and for a short while, there had been heated demands from some of the angrier members of the community – Whale and Leroy for example – that perhaps the vehicle should be destroyed so as to remove one of her last remaining symbols from the town, but Emma had insisted that it belonged to Henry, and he should be the one to decide its fate.

And, of course, he'd wanted to keep it so for five long years, the Mercedes had lived a very comfortable life in Michael's Tillman's garage, getting worked on regularly and being driven around Storybrooke every now and again just to keep the engine fresh and lively. Michael, though he'd harbored very little in the way of good feelings towards Regina thanks to her forced separation of him from his family, had treated the car very well because even though his memories of being a mechanic had been implanted by the curse, his strong love of engines apparently had not been. When Henry had turned sixteen, he'd proudly presented him with keys and told him it'd be the best car he'd ever own.

Michael had been absolutely right, and Henry has been driving the Benz since that day, keeping her clean and shiny and running like she's brand new. Emma has always believed that this car was Henry's one tangible remaining tie to his adoptive mother, and making sure that the car was always treated with love and care was his desperate way of trying to make peace with the feelings he had of failing Regina while she'd been alive.

Around, Snow corrects herself, because now she knows the truth.

Now that she knows that Regina is alive, and she knows where Henry is taking them, and what they're going to see. He doesn't yet, of course, and for once, such truth will not come from her.

Though she'd been the one to push the door to Regina's return open, what happens next belongs between mother and son and she won't do anything to ruin anything else for Regina.

Especially not for this reunion.

"Hey, guys," Henry calls out, his hand hovering over the horn. "You about ready to go?"

"Not quite," David says as he comes to the window. "I have to stop by the station for a few minutes and check in on something for your mom – for Emma."

Henry frowns at the strange correction from his grandfather; they're well past the point where there's any degree of discomfort from anyone in relation to Emma's position in his life (she's ma
and even lost to him, Regina will always be mom), and to be honest, there's never really been that from David or Snow so the sudden change back to Emma is odd.

But perhaps whatever is happening at the station is distracting him.

"But you'll be by after, right? For whatever surprise party this is?"

"Yeah," David nods, his face lighting up. "Of course." He puts out his hand as if to touch and perhaps ruffle Henry's messy hair, but then stops a few inches away as if forcibly reminding himself that Henry's not a little boy anymore and might not appreciate it as much he once had. The fact that Henry only comes back to Storybrooke every now and again (he agrees with Snow that it's the past that keeps him away) has been hard on everyone, and though David would never admit as much for fear of putting guilt on the boy's shoulders that he ill deserves, he misses his grandson dearly.

"Cool. You ready to fly, Gram?" Henry asks as he sees Snow steps behind David, her arm settling around his waist for a brief moment as she leans up to gently kiss him on his rough cheek. With a knowing smile, Henry nods his head downwards, indicating for Snow to get in. When he'd first received the car, she'd been noticeably hesitant about riding in it because every part of it – the style, the smell and the power of it – had reminded her of Regina. And those memories had turned from angry to confused to just terribly sad.

"I am," she says as she slides inside, sitting atop leather that has been kept in pristine condition. She quickly belts herself in, and then waves at David who turns and heads towards his truck.

"Cool." He puts the car into drive, and starts slowly moving down the street; Emma's townhouse is only a few miles away. "So why the mystery over who this surprise party is for? When ma called, she was being all kinds of cryptic, but she didn't sound upset so I figure nothing is wrong, right?"

"Nothing is wrong," Snow assures him. "And I promise, you'll find out everything in just a few minutes." She reaches out and squeezes his hand tightly. "We're really happy you're home," she says. "We missed you."

"I missed you, too," he tells her. "I did. I just...you know school and work kind of get in the way."

"I know," she replies with a large watery smile. "But I hope after this weekend, we'll get to see you around more. We'd all like that, Henry."

Clearly unnerved by her words, his eyebrow lifts up in a way that reminds Snow so much of Regina. "You're sure nothing is wrong? Really sure?"

"I am," she laughs. "Drive. The faster you go, the sooner you know."

"Are you telling me to break speed laws?"

"I'm telling you that our sheriff is at home right now and our lead deputy is the station, and I'm telling you that I want to see this surprise as much as you do – well, maybe not as much, but close enough – so, yes, step on it."

He grins, and then does exactly that.

*** ***

"Hey, Kid," Emma says as she reaches out pulls him into a fierce bear hug approximately half a second after she's opened the door to him. Behind him, Snow enters, her eyes tracking to her. In
turn, Emma flickers her own green ones towards the stairs so as to tell her mother where Regina is. She's pretty sure she hears Snow let out something like a small nervous chuckle and the way she's clutching her hands together in front of her certainly shows off her anxiety.

"Hey," he responds, breaking away after a moment. "So are you going to let me in on what this is all about? Is this party for Ruby?" he asks. Then, wrinkling his nose. "Tell me that she didn't forgive that son of a bitch because if she did -"

"She didn't and no," Emma responds quickly, before he can get on a rant. "And it's not for Ruby. Actually, to be honest, there's no actual party, either." She offers him a sheepish grin at the end of this because she knows the look that she's about to get – one hundred percent Mills irritation. And oh does she get it, complete with an unimpressed glare. He may be her son biologically, but even after ten years apart, Henry still carries with him so much of Regina.

Almost immediately, though, the glare morphs into a grin. "Wait, are you about to introduce me to someone that's supposed to be my new daddy?" He looks around the kitchen as if scanning for another person that might be hiding behind a wall or a counter. "Because if you are...you know what, at least promise me it's not someone like George."

"Eww. Also, I think he might be related to us."

"He's actually not," Snow assures him. He was your father's twin brother's adoptive father so no, no relation of any kind." She punctuates her words with a cheeky smile towards Emma.

"Yeah, thanks so very much for that genealogy lesson," Emma groans. Then, turning back to Henry. "It's not about a guy, Henry. There's no guy, and I'm not introducing you to anyone new."

"Not anyone new," he repeats with a thoughtful nod. "So someone I already know, then. Are you dating a woman because if you are, that's okay -"

Emma almost growls in frustration. "Wait. Stop a second. I'm not...I'm not dating anyone. Okay, so this is kind of where it gets complicated, and I need you not to freak out, okay? Because there's a lot of story to tell and I know –"

"Henry," a soft rumbling voice says from the doorway.

Knowing that voice in his sleep, Henry snaps around and his eyes widen almost comically as he takes in the surprisingly unsteady form of the woman who had raised him for the first eleven – almost twelve – years of his life.

"Mom?"

"You were supposed to wait upstairs for me to...give you the signal," Emma grumbles, her voice rough. She seems noticeably exasperated, but not the least bit surprised. A glance towards Snow earns her a that seems to say that she should have known that Regina couldn't be left waiting for this for too long.

"And you, Sheriff, weren't supposed to make a complete mess of giving me a simple signal to come downstairs," Regina retorts, the tone sharp but also clearly amused. Her eyes flicker towards Snow for a brief moment (it's not lost on Emma just how loaded the look they share between them it), and then back towards Henry who is just staring at her like she might as well be a ghost and he can't quite believe that she's standing in front of him right at this moment.

"Ten years," he says finally, his voice trembling. Suddenly, Henry doesn't look like the beautiful strong man that he's become, but rather the young innocent boy that he'd been the last time he'd
seen him. He's practically shaking as he desperately fights not to break down in front of her.

"Hello, my beautiful - beautiful - boy," Regina whispers instead of offering explanation.

He won't be swayed, though. Not yet. "You've been alive the whole time?"

"Something like that," she replies cryptically.

"What does that mean?" His voice rises. "Tell me what you mean by that!"

For a moment, Regina says nothing and does nothing, and that's when Emma notices the peculiar way that the former queen is standing in the doorway between the Kitchen and the Living Room. She's practically leaning against the wooden frame, as if she's using it for support. What she's really doing, though, is trying to hide her physical weakness from Henry. Emma meets her eyes and then nods at her as if to say, "let him see you."

Regina licks her lips, takes a deep breath, and then slowly – far slower than Henry has ever seen his force of nature mother move – she steps into the kitchen and allows her son to actually get his first real look at her.

"You're hurt," he says, the anger seeping away from him as his eyes sweep down towards her cane, and the badly shaking hand that rests upon it. "They hurt you?" He swallows as he says this, and she sees something like fear flicker across his handsome face."What did they do? Why?"

"None of that matters. All that does is that I'm here now," Regina insists because she doesn't want to speak to her son about the terror that she'd somehow managed to live through for over three years or the fear and she doesn't want to talk to him about waking up in a hospital room without a single memory and only pain to keep her company, and she certainly doesn't want to discuss the anguish and loneliness that had followed over the last seven years.

He doesn't need to know how very broken she'd been.

He only needs to know how much better she feels as she looks at him.

And how whole she'd feel if she could just touch him.

He nods his head slowly, like he's trying to get himself under control.

"You were just gone," he tells her, his words thick and broken, and she thinks for a moment that maybe he's about to cry; Regina knows that she is, and she's more than a little bit afraid of what will happen if she does. Over the last several years, she's had to work hard to control her even more than normal shifting emotions thanks to the rather extensive damage done to her brain by the maniacs at the Home Office. She doesn't know what will happen now if she lets everything out; she doesn't know if it will destroy her completely. "I thought you were dead."

What she does know is that she doesn't care.

"Oh, Henry, I'm right here," she whispers and then, slowly, she takes a hesitant step towards him. The motion is without her normal grace, and it hurts, but she thinks of nothing but the need to hold him, and then when she sees the way he reaches towards her, she feels little beyond the strength of his arms.

She's his mother and she should be so strong for him. She needs to be.

She can't be.
Because it's been ten years and he's still her everything.

His arms around her make the last ten years disappear in a flash and the pain she feels becomes irrelevant because he's holding her like she's the one thing - maybe the only thing - that completes him and makes everything absolutely right in the world, and nothing means more than that to her.

"Mom," he whispers, and she thinks she feels tears on her face. "I missed you."

Henry is so very much taller than her now, and she's being completely consumed by his size and strength, but it's something like heaven to her.

She holds on tighter even though her head is starting to spin and she thinks that she's close to passing out from the overwhelming nature of everything. She won't, though, because that would mean surrendering his touch. It would mean letting go of the embrace that he's so freely giving her.

Ten years ago, such a hold would have been impossible; it would have led to him pulling away more and to losing him even more than she already had.

Now, it brings him back to her.

Somewhere behind her, she hears Emma say to her mother in a quiet whisper, "I think that maybe we should give them some space."

*** ***

She doesn't want to sleep.

She's afraid to do so because entirely too much of her fractured mind believes that this is one of those hallucinations that she had comforted herself with during her three years of tortured captivity. She's terrified that if she closes her eyes and allows the world to sweep away from her for a few hours, when she wakes up, she'll still be alone and broken in her condo back in Bangor. She'll still be the woman who once commanded a kingdom and now struggles to walk down a hallway.

Unfortunately, she's not as physically strong as she'd once been, and the emotional strain of the day has sapped whatever energy she'd begun the morning with. Reluctantly, she allows her son - who she'd unfortunately almost collapsed upon in the kitchen much to his horror (and hers) - to convince her to rest for a few hours. The only thing that makes it worthwhile is the promise from him – one he offers up freely – that he'll stay beside her the entire time.

He does.

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She's the one that leaves the room first. Henry is still on the bed; sound asleep, his face pressed into the pillow. When she'd woken up, he'd been next to her as promised, his hand tucked into hers like he'd just needed to touch her in order to assure himself that she'd actually been there.

She knows the feeling entirely too well.

Her body aching terribly, she slowly leaves the bedroom, makes her way downstairs with the help of her hated cane and heads into the kitchen where the lights are on. There, seated around the table are David and Snow.

"How are you feeling?" Snow opens with.
"Better," she says, and then drops herself down into the chair with a sharp undeniable wince. There are streaks of pain running through her, and she knows that before too much longer, she'll likely be forced to take something for the pain. She intends to hold off on that for as long as possible, though.

Because she wants to be awake and aware for Henry if he wants her.

"Would you like some tea?" David offers. "Water is still hot."

"That would be lovely."

He nods and rises, moving away from the two women.

"He always was good at making himself scarce," Regina notes.

"He thinks we need space to talk," Snow says.

"Perhaps he's right," Regina agrees. She glances around. "Where did your daughter disappear off to? And when did Charming arrive?"

"They swapped off. They've been running down taggers for the last couple of days" Snow replies. "We don't have quite the law and order that we used to around here. There are more teenagers doing, well…their thing."

"So I see."

They share a small smile, and then, "Regina, what you said in the letter—"

Regina cuts her off, her dark eyes suddenly quite fierce and determined. "I meant every word of it. I am sorry for what happened between us."

"At the end or—"

"All of it, Snow. The one thing that I've had time—entirely too much time, you might say—to come to terms with are the many terrible things that have happened that were my fault, and the very few ones that were not. What I do know is that the people to blame for…well, we were playing our roles."

"Yes, we were. And we lost so very much time to how very well we played those roles, didn't we?" Snow says with an almost disgusted but sad shake of her head. And then she lifts her hand up, pauses it in mid air for a beat and then places it over Regina's, just holding it there for a moment.

"I'm not frail, Snow," Regina says, eyes on their hands.

"I know you're not, but…I missed you, too."

"You missed me? After the hell that I put you through?"

"After all the hell that we put each other through. You said that you had a lot of time to think and come to terms with things? Well so did I, and the one thing I realized was how much I was never there for you."

"I didn't need you," Regina insists, her voice trembling a bit.

"Maybe not, but when we first met, I needed you, and I think that meant that I stopped caring what you needed. Or wanted. And no matter what else happened between us after that, that's on me. So
"you know what, Regina? I accept your apology and...I offer one of my own. I need...I want peace between us. I want a new beginning. Whatever that means."

"After ten years?" Regina asks, unable to disguise her doubts.

"Especially after ten years. Henry lost too much. I think we all did." Her fingers tighten around Regina's and then slip between them to tighten the grasp. "There are no easy options or chances for any of us, but I think maybe we can do what we should have done so long ago and let go."

"I just want my family," Regina whispers, moisture glistening in her eyes.

"Me, too," Snow assures her. "And now, we both have it again."

Regina closes her eyes, and though part of her feels the disgust at doing it in front of Snow, she finally lets the tears she's been holding back fall.

*** ***

She's beside Henry on his bed again when Emma comes into the room later that night, knocking first on the door before she enters. "Hey," the sheriff says as she steps in, her eyes showing the deep exhaustion of the evening.

"Hey," Regina responds, her eyes flicking back to her son's sleeping form.

"Is he still out cold?" Emma asks.

"He still sleeps heavy," Regina notes, her fingers slipping through his hair.

"Yeah, he does. Heavier since he went through puberty."

"I've missed so much," Regina replies with a deep sigh. Then, looking up sharply, her eyes wide, "Is he dating anyone? Has he ever been in love?"

"Well, depends on who you ask. He would say that he's been in love a dozen times over, but I don't think there's been anyone really seriously yet. No one that he's been with for longer than a few months, anyway." Emma chuckles before saying wryly, "I don't think he's found his...True Love yet."

Regina lifts an eyebrow. "Does he still believe in that? True Love?"

"Some days he does, some days he doesn't. Losing you took away some of his faith in...magic and happily ever after, but at least now I know why I couldn't find you when I was looking everywhere for you during those first few years that you were gone. Hook told me that you had to be dead after what you went through with Greg and Tamara --"

She's stopped by a short snort of disgust. "What put me through was child's play," Regina tells her. "It was nothing in the grand scheme of things."

Emma frowns at this, but chooses to let it go for the moment – she has a feeling that there will be plenty of conversations to come about what Regina had gone through - and focuses back on their son. "But Henry refused to believe it. Unfortunately, that made him think other things."

"It made him think I'd abandoned him," Regina finishes, swallowing hard.

"Luckily for both of us, it was easier than you'd think for me to convince him that you'd been killed because I knew - I knew, Regina - that you'd never ever do that to him," Emma assures her, sitting
down beside her, the full-sized mattress sinking deeper beneath the combined weight of three adults.

"I wouldn't have, and that's what started this whole mess. My inability to let go of him. Of anything, really," Regina admits with a small sad smile. "For what it's worth, though, I wanted to come back to him - come back here - right after I remembered who I was, but if you could have seen me then…"

"I get it," Emma tells her with a short nod of understanding. "It's not easy letting the ones we love the most see us when we're the weakest."

"Not weak, Emma, broken. I was completely and utterly broken by what they did to me." It's an astonishing confession from a woman that ten years ago would have been physically incapable of saying these words no matter how true they might have been at the time. Back then, sheer pride would have prevented it.

Now, it's the heartbreaking sadness and loneliness within her that allows her to voice these thoughts to a woman who'd once been her enemy. "But like you said at your condo, you survived. And you're home now."

"What does that mean? Tomorrow, when Henry goes back to college and to his life, what then? I don't want to be…" she trails off, shaking her head.

"How about, we worry about tomorrow when it comes," Emma urges. "And for now, you focus on the fact that he's here and you're here and…"

"And you're here, dear?" Regina asks, an eyebrow up.

"Yeah, and I'm here, too, but for now, I'll be in my room sleeping like a baby because I figure what you want - what you need - is him. Just him."

Regina smiles in admission of this. "Then good night, and in the morning, the three of us will have breakfast together, and then we will figure out everything else then, okay?"

"On one condition."

"Name it."

"The truth. Why are you being so kind to me? We were never friends."

"No, we weren't," Emma admits with a small frown. "But maybe if we'd both played things differently, we might have been. Who knows, right?"

"You and your mother are so very different in so very many ways," Regina notes. "But you're so very much alike in so very many other ones."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"I suppose that for once, it is one."

"That's good to hear. And on that note, sleep well, Regina." She gets up off the bed, then lightly places a hand on Regina's shoulder, the gentle contact warm and soothing in a way that makes something flutter in the middle of the former queen's chest. "It is nice to have you home, Your
Majesty.

Regina smiles. She lifts a hand, places it over Emma's, and lets their fingers touch for just the briefest of moments before she pulls it away and returns her attention back to her sleeping son. A few seconds later, she hears the bedroom door close, and then mother and son are encased in darkness.

"Mom?" Henry mumbles suddenly, sleepily looking up at her. He blinks and looks up at her. "You're here, right? I didn't dream everything? Because if I did, it was a really good dream, and I'd like to return to it, please."

"It wasn't a dream. I am here here, dear," she assures him, her hand moving to his cheek. She runs the back of her fingers across his skin, so very soft.

He smiles. "Just making sure." He yawns then and closes his eyes again.

Her body fatigued and sore and her head pounding terribly, she thinks nothing of these things as she reclines herself next to him.

Because she is home.

TBC...
"Tell me the truth," Henry demands as he quickly strides through the door and then moves to stand in front of her desk at the sheriff's station. His messy brown hair is combed back, but as always, it spills over his forehead and into his bright green eyes.

"About?" she asks, chewing on the cap of her pen and not yet looking up at him.

"About Mom. I want the truth about my mom."

"What truth is that?" Emma murmurs as she finally looks up at her son, an eyebrow slightly lifted. She takes the pen out of her mouth, sets it on the desktop, and then closes up the file on the recent graffiti artists that have been tagging their strange little symbol (a weird triangular thing with three circles hovering around it) all over town. David has been insistent that they seem innocent enough ("just bored kids in need of a better outlet"), but Emma has a good idea what the difference between teenage hijinks and true thuggery is.

Problem is, this feels like neither one of those things to her.

No, this feels like something more. This feels like something that this sleepy little town hasn't had to deal with for quite awhile now. Almost ten years, she thinks grimly before shaking the thought away.

Because that's a problem for later.

For now, she looks back at the hard determined gaze of her son, and waits for him to reply.

"What's wrong with her?" Henry presses. "I want the truth about what happened to her, and why she seems like she's in so much pain. It's been a long time since those monsters had her, Emma; she should be better than she is, right?" His green eyes are steady and intense, and for a moment she just stares back at him and wonders when he got this big and strong. She'd been there for all of his puberty, and even she doesn't quite remember him becoming this man.

"I wish it were that easy," Emma says after a few moments. "As for what happened, you'll have to ask her."

He shakes his head in the negative. "That's bullshit, and we both know it."

"Henry —"

"We both know, Ma, that she'll never tell me what's wrong with her because she thinks she can't be weak in front of me." His face screws up into an expression of frustration before he adds, "Some things never change."

"Some things do. A lot of time has passed since you last saw her," Emma reminds him. "Things aren't the same. Ask; maybe she'll tell you the truth."

"Yeah? Do you think she will?" he volleys back. "Your turn for the truth."
She sighs dramatically. "Is this my fault? What a pain in the ass you are?"

"Probably because you are," he shoots back, his voice layered with a little bit of teasing and a whole lot of fiery determination. "But my stubbornness is completely hers. And you know damn well that I won't stop until I find out what happened to my mother while she was gone. So what don't you just tell me."

"Because it's not my story to tell, Henry. It's hers."

"And she probably still won't be honest with me about it," he grouses.

Emma shrugs her shoulders. "Maybe, but you won't know until you try."

"Fine, I'll ask her, but if she refuses to tell me, I'm coming back."

"You really are a pain in the ass."

"I love you, too," he answers, his voice softer now, completely affectionate.

She rolls her eyes and then waves her hand towards the door. "Go away; I have work to do. Shitty teenager problems. You recall those, right?"

"I was a great teenager."

"Humble, too. Now get lost."

"I mean it, I'll be back if she stonewalls me."

"And I'll still tell you it's not my story," she replies.

"You suck," he tells her.

"Yeah, yeah."

He huffs in annoyance at her, and then all but stomps out of the sheriff's station. She hears the door shut behind him, and sighs. She has a pretty good idea that despite her words to him about it not being her story to tell, he'll be back in a few hours. The sad truth is that even though ten years have passed, after spending the last few days with Regina, she feels like she still knows the former queen well enough to be certain that she won't want to tell their son of the utter and complete nightmare that she had gone through.

As is, Regina has just barely scratched the surface of that story with she and Snow, and Emma well imagines that further details about her captivity will take more time and patience before Regina will be willing to speak of such.

Unfortunately for everyone involved, Henry had inherited impatience from both of his mothers, and that means that he'll keep pushing and pushing.

Hopefully he won't push Regina too hard before she's ready for it.

Deciding that it's probably for the best if she doesn't worry about that for now because there's nothing she can do about it just yet, she reopens the folder on the taggers, puts the end of the pen into her mouth, and for the fifth time since she'd come to work this morning, she just stares at the strange images that these little punk kids have been drawing all over town.

"What are you?" she mutters through the plastic of the pen cap.
She has a terrible feeling that she's not going to like the eventual answer.

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It's more than a little strange to be all by herself in Emma townhouse. It's even stranger to have woken up here – wrapped up tight and comfortable in the heavy blankets of Henry's bed - by herself, apparently trusted not to do anything well, evil. Sure, it's been ten long years since those dark days, and so very much about her has changed, but Regina can still vividly recall the wary fear that people had regarded her with at all times. Like she'd been some kind of vicious beast just seconds away from attacking.

Perhaps, she muses, she had been.

Rising slowly from the bed, she winces as a sharp wave of pain echoes from her toes to her hip. She's gotten used to this, but there are days when the agony is so intense and raw that she has no other choice but to find herself back on the bed curled up into a tight ball, her eyes closed against the hurt.

She won't allow that to happen, today, though; she won't risk being found by Emma or Snow or God forbid, Henry like this.

So instead, she takes a deep chest rattling breath, and then another and wills the pain back into submission. Her legs tremble fiercely, and for a thundering long moment she thinks her knees will buckle beneath her and throw her to the ground in an undignified heap, but for once they hold.

For once, her body obeys her. Her head is hammering, but she can deal with that because no one can see that pain as long as she controls her face. And she will because her son deserves to see the mother he's missed and not the mess that she's become since the day she'd woken up in the hospital.

Jane Doe instead of Regina Mills.

Feeling the onslaught of painful memories of those early days in the hospitals - memories that she has no desire to relive - she closes her eyes and places a shaky hand against the wall, steadying herself so that she can try to pull herself together. It's all about getting everything back under control again. That's what she's been trying to do for seven years now.

Down below, she thinks she hears a door open and close. "Mom?" a man calls out, and though it's much deeper than the one she remembers, she knows without even thinking about it that the voice belongs to Henry.

"I'm up here, dear," she calls back, a smile involuntarily spreading across her lips. "I'll be down in just a moment." Her eyes track over to the brown pill bottle on the counter, and for just a moment, she considers taking one to help her control the pain that continues to streak up and down her body.

She chooses not to, though, because the pills always – always - make her sleepy and foggy, and utterly incapable of being strong.

And she has to be.

He deserves nothing less from her.

"Do you need my help?"

"No," she answers, flinching at the question. One more set of in and out breaths, a glance towards
the mirror to ensure that she doesn't look pale or haggard, and then she leaves her son's bedroom, and walks down the stairs to greet the very same boy in the kitchen. "Hi," she beams at him.

"Hey," he replies before stepping forward and hugging her. That she feels like everything inside of her melts at his contact is something she keeps to herself, but if he were to look at her this moment, she's knows there would be tears in her eyes because right now, she honestly believes that every bit of pain that she'd gone through had been worth it to bring her back to this.

"I thought you were supposed to be getting back to school today," Regina notes as her hand reaches up to lightly press down on a strand of his unruly hair that's sticking up. When it refuses her, she tries again, frowning.

"Tomorrow, and I do have to get back, but did you really think I'd leave without telling you?" he asks as he pulls away to look at her, his sharp eyes entirely too wise. "Besides, I was hoping we could talk. I have questions."

"Henry –"

"You know you both do that."

"Do what?"

"You and Ma – you both sigh my name like that when you want to push me away from talking about something that you don't think I'm old enough to know about. You both even use the same exasperated tone."

"I believe that it's called being a mother," she teases, her hand again rising to bat at his hair, which is quite stubbornly refusing to cooperate.

"Maybe, but it's also called avoiding the question."

"And what question is that?" Regina asks as she steps back and slightly away from him, unable to hide the slight tremor in her tone as she fears what he's going to ask of her. Years ago, she would have been able control such an impulse easily, but now she's so raw and exposed that she's certain that if he looks hard enough, he can see into her.

Right through her, even.

"What happened to you?" he asks. "What did they do to you?"

And there it is; exactly the question that she'd been so dreading.

She forces a fake smile, one that reminds him a bit uncomfortably of how she looked when she was Mayor Mills. "I was hurt, but I'm okay now."


"None of those details are important now," Regina insists as she almost blindly reaches out for the wall to once again steady herself. She'd left her cane back up in his bedroom because she hadn't wanted her son to start associating her with it, but now she's regretting having let her pride lead the way (as usual) because she can feel the grinding exhaustion and weakness in her muscles. She can feel that strange watery sensation she always gets just before her body seems to betray her completely.

"They are to me," Henry replies just before he moves forward, and before she can protest, wraps
his arms around her torso so that he can help keep her on her feet. It's utterly humiliating to have to be held up by her child, and she's disgusted with herself for needing him like this, but curiously, he doesn't seem to be feeling the same way. "I want to understand how this happened to you and I want to understand how to make you better."

"All you need to understand," she assures him as she allows him to gently guide her over to the couch in the Living Room. "Is that I am here now, and just being here makes me better." She sighs in relief when he sets her down on the soft fabric, and then immediately scolds herself for the reaction.

"But you're not okay," he tells her, his frown deepening.

"I am," she says. "I'm the best I've been in a very long time."

"You're not going to tell me what happened to you, are you?"

"I can't."

"Can't or won't."

"Won't," she admits. "Because you don't need to know about those things."

"I'm not a little boy anymore, Mom."

"Yes, you are," she answers with a soft smile. "No matter how old you get or how big and strong you are, you will always still be my little prince, Henry, and I will still always have the right to protect you when I can."

"I want to be here for you," he tells her. "Like I wasn't before."

She shakes her head almost desperately, her eyes shot wide with something that almost looks like panic as she reaches out for his hand. "No! No."

"Mom," he protests, looking down at the grip she has on him. It's so strong and tight, and it scares him more than he might like to admit because she looks scared, and as he searches his mind, he can't remember another time when he'd seen her like this. Angry, frustrated and vengeful, but not scared.

"Oh, Henry, don't you understand?" she whispers as her fingers weave between his. He squeezes back as if to anchor her, as if to tell her that yes, he's here and no, he's not going anywhere. "It wasn't your place to be there for me before. It was my place to be your mother and to take care of you, and I never did that especially well, and I promised that I would. I will be damned if I don't do better now that I have a second chance with you."

"Mom," he tries again.

But she'll have none of it, shaking her head. "Tell me about your college course," she says, changing the subject and forcing another smile. When he starts to protest again, she shakes her head. "What are you majoring in?"

"This conversation isn't over," he informs her, using the same even determined gaze that he'd used on Emma earlier. It works better on Regina simply because she's never seen it before and it momentarily surprises her.

Still, for everything that changes, some things stay the same, and his mother's ability to recover
from even the strangest of things (God, how he hopes that's true, he thinks as he takes in her not quite as strong as it used to be frame) is one of those things. After a moment's pause and a quick study of him, Regina waves her hand as if to dismiss the subject outright.

"Well, it is for now," she replies, adopting a hard no nonsense tone that reminds him of the past in a way that actually makes him smile just a little bit. "Now," she says, "talk to me about school. I want to know everything."

"Fine," he says, dropping himself with a petulant thump to the ground next to the couch. Reaching out, he takes one of her hands in his, and then begins to speak about what his world had been all about yesterday.

The world that means so very little to him today.

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What Emma sees when she finally gets back to her townhouse at just before seven that evening is almost a complete reverse of the previous night. Now, instead of Regina sitting next to a slumbering Henry on his bed, their son is seated next to his sleeping mother – he's on the floor and she's on the couch, and he's just gazing at her like he's afraid that if he blinks or looks away that she'll be gone again. He's holding her hand in his, so very tight.

"Everything okay, kid?" Emma asks as she hangs up her leather jacket.

"Yeah. She's tired," he replies with a soft nod. "It was like we were talking, and then she was sleeping. No warning whatsoever. Awake and then like this. I think she's been hurting most of the day. Not that she'd tell me."

Emma frowns at this, though it's not unexpected. She'd called up some old business friends and finally – with some heavy cajoling (okay, more like heavy blackmailing) and a few promised favors (her next born) – she had managed to get her hands on Regina's full medical and police file, and well, the two of them together had painted a fairly vivid and hideously ugly picture of a woman who had all but been destroyed by the captivity and obscene torture that she'd been submitted to for a little over three years.

"I'm worried about her," Henry continues.

"I know you are, and I am, too but I'll tell you this much: she is better now than I think she's been in a very long time," Emma assures him as she approaches. "She's got you with her, and that makes her stronger."

"If you say so."

"I do." She pauses, studies him for a moment, and then continues on with, "I take it that she wasn't willing to give you any details."

"No."

"I'm sorry," she says, reaching behind the couch and grabbing a blanket, which she then places over Regina's legs and waist to help keep her warm.

"I don't want to go back to school," he says, sliding his hand out to lightly brush a strand of dark hair away from his mother's closed eyes. "I think maybe I should take a leave of absence and –"

"Nope. No way," Emma breaks in. "No chance."
"But –"

"She'd sure as hell never allow it, and neither will I."

"Ma! Come on! Be reasonable here. She needs me. You know she does."

"I agree with you; she does need you," Emma confirms. "But not every moment of every day. She's been surviving for the last ten years, Henry. The last seven completely on her own. Your mom is still your mom, and though I know it's probably harder to remember it these days, she once ran an entire kingdom on her own. She's not an invalid and she neither wants nor needs a caretaker. What she needs is family, and maybe some space to breathe."

"I don't want to lose her again."

"You won't," Emma replies. "I promise you that. But you are going back to school tomorrow morning, and that's the end of this discussion."

"Do you have any idea how many mothering tics the two of you have in common?" he growls out, looking like he'd like to scream. "She pulled that same idiotic line on me when I asked her what happened. I'm not a fucking child anymore, Emma. I am a grown man, and I can handle the truth."

"And when she's ready for you to hear it, you will. Until then, school."

He shakes his head in disgust. "Fine, but I'm coming home every weekend."

"What about your job?"

"Screw my job."

"Henry –"

"Is there an overall reason that the two of you are arguing like small children over the top of me?" Regina asks suddenly, her voice husky with sleep, but also slightly sharp with pain. She's looking up at them, her eyes slightly glazed over, but still aware. She looks annoyed, but somewhat amused, too.

"We were just discussing our son's plans to return to school in the morning," Emma notes in her most cheery tone, staring right at Henry.

"I was saying maybe I shouldn't," Henry offers.

"Why wouldn't you?" Regina queries, still too sleepy to be coherent.

"I figured I'd stay here and you know, help you."

"No," she says immediately. "Emma is right, you need to return to school."

"See," Emma can't help but throw in. "I told you so. Emma is right."

"Very mature," he counters.

"Whatever. " Then to Regina, "Are you hungry?"

"A bit, yes."

"Good; I have pizza on the way. I ordered a salad for you."
"I'd actually prefer the pizza if that's all right."

"Really?" both Henry and Emma say at once.

Regina smiles thinly at this. "Really. I haven't much care for salad anymore."

There's clearly more to this story – the tale of a woman who previously would not have been caught dead in public consuming something so greasy and nutritionally worthless as pizza – but for now, Emma lets it pass because she has a feeling that it somehow wraps into the rest of Regina's nightmare.

Henry, though, has a frown stretched across his lips as he continues to study his mother carefully, like he thinks that if he just looks hard enough he'll understand everything that's happened to her, and then know exactly how to make her better, and how to make her strong again and fearless again.

Emma knows better, though; some fixes need more than love.

Though, she thinks as she watches mother and son smile at each other in a way that is heartbreakingly real, it's a start.

"All right, then," Emma nods. "It should be here shortly. Would you care for some wine? I think I have a not too terrible red somewhere in the back."

"I'd love some, but it's probably not a good idea," Regina replies cryptically, and that's when Emma notices the tight lines of pain around her eyes. The lines which seem to suggest that Regina will likely eventually be forced to succumb to the clearly perceived weakness of taking a painkiller.

"Eh, for the best, anyway," Emma replies with what's meant to be a careless shrug. "I think we both know that I have absolute shit taste in wine."

"Well then, some things really haven't changed, have they, dear," Regina muses, drawing a smirk from Emma.

"Hey, Ma, can I have a beer?" Henry asks as he stands up.

"Absolutely not! " Regina answers immediately, and then blushes when two sets of green eyes snap towards her in surprise. "I'm sorry," she quickly apologizes, her head dropping down in a way that makes Emma's stomach flip over. "Old habit. You're twenty-two so I guess it's all right now, isn't it?"

"Yeah," he grins, and Emma finds herself relieved that for all he sees, he hadn't noticed his mother's odd reaction. "But I don't drink much. Promise."

Regina chuckles at this, her expression fond. She starts to stand up, but then immediately stops, the lines around her eyes tightening up even more.

"Henry," Emma says immediately. "Why don't you go set the table?"

His eyebrow lifts, and his mouth opens and she knows that he's about to argue, but then with a loud sigh, he turns and heads towards the kitchen.

"Subtle as a brick," Regina notes.

"As you said, some things haven't changed," Emma replies before gently sliding an arm around
Regina's waist and helping the uncomfortably light woman back up to her feet. "Where's your cane?"

"Upstairs."

"He saw it yesterday, Regina. He knows you need it."

Regina just stares back at her, defiance gleaming in her dark eyes.

"Right. Tell me when you want me to let you go."

"I'd like you to let me go right now," Regina says. "But if you do, I'll fall so…give me just a moment to get my legs under me; they fell asleep."

It's clearly a lie, but one that Emma decides to let pass for the moment.

"As long as you need," she says instead.

Regina sighs, her eyes tracking towards the kitchen where she can see Henry putting plates on the table. "You did a good job with him," she says softly, trying to ignore the sharp bloom of pain in her chest. No matter how much she wishes it didn't, it hurts to have lost so much time with her son.

"I had a damned good foundation to build on," Emma offers back in return. "He was a smart and loving kid when I got him; all I did was make sure he never changed. He's my son, Regina, but he's sure as hell still yours, too."

"Which is why I need to protect him from what he doesn't need to ever know about. He doesn't need to know what people are capable of."

"He already does," Emma says. "He's already buried too many people."

"Because of me. Because of who I was."

"Because life hasn't always been easy for him, either," Emma says.

"I know," Regina says softly. "And part of me thinks that I shouldn't have come back for exactly this reason; it's why I stayed away for so long, but -"

"But it was time to come home, and we're both glad you did."

Regina nods at this, but then says, "I appreciate that, but I need your help convincing him not to push on knowing more about what happened to me."

"It doesn't work like that," Emma laughs. "Henry may be twenty-two now, and a lot taller and bigger than both of us, but he's still the independent pain in the ass kid who does his own damned thing whenever he wants to, and that means ignoring people telling him what to do."

"He doesn't need to know," Regina says again, desperately.

It's perhaps this clear pain and fear in Regina's voice that makes Emma look at her harder, and it's this desperate need for assistance that makes Emma really realize just how insistent and frantic Regina is about this request.

"Okay," Emma says softly. "I'll do my best to convince him to let it go."

"Thank you."
"But for what it's worth, while I understand that you don't want him to know what happened to you, and I respect the hell out of that, I want you to know that I am willing to listen if you do want to talk about it."

"I don't."

It's at that moment when the doorbell rings signaling the arrival of dinner.

And for the time being, the end of this conversation.

"I'm okay to stand on my own now," Regina tells her, and there's an odd grimness in her tone mixed with something that sounds a whole lot like hints of the stubborn pride that has always defined Regina. "Get the door."

"Still giving orders, I see," Emma notes, though she's grinning.

"And I see that you're still following them as well as you ever did."

They share a comfortable smile, and then Emma heads to the door.

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"When did you take the painkiller?" the sheriff asks as she softly steps into the Living Room. She's holding the folder about the tagging case in her hands, and had been intending to start looking it over again at the kitchen table, but had ended up stopping just short when she'd spotted Regina dropped back against the couch, a dazed look in her foggy eyes.

"About a half hour ago," Regina drawls, sounding completely drugged.

"Will sleep hit soon?"

"Very soon."

"Good. Then we should get you up to Henry's bedroom."

"Here is fine. He needs his rest."

"You really are a stubborn ass. Even when you're high."

Regina simply smiles at this, the expression vaguely goofy yet somehow uncomfortably sad. "Sit," the former queen pleads. "Don't go."

"Okay," Emma agrees, thinking that this request is not about her especially, but rather the presence of a person that Regina knows means her no harm.

With an undignified, thump, Emma drops down in front of the couch, sitting in the exact same place that Henry had been when she'd come home earlier, and then opens the folder and starts to flip through information that she's pretty sure that she could recite from memory at this point.

"What's that?" Regina asks, practically slurring her words now.

"A case I've been working on. Some little shits have been going around town for the last couple of days tagging this stupid symbol everywhere. I don't know exactly why it's bothering me - I mean it's probably just kids being kids - but it does. I've looked through every database I can find, and checked with some of my buddies in the big city gang units just to be sure, but no one knows what it is, and my mother doesn't believe it's from the Enchanted Forest. I checked with Blue, and she
doesn't recognize it, either."

"That's because it's not from my world," Regina murmurs. "It's from here."

"You know what this is?" Emma asks, turning to look at her.

"Yes. Because it's theirs." Regina laughs then, the sound vaguely hysterical even though her mind is little more than a field of very soft marshmallows right about now. "That strange little triangle there, it's the calling card of those high up in power at the Home Office. It's the crest of their Queen."

"Are you sure?" Emma asks, cold dread seeping into her gut. It's been ten years since they'd heard a word from any of those goons; ten years that the shield that Gold had erected around Storybrooke had held, and ten year that that shield had kept everyone safe and secure behind it.

Safe and secure from those who would do them harm.

Now, apparently, that safety is gone.

Just a few long days ago, Emma had assumed these weird little symbols to be the work of the bored teenagers around town that tend to get creative whenever they get restless thanks to small town life, but if Regina is right (and Emma fears she is), apparently, she'd been very wrong indeed.

And now that she actually thinks about it, it seems a terrible and unsettlingly strange coincidence that the letter from Regina had been sent from Bangor on almost the exact same date that the tagging had begun.

An uncomfortable coincidence that she doesn't at all believe in.

"I'm sure. It's them. It's her," Regina mumble out as though she's speaking through cotton, and then her eyes drop closed, and she's out, tossed into the cold chemical induced sleep of her high dosage painkillers.

"Of course you are," Emma sighs as she looks back down at the symbols.

And then thinks to herself just how very glad she is that Henry will be returning back to school in the morning.

TBC...
"You know, Emma, it could be just a coincidence," Snow suggests weakly (like she doesn't even believe her own words) as she sits down across from her daughter at the glass and metal table in the middle of the kitchen. David is, as always, hovering nearby. His hands are on his hips, and his lips are pursed like he's thinking and trying to figure all of this out. Emma's pretty damned sure that she's had the exact same look on her face for the last few hours.

Ever since Regina had - even while drugged up - confirmed knowledge of the strange symbol. Ever since she had called it the Home Office's calling card.

"Absolutely. It could absolutely be nothing but a weird coincidence, sure," Emma nods between sips of coffee. She's running on exhaust fumes now; the last two days have been insane what with Regina's return and the emotional reunion between mother and son, but the idea of sleeping while there might be agents from the organization that had led to so much loss, pain and destruction ten years ago is absurd to her.

These lunatics had been responsible for so many deaths (Neal's, her mind whispers at her, and then, as always, she roughly pushes these thoughts away because she doesn't think she's ever really get over Neal stepping in front of a bullet for her). They'd been responsible for ten years of Henry mourning his mother and believing her lost to him, and she'll be damned if they take more from anyone else in this town because she needs a nap.

Regina hadn't had a choice; she'd been forced into a sleep by the painkillers that her damaged body had required, but Emma thinks that it would take getting hit by a bus for her to rest before she has some answers.

Unfortunately, she's not all that sure where the answers will come from given the fact that the person who likely knows and understands the most about what's going on is currently slumbering heavily on the couch.

"But you don't think so," David translates.

"Never been much for coincidences," Emma admits grimly. "But I have to admit, I don't have a clue what they could want besides….Regina, and honestly, that worries me because if they're back for her...." She trails off with a shake of her head as she glances back over at Regina, frowning at the way she barely moves thanks to the painkillers. It's the slow rise and fall of her chest that confirms that she continues to breathe and live because otherwise, she's completely still.
"Okay," Snow nods. "Then let's go over what we do know."

"And then maybe, when Regina wakes up," David adds as he finally drops down into one of the chairs. "She can help us fill in some of the gaps."

"If she even can fill them in," Emma answers with a tired sigh. Another sip of her coffee, and then she continues with, "The medical files that I was able to get my hands on, they suggested that even after extensive therapy, she still has a significant amount of residual memory loss due to her extensive trauma, and the possibility exists that she may never remember or choose to. Those are their words - paraphrased - not mine or hers either, I'm sure."

"But what that means is that she might not even recall everything she went through in there," David sums up.

"Right," Emma acknowledges.

"Perhaps that's true, but she remembers enough to be haunted by it," Snow replies softly, her worried eyes following Emma's over towards the couch. "She remembers enough to help us. And if they're here for her, to help herself."

"All right, okay," Emma agrees as she refills her mug of coffee. "So what we do know is this: ten years ago, Greg Mendell AKA Owen Flynn tracked down this town so that he could find Regina for what she took from him."

"His father," David inserts, frowning a bit. It's been a very long while since he's thought about all of the terrible things that Regina had done; there'd been no disputing how red her ledger had been, but even ten years ago, they'd all been horrified by the idea of what Regina had gone through at Greg's hands and back then, they hadn't even known the half of it.

"Right," Emma confirms. "Neal's fiancee - his girlfriend – follows him into town. He spends the next several weeks stalking Regina and confirming her identity, which we know because we found all of his home videos. Tamara kidnaps Hook from New York and then she brings him back to Storybrooke at which time they all team up to try to take Regina down. After she burns down the bean fields, and retrieves the trigger which Hook eventually deactivated, Regina is taken prisoner by the three of them. We tracked her to the Cannery where Greg was electrocuting her, but that's where her trail went completely cold for us. I think it's safe to say at this point that sometime between when Hook left and when we got there, Greg and Tamara turned her over to someone at the Home Office who took her back to somewhere in Bangor."

"Makes sense so far," David states.

"Except it doesn't," Emma protests. "Regina should not have had magic available to her once they took her across the town line so what did they want from her? Their whole mission was supposed to be about destroying magic. Why not just kill her here in Storybrooke and be done with it. Why torture her for so long?"

"Revenge for Greg doesn't make sense," Snow says.

"Not three years of sense anyways. Besides, from what Hook told me, they'd already hurt her pretty badly. What he said was why I thought she might be dead to begin with. I mean we never found a body so I kept looking, but the whole time I was, I kept remembering how sure he was that she had to have died."

"Hook was wrong," Snow says unnecessarily.
"Well, assuming that this does have something to do with magic and the Home Office's obsession with destroying it, from what we know, it can't be used outside of Storybrooke, but that doesn't mean that it's not still in her body, right?" David asks, frowning as he turns the thoughts over in his head. He's never really spent much time dwelling on the logistics and theories of magic; never really cared to think too deep on it, but now, to protect his family, he finds himself forced to, and he can't say as that he much enjoys the experience. "I mean your magic is elemental. Is Regina's as well?"

"That might be it, Emma," Snow nods. "I doubt they've had access to too many magic users that weren't given it by an object like Rumplestiltskin was or taught it from a book like Cora was. She might have been their –"

"Their Holy Grail, right," Emma replies with undisguised disgust clear as a bell in her voice. "That doesn't actually make me feel better about any of this because if she was that, it's hard to imagine that they just let her go."

David startles at this. "You think this is some kind of plan to get back here?"

"I think we have to at least consider it. I mean, we safeguarded Storybrooke after we defeated Greg and Tamara and kicked the rest of the Home Office agents out of town," Emma reminds him, her green eyes intense. "Gold helped us put up shields so that no one else from outside could ever get in and endanger the people here again. Don't you think it's a bit strange that when Regina finally reaches out to us to come home, their agents reappear within our border? And not to pile it on too high, but how did the post office manage to deliver a letter from Bangor to a town that doesn't exist."

"But Regina wouldn't have known that it doesn't exist anymore," Snow adds on, suddenly speaking quite fast as she starts to put everything together in her head. "She wouldn't have known about Gold's shield; the last thing that she would have know was that outsiders could get into town. But Emma, that would mean that someone from the Home Office worked with someone from here. There are no more outsiders here so it would have to be someone that's native to Storybrooke… why would they do such a thing?"

"Maybe vengeance against Regina. Maybe a way out of here. Honestly, I have no idea why; I just know that not good doesn't even begin to cover this. If they've been watching her the whole time, they've been waiting for her to come home. They've been watching and studying her like a lab rat."

"This is all conjecture," David insists, looking fairly green. Perhaps it's the idea of this woman who was for so very long his mortal enemy, but always defiantly strong, having been reduced to something so small that unsettles him so much, but whatever it is, he feels like he's going to be sick.

"It's conjecture that makes an entirely disturbing amount of sense," Emma answers grimly, following her mother's gaze towards Regina. "They broke her down, and then let her escape only I'm willing to bet she has no actual memory of how she escaped; she probably just thinks that she must have."

"Why do you say that?" Snow queries.

"One of the other things I was able to get from one of my old buddies in the Bangor PD was Regina's police file," Emma notes, glancing back towards her laptop which sits closed over on the kitchen counter. She makes no move to get it now; she has no intention of actually showing anyone the file even if she now finds herself needing to speak to her parents - as vaguely as possible, she has no intention of getting into specifics - about the rather dark and disturbing content found within
It talked about how the day she was found, she was stumbling across middle of a busy road completely out of her mind, like she was high. Her fox screen came back with a whole list of drugs that shouldn't have been anywhere near her. When she was questioned later about that, she told them she had no memory of it. They asked her again after she started remembering who she was and where she'd been, and she still couldn't offer them an answer as to how she ended up on the road that day. I'm guessing she still can't.

"Oh my God," Snow whispers.

"Yeah," Emma sighs, and thinks that at least Snow hadn't had to read the details or see the pictures that she had. The ones of the marks and scars across Regina's back and chest, well she thinks she'll never forget them.

"So what do we do now?" David asks, his hand against his holster.

"For now, the two of you go home --"

"Emma," David protests.

She shakes her head. "I want Henry out of Storybrooke, and we all know that he won't leave if he thinks that the mother that he just got back is in danger. And he'll think she is if he sees the two of you here at three in the morning. So go home, and after he's gone, you can come back. Regina will be up by then, and the four of us can try to figure this whole mess out."

"What if they come for her tonight?" Snow presses.

"They won't. They've been waiting a long time for this. They let her go seven years ago and then they just waited for her to finally come home; they're not going to blow up whatever plan they have by being hasty now."

"I don't like this," David tells her.

"I know, but trust me here, okay? Trust my gut on this."

"Of course," Snow says. "But call us the moment he leaves."

"I promise." She stands up with them, and then leans forward and gives both of them a good hard tight hug – something, it occurs to her – that she would not have been able to do the last time the Home Office had turned everything upside down in this quaint little town of theirs. So much had changed for the better since then, Emma thinks, and whatever it takes, she won't let the clock turn back to days when there had been little to come home to beside hurt and loss. That means that the Home Office can't have Storybrooke, and they sure can't have Regina back, either.

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Henry notices Emma's exhaustion, and that almost ruins everything, but thankfully, right as he's about to demand to know why she's been up all night, Regina wakes up and smiles at him, and his eyes are all on her.

Emma never thought she'd be so relieved about that in all her life.

In truth, she's found herself wonderfully touched by the tenderness of this new relationship between Regina and Henry. Gone is the thoughtless boy who had hurt his mother without even realizing it, and likewise a thing of the past is the woman who'd mistaken sternness for caring. Now, with so
much history behind them meaningless beyond what they should have had together, they seem to be finding a way to connect as they were meant to.

And damn, Emma thinks, if it isn't nice to see Henry grinning like he is.

She knows that he's worried sick about Regina; she can see it in the way his forehead creases as he sits down next to her on the couch, and she sees it in the almost gentle way that he takes her hand. She knows that being treated like she's fragile frustrates Regina; this is clear by the way her eyebrow lifts when Henry touches her. Yet, still, they're smiling at each other like they understand what this is all about.

Like they understand that they both need to allow each other these deeper emotions without trying to tell the other one that they shouldn't have them.

"Morning, Mom," he says, like he's amazed he gets to say the word again.

"Good morning," she replies. "Are you getting ready to leave?" Almost instinctively, her hand lifts up and she brushes hair away from his eyes.

"I don't have to," he insists, catching her hand. "I can –"

"Nice try. You're going back, kid," Emma cuts in. "We agreed. All of us."

"Yeah, but –"

"Emma is right," Regina tells him before reaching up to touch his face like she's trying to remember what he'd felt like; there's a memory caught in the back of her head, just behind the fuzz of the now wearing off painkiller. It's something of Henry as a baby. Perhaps his first day home? She can't really remember, but she can recall the feel of his skin beneath her fingers.

So soft and smooth.

She closes her eyes, and tries to force the images to the front of her mind. She thinks – as she always does when she needs to pull a memory forward - about a technique one of the doctors had shown her. It's about focusing on just the sensations that she can recall and then zeroing in on them and adding details, supplying context. She thinks she sees a face and then -

"Mom? Mom, are you okay?"

She opens her eyes and sighs. She lifts up a hand to her forehead and dances her fingers over the skin there for just a second. She can feel the headache starting to pulse, as it always does when she tries to grab for the memories that seem to be locked away. "I'm okay. Just…remembering."

"What are you remembering, Regina?" Emma asks, pushing herself forward and slowly stepping towards the couch. She seems more than a little urgent, and it makes Regina look at her with concern and perhaps even a bit of fear.

"When he was a baby," she says softly. "His first day home. Why?"

Emma shrugs her shoulders as if to suggest that it's no big deal. "Sorry; you just… you had kind of a pained look on your face. Everything all right?"

"Yes. It was a good memory." She looks at Henry and smiles. "Of you."

"Yeah?" He returns the smile, only his is bigger and his eyes are sparkling with fascination. It's
like he's completely intrigued and can't get enough of Regina right now. Emma knows that there's probably some deep underlying guilt involved, but it's so much more than that. This is about the love of a child who has been for so long unable to really let the feelings out. Not that Emma or Snow or anyone had ever told him not to, but he'd always refused to say much about the subject, always assuming that others would call him foolish for missing the woman that he himself had called the Evil Queen.

Now, he doesn't have to worry about what anyone but Regina thinks of what he feels, and Regina quite clearly is happy for the affection and love.

"I was remembering how very small you were the first day I brought you home with me," she tells him, her smile growing into a wistful one. She almost mentions how soft he was, but then remembers that he's her grown son now, and such words would probably scare him away from her. She's not sure she could bear that again.

It's already bad enough that he's leaving again. She understands why – both of the reasons why – but that doesn't mean she likes it one bit. Either way, though, she's not about to do or say anything that will push him away.

Never again.

"Oh, look, you were tiny once upon a time," Emma teases.

"He was beautiful," Regina corrects, with absolute sincerity.

He blushes a bit and looks away, a shy grin on his lips as he bows his head.

"Stop it," he mumbles.

"Still a twenty-two year old college kid," Emma laughs. "He prefers manly."

He groans. "Ma."

"Fine," Regina replies with a chuckle. "You're a beautiful man."

"Not actually better," he tells her, but then, as if thinking she might feel as though he's rejecting her, he quickly tries to soften his words with a smile.

"If it makes you feel better," Regina says. "You threw up on me the first time that I tried to tell you a bedtime story. Not quite so beautiful."

'Yeah, that's better," he agrees. And then he sighs, and makes no effort to move or do anything that would suggest that he's about to leave.

Which is why Emma moves in again. "You should probably be hitting the road," she says. "It's a long drive back, and you're already running late."

"I hate our agreement," he groused.

"So do I," Regina tells him. "But this means a lot to me. That you're happy."

"I'm happy here with the two of you. With my family."

"Your family will be here next weekend, too, Kid," Emma assures him. "And when you graduate in a few months, we'll be there to cheer you on, and then if you want, you can absolutely move
back home, but until then –"

"I'm going back. Got it."

"Good," Emma says. "Then I am going to go make you some coffee for the drive and then you're taking off. Regina, you want some?"

"Yes, thank you."

Emma nods, then heads back towards the kitchen, leaving mother and son to have a few moments alone with each other before they again separate.

"I'm so proud of you, and everything that you've accomplished over the last ten years," Regina tells him, pushing another strand of hair back and away.

He shakes his head, "You shouldn't be. Mom, I hope you know how much I missed you. I was a stupid idiot naïve idealistic kid, and I had no idea –"

"Henry, it's okay. All of those things? They're what I loved – what I love - about you because I couldn't be any of them. You're my hope."

"But I hurt you and it took me a long time to understand how badly –"

She doesn't – won't - let him finish the sentence; she simply will not let her child believe that he had ever been the cause of what had gone wrong between them. Yes, he'd treated her horribly at times and broken her heart whenever he'd chosen Emma over her or called her the Evil Queen, but she refuses to lay the burden of their issues with each other at his feet.

The past is the past, and though Regina has a pretty good idea that she'll be revisiting a rather dark and unpleasant part of it some time later today, this is one bit of the past that she won't allow either of them to ever return to.

She pulls him towards her, ignoring the sharp pain that streaks up through her leg and hip as his arms circle around her, and he all but crushes her to his chest. She feels him press his face against her shoulder, and she knows that he's holding onto her with the same kind of desperation that she is.

"I'll be here when you get back," she tells him. "I'm not going away again."

"Promise me."

She knows that she shouldn't make this promise; not with the Home Office potentially sniffing around town again (she's amazed at how clear a memory she has of the discussion with Emma the previous night considering how drugged up she'd been, but she thinks that fear has rooted it in her mind, and though she feels somewhat tranquil now, she knows the panic is just beneath the surface, just waiting to rise up), but she can't help but do it.

She can't help but offer them both the hope they'd been so long deprived.

"I promise you that I'm not going anywhere," she says, and then hugs him again with all the strength she has in her. "I love you," she tells him.

"I love you, too," he says, returning the hug in kind.

"All right," Emma says just as they're pulling apart. She's coming out of the kitchen and holding up
a travel mug of coffee in her hand as she walks over to them. "Call me – call us – as soon as you get
to your apartment, okay?

"Of course," Henry nods, taking the cup from her. He opens his mouth as if to start to protest again,
but then suddenly he's getting the same even no bullshit kind of gaze from both of his mothers, and
he just knows he has no chance in this fight. "Fine, but just for the record, you both suck now."

Both women meet this comment with a smile and he can't help but laugh.

Because for the first time in ten years, everything actually feels right again.

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"Now the truth. What's going on?" Regina asks the moment Mercedes (she hadn't been able to stop
herself from breaking into a massive smile when she'd seen him behind the wheel of her once
beloved Benz) pulls away from the apartment, and disappears down the street. She had watched it
until it had been completely gone, and then she'd stared after it for a few long seconds, already
feeling the emptiness of his presence.

She tries to remind herself that such desperately possessive and needy thoughts had created some –
most - of her problems years earlier, but she's finding it so terribly difficult to control her emotions
right about now.

"Do you remember the pictures that I showed you last night?" Emma asks.

" The symbol from the Home Office, yes, unfortunately," Regina replies as she forces her tone to
stay calm and even. Part of her is already thinking about the painkillers in the medicine cabinet, but
that's weakness speaking and she doesn't need those to help her deal with this, she tells herself.

She can deal with these people.

"If they're here somewhere here in town, I wanted Henry not to be."

"I agree."

"I thought you would," Emma says, and then goes quiet. It's clear that she's trying to figure out
how to say something else. How to ask something else.

"Out with it, Sheriff."

Emma chuckles. "It's been awhile since I've heard you say that."

"Nostalgic are we?"

"Maybe just a bit." She sighs then, and gets to the point. "If we're going to figure out what these
goons are up to, and how they got back into this town, then we're going to need to understand what
happened to you."

"I had a feeling that you were going to ask that. So I’m guessing you want to know about the three
years I spent as their honored guest," Regina states. Her tone is flat, but her dark turbulent eyes
betray her as always.

"I don't want to, but I think we need to."

"I don't remember everything."
"I figured as much, but I think whatever you do remember will be enough."

"Fine. Now?"

"Not yet. My parents are on the way over. I know you're not their biggest fan and all, but they really want to help and –"

"It's all water under the bridge to me now, Emma," Regina says softly. "All I care about is ensuring that those monsters can never come near Henry. Even if I still held a grudge against your parents – and I don't – I'd gladly work with the Devil himself if he could promise me that Henry would be safe."

"You really have changed, haven't you?"

"Not willingly," the former queen responds with a humorless chuckle of what sounds a whole lot like self-loathing. "I'd like to tell you that all of this came into being because I woke up and became a better person, but the reality is Emma, I needed to be torn apart completely for that to happen."

"You didn't deserve that nightmare."

"But that's just it, dear: I did deserve it." Then, changing the subject before Emma can argue with her further. "When will Snow and David be here?"

"About twenty minutes or so."

"Very well. I'd like to take a shower if that's all right."

"Of course."

"Which reminds me," Regina says, sounding suddenly almost painfully formal. "I want to thank you for the hospitality you've shown me. I'm sure that it quite the inconvenience to have me here, but I do very much appreciate it. I assure you that I'll be out of your hair as soon as possible."

Emma laughs loudly at that, though more at the politician like words and delivery than at the statement itself. When she sees the surprised perhaps even offended look on the former queen's face, she rushes to explain herself, "Regina, you are more than welcome to stay here as long as you need to. Henry's not using his room except on the weekends, and really, I don't mind. It's actually kind of nice to have someone around again."

"There's no significant other?"

"Not for a long while now."

"Well, thank you, then."

"Yeah, you're welcome," Emma nods, doing everything she can to hide the frown that wants to break out as she tries not to stare right at Regina. There are moments when she sees the woman she'd once known, but there are others like now where she can plainly see the damage done to the former queen; she can see how badly the woman had been humbled and crushed.

And for reasons that Emma can't even begin to understand, she finds herself terribly pissed off on Regina's behalf. There had been a time when she would have gladly seen Regina's pride shattered, but God, not like this.

She watches as Regina slowly stands up from the couch, her legs shaking beneath her like they're
made of Jello. Almost immediately, the clear pain that she's in causes her knees to buckle. Emma starts to move forward as if to catch her, but a hand up prevents the sheriff from coming any closer.

Swallowing hard against the agony streaking through her like a wildfire, Regina pushes herself back up to her feet, her hand settled on the edge of the couch to steady herself. "I'm fine," she says, her voice trembling.

"Maybe use the cane when you come back down," Emma suggests gently.

"Maybe," is all Regina will allow for before she heads towards the stairs leading to bathroom. It hurts to walk up them, but she's been weak enough in front of Emma for today, and with the Home Office back around for whatever reason, it's never been important to prove herself strong.

Even if it's a complete lie.

TBC...
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Some salty language, and some conversation about what Regina through during her time in captivity. Though it's not graphic in this chapter, it does start to get suggestive so if you are in any way sensitive, you may wish to skip this.

6.

STORYBROOKE, MAINE - JANUARY, 2023

When a freshly showered and dressed (she's even put a light coat of make-up on, once again mustering up whatever small amount of shielding against the world that she can) Regina finally comes back down the stairs about twenty minutes, she's using the cane to move about. She had tried to leave Henry's room without it, but almost immediately thanks to her night spent on the couch, her muscles had cramped up to the point that almost all movement feels a bit like someone is trying to ram sharp needles into her skin (unfortunately, she has a distinct memory of this having happened to her so the comparison isdarkly apt), and she'd been forced to use the cane for assistance.

Her hand tightly rested around the knob of the cane, she feels old and broken, and there's a kind of deep shame burning harshly in her dark eyes, but she holds her head up as high as she can when she greets David and Snow with a small thin smile that doesn't quite go all the way up. "Good morning," she says as she settles herself into the chair opposite them.

"Good morning," Snow repeats softly. "Did you sleep well?"

"Well enough," is all Regina will allow for, her expression almost completely emotionless. She doesn't need nor want her former stepdaughter to know that her sleep had been a kind of dark nothingness thanks to the painkillers.

That Snow is looking at her like she already knows this is bad enough.

"Okay," Snow nods before offering up another smile that's surely meant to be comforting. Regina thinks that she should be irritated by this kind of pitying sympathy, and part of her even is, but the exhaustion and the desire not to be alone again is so much more and so she simply lets it go.

"Emma told you what we want to…talk about?"

"She did," Regina confirms. Her jaw sets and her eyes harden. "Go ahead and your questions."

"I don't think that there are specific questions," Emma tells her as she puts a cup of tea in front of her. "We just want to know what you remember."

"Why? Exactly? What does what I…went through matter now?"

Emma exchanges a look with her parents, and then sighs. "Regina, after you were taken out of Storybrooke, Gold helped us put up a protective shield around the town to keep outsiders well...out. It wouldn't have kept you from returning because of your magical blood, but it should have stopped
mail from you. For ten years, we haven't received so much as an ad from the real world, and then your letter arrives. That's just...it's not possible."

"What are you saying?" Regina demands, her voice deepening with dread.

"We think there is a possibility that your captors were waiting for you to come back home to Storybrooke," David tells her.

Regina can't stop herself from flinching in reaction. It's a small movement, but she's quite certain that everyone had seen it. Just the same, she ignores their worried reactions, and hisses out, "I'm guessing that you have no idea why?"

"Not yet," Emma admits, frowning at the clear fear she sees on Regina's face. "That's kind of why we were hoping that you could tell us what you remember about how you escaped from them."

"You think they let me go so that they could track me down seven years later? Why? They had me and were able to do...whatever they wanted with me. Why would they release me to just to…” She comes to a choking stop, clearly upset to the point of looking as though she's about to break down.

This isn't anger that she's showing right now; this is fear to the point of almost looking like crippling terror, and seeing this particular emotion painted in bright bold strokes across Regina's face is a new experience for all three of the Charming's. Ten years may have passed, but their memories of the proud woman who had refused to let them see anything but the rage brewing inside of her is still vividly imprinted upon all of their memories.

"We'll figure this out, Regina," Emma assures her. "We will figure this out; I promise you that."

"Don't make promises that you can't keep."

"I don't."

"No, I suppose you don't," Regina replies with a small sigh. For a moment then, her face contorts into something so deeply agonized that it almost looks like it physically pains her. The expression she's wearing is so raw and hurt that it almost makes both Emma and Snow want to call off this conversation before it even begins.

"Regina," Snow says, and perhaps she means to tell her former stepmother that she doesn't need to do this.

"It's just a simple story," Regina replies, the shake of her voice undermining her words. Her shoulders lift up almost defiantly, and then she starts speaking, slowly and deliberately. "For three years, my every day was wondering what my captors would do to me next. They did every single thing that you could possibly imagine to me and then they did so much more than that simply because they could. The worst of it was the one thing I would have thought would have been the easiest to endure: complete and utter isolation. They would put me in a dark tiny room that was big enough for me to pace and sit down in, but little more than that. They would keep me in there for what must have been weeks at a time with my only contact with anyone being the sound of the flap in the door opening so that one of the guards could push food and water in for me. At first, being in that room was a relief because it meant that they weren't electrocuting me or beating me or doing anything else to me, but I started going...well, you'd think I've been used to it."

"You started what?" Snow urges.

"There's very little worse than being all by yourself," Regina tells her. "I had to find ways to keep myself from losing my mind all over again. The first time - back in the Enchanted Forest - wasn't a
great experience for me, and well, to be frank, it's at least part of the reason why we're all here in this world now now. I didn't want to feel that desperation and hopelessness all over again." She looks up at Snow when she says this, meeting her eyes. "I'm not blaming you for what happened; you showed me what you believed at the time to be mercy, but my dear, it never was that."

"I'm sorry," Snow replies, swallowing hard against the guilt in her chest.

"I know," Regina says simply.

"How did you know that three years had passed while you were in there?" Emma queries, attempting to get this conversation back on track. There's so much that needs to be worked out between her mother and Regina, but those things will have to wait until this threat is over. All the same, she thinks it's a probably good sign that both of them are willing to step into their past at all; it means that perhaps, when the time is right, they can find their way towards truly reconciling and forgiving each other as opposed to simply letting go of things and pretending that they'd never happened.

For now, though, this is what matters. And this story needs to be told.

"I didn't," Regina admits. "I had no concept of time whatsoever while I was their...guest. I didn't gain an understanding of how long they'd had me until a few months into my hospital stay. Until after I remembered who I was and when I'd been taken. All I knew while I was in captivity was that at some point in each given day, I would fall asleep and then I'd wake up and everything would start all over again. I measured time by the meals that they supplied me with, but since they didn't always do that, after awhile, everything just fell together. It could have been two weeks or ten years for all I knew."

"How did you finally escape?" David asks as he rises to start brewing another pot of hot water. This seems to be his go-to way to keep his hands busy. He keeps casting worried glances over at his wife, but her eyes are on Regina.

"I have no idea," Regina admits with a slight frown as she digs into her memory. "I remember trying to escape numerous times before I actually succeeded in doing so." She laughs, then, an almost sadly hysterical sound. "One day or maybe one night, I don't quite know, one of the guards came into check on me because I'd skipped the meal that they'd provided and then he started..." she trails off once more and shakes her head as if even remembering this causes her great pain.

"Regina," Snow says gently, her hand moving to cover the former queen's.

Regina smiles softly at the contact, but curiously doesn't pull away from it. It almost seems as though she's actually comforted by it. After a moment, she composes herself anew, and then forces herself on. "It's all right; I can do this. He got a bit...free, and I bit him and while he was down, I ran through the door he'd left open. I don't think I got far. I have this memory of being back on the electrocution table after that, but that must not have been what happened because the next thing I know, I'm waking up in a bed at St. Joseph's Hospital in Bangor and they're asking me if I know who I am."

"But you didn't?" Emma asks. "Remember who you were?"

"Not at the time, no. The detectives that I spoke to when I woke up told me that I'd wandered into traffic, and asked me if I had any recall of that. I didn't. And I still don't. Probably a good thing since it seems as though I gave a fair amount of people quite an afternoon show." She chuckles humorlessly at this. "As for my memories, they came back to me quite slowly. Some of them, anyway." She taps her temple with the tip of her finger. "There are still so many things locked
away in there, and it's almost always an unpleasant experience to pull them out when they start to surface on me."

"Like the memory of Henry from earlier."

"Yes, but for that memory, I'd go through any amount of pain."

"I know you would," Emma tells her. She doesn't add that she, too, would have done the same. Instead, she says, "During any of the time that the Home Office had you, did they ever tell you what they wanted with you?"

"You mean did they tell me why they insisted on keeping me alive for three years instead of just letting me die?" She shakes her head. "No, and believe me, my dear, I asked. Every single time that I'd wake up after they would beat and whip me into unconsciousness and every time I'd open my eyes after they would electrocute or drown me to the point of death, I would demand that they explain why they kept bringing me back, and every single time, all I got was stares from the doctors and a smile from her." She shivers almost violently when she says this, as if even the memory of these dark pseudo conversations is painful and haunting to her.

They probably are.

"Her?" Snow prompts, trying to ignore the impulse she has to react to Regina's words; unfortunately for her, though, her mind is giving her horrifically graphic visuals involving Regina being hurt as she'd suggested, and it takes everything that Snow has to not run over to the sink and throw up into it.

But she figures if Regina can hold herself together right now, well then she can, too.

"I presume she was their leader. She introduced herself to me as their Queen, though I don't believe that that was her official title so much as the one she adopted so that she taunt me with her power over me. She certainly knew who I was, and enjoyed telling me as much. Beyond that, I don't know who she was. What I know is that she was almost always there for the worst of the sessions, and then she was always there to question me when I woke in the medical bay."

"What do you remember about her?" Emma queries.

"She looked to be in her mid thirties perhaps, though I suspect she might be substantially older than that. She was thin and tall, and blonde. And she was English," Regina replies immediately, because though there are some memories that have been dug deep into the crevices of her tortured mind, the one of that horrible woman is not one of them.

"You're saying English because of her accent?" David asks.

"Yes, and she utilized a polished and upper class dialect. Her clothing was also extremely expensive, and I never saw her in the same outfit twice. Her nails were also expertly manicured. She reminded me of me, actually."

An unmistakable expression of disgust races its way through Regina's eyes when she says these words, guilt darkening them for a moment before she forces herself back to something reasonably calm and measured again.

No one needs to ask to know what that expression was all about because they already know the answer; it was about the dark and terrible sins of her own past, sins that seem to weight on her like an hundred gallon drum.
Emma waits a brief moment, lets Regina finish collecting herself, and then asks, "Do you recall if she was present in your last memory – the last one you have of being on the table - before you woke up in the hospital?"

Regina thinks about this for a moment, and then says softly, "She was."

"Do you think you can try to focus on that memory?" Emma asks. She's frowning when she says this, and it's quite clear to everyone that this is the very last thing that she wants to make Regina do right now, but no one says a word in protest because they all know that it's quite likely that those dark and horrifying moments hold some of the answers that they need to try to understand what's happening in Storybrooke right now.

"I can try," Regina answers as she takes a sip from the refreshed cup of tea that David sets down in front of her. The other one was just fine, but he's anxious, and he needs to be doing something to try to help now. She smiles up her gratitude at him for the thought, and then looks back at Emma.

"Do you need us to give you some time alone?" David asks.

The response she gets is immediate and somewhat startling, "No!" Regina almost shouts out. And then, as if realizing that she's perhaps given away far too much of what she's feeling right now, she again forces her face back to what she probably thinks looks like neutral expression (it's more like a sad grimace), and then says in a much quieter but slightly trembling voice, "If it's all the same to the three of you, I've spent a very long time alone and –"

"We're not going anywhere," Snow promises, her hand tightening.

Regina nods. She then closes her eyes for a moment, and just as she had before when she'd been pulling the memory of Henry forward, she focuses on the tiny thread that she can pull on – the visual of staring up from a metal table – and keeps yanking. It hurts like a son a bitch, and there are violent red sparks of pain glowing behind her eyelids as her brain protests her efforts to remember what it clearly doesn't want her to, but she keeps on.

Because if this had all been some kind of game, if they had released her simply so that they could then follow back into Storybrooke for some reason or another, then everything she cares about – Henry – could be in danger.

And she didn't come home to lose her little boy again.

She won't lose him.

So she keeps grabbing on that thread and she keeps pulling and her teeth are grit hard enough that Snow wants to stop this right here and now, but David has his hand on her shoulder, and he just seems to understand that this has to happen. His eyes meet Emma's and she nods in agreement.

But dear does God does this suck.

Former enemy or not, none of them want to see her in this kind of pain.

But then Regina's dark eyes snap open, and she lets out a soft sob.

"Regina?" Emma asks.

"It's not all there anymore," she says, blinking her eyes rapidly as she tries to get herself back under control again; there's a fierce pressure just behind her eyes now, but forces herself to ignore it.
"But some of it is?"

"Yes." She looks right at Emma, again unwilling to see the sympathy and sadness in Snow’s eyes; she understands it, though, because whatever dark hatred had bloomed so fully between them, however much Snow had just wanted Regina to go away, she'd never wanted her to go through that much physical - or even emotional - pain. And even Regina in her darkest days would never have tortured her former stepdaughter to that kind of horrific degree. She'd wanted her simply dead believing that the lack of her existence would have made the agony in her soul less. Absolutely nonsense, of course, but it'd never been about rending the flesh and destroying the mind for Regina or Snow. In its own sick way, both of their fights with each other had always been about healing their broken and deeply betrayed hearts.

None of that had ever happened, but now Snow thinks, maybe when this is all over and everyone is safe and secure once more, maybe it finally can.

Once Regina is willing to meet her eyes again.

For now, though, Snow actually understands – even if she doesn't like it one damned bit – why Regina can only look at Emma. She completely gets why Regina needs the confidence and fight that Emma is offering to her.

"She was there," Regina says. "And I remember her telling the man - I suppose he was a doctor - who had been…working on me that this would be the last…treatment. That was the word they always used. He asked her if I was to be eliminated and she laughed and said of course not, but that I'd no longer be a guest of theirs because they clearly weren't going to get what they needed from me this way." She swallows hard, looking nauseous.

"What they needed from you," David muses. "Do you mean your magic?"

"I always assumed that considering their hatred of magic, that that was at least part of why they abducted me, but as I said, they were never clear about what they wanted. I can recall her telling me time and time again to just let go and give in, but there was never any other demands made."

"As far as your magic, were you able to feel it out there?" Emma queries.

"Inside the compound where they kept me, yes. When they wanted me to, anyway. They had this bracelet that they would put me on that would stop me from being able to use my magic. When it was off, I could, but the only time they’d take it off was when they were trying to use one of their machines to rip the magic out by force. I could feel it then."

"Were they able to take your magic?" David asks.

"I'm not sure," Regina admits. "I haven't felt it since that last day I spent there."

"What about we drove back into town a couple days," Emma presses. "You were sleeping, but did you feel anything at all? Even when you woke up?"

"I didn't," Regina admits.

"Were you expecting to?" Emma queries.

"No, but that's mostly because though I can remember having used magic and I remember what it did, I don't feel any kind of connection to it, anymore. I don't have muscle memory of it any longer. I don't recall what it felt like or what it tasted like."
"It's been seven years," Snow suggests. "Maybe you're just out of practice."

"It'd been twenty-eight years the last time I'd gone without magic for a long while, and there were still days during that final year of the curse when I would wake up vividly recalling exactly how it felt to have magic humming in my fingers and through my blood. Now...now it's all gone. Like it was never there to begin with. I don't understand how they could have...I don't."

This isn't about magic, she thinks even as she stares down at her hands. Not exactly. Magic had been a kind of drug for her, though control had been the actual addiction. She finds herself not so much missing the magic as fearful of the loss of the mental connection to those memories.

And what's worse for her is the understanding that until now, she hasn't even realized that her connection to her magic had been missing.

If they could take away that, what else did the Home Office take from her?

She exhales, then, because no matter what else they had taken — and she's terribly sure that there's so much more that she'll find out has been stripped away now that she's back in Storybrooke and being faced with her past — they hadn't taken away her memories of Henry nor her love for him. She'd like to think that they couldn't remove those things from her even if they'd tried to, but that would be something of a lie because for a short time, they had done exactly that to her. They'd broken her mind so badly that there had been awhile when she'd forgotten everything including her son.

But she remembers now, and that's all that matters, she tells herself.

She remembers Henry, and she'll never forget him again.

Never.

"So maybe the Home Office doesn't want you to be able to stop whatever their new plan is," David suggests. "With your magic, I mean. If this is some kind of long game they're playing, maybe this is their idea of precautions."

"I suppose that's possible," Regina admits, her words slow and thoughtful as she turns everything over in her mind. "If I can't feel or taste my magic anymore, even if it's still running through my blood, I won't be able to control it. It'd be like I was a novice again; I'd be no help to anyone."

Emma nods her head, then says, "That still doesn't explain why they would let you 'escape' seven years ago and then just wait for you to come home."

"Maybe they didn't have a choice," Snow suggests.

"But if they had an inside person as you believe," Regina argues. "Then couldn't they have assisted their partners in getting back in long ago?"

"Maybe their partners have always been inside," Emma says. "Like sleeper agents just waiting to be activated once you returned to Storybrooke."

"This is insanity," David says. "Why so much subterfuge?"

"I don't know," Emma admits. Her eyes flicker over to Regina. "Over the last seven years, you've been mostly healing from they did to you, right?"

"Mostly. I spent quite awhile in the hospital after I woke up, and then once I was on my feet again,
I needed extensive physical therapy. And other kinds of therapy, as well," Regina states, frowning a bit at the confession.

"So you went to someone like Archie?" Snow asks gently. She had almost used the term shrink, but had pulled back not wanting to offend Regina or her pride; this new relationship with the former queen is still so fresh and young, and she doesn't wish to endanger it with ill-thought out words.

"Yes. Reluctantly at first, but after awhile I realized that I enjoyed having someone willing to just listen. I don't think he believed most of what I said. In fact, I'm quite certain that he thought that I was quite delusional and had created almost everything I was telling him in my head due to whatever trauma I had suffered during my captivity, but he was still there." She laughs. "He also prescribed me a good amount of medication for anxiety and depression. I refused to take it at first, but there was a time when I started wondering if maybe he was right, and everything I remembered was just some kind of pathetic coping method so I tried his treatment plan."

"You thought you'd created yourself as one of the biggest villains in storybook history as a way of dealing with being tortured?" Emma asks.

And then she winces because damn, that was probably too blunt.

Thankfully, Regina seems more amused by the sheriff's ill-chosen words than annoyed by them. Perhaps it's the old familiarity of how tactless Emma can be that causes her to smile. "Yes," she answers. "Because creating myself a story where I was the hunter instead of the prey seemed logical for a time."

"So what made you realize it was real?" Snow queries.

"I started having dreams of Henry. You have to understand, while I was in that cell of theirs, I filled my days with…him. And even the three of you."

"Us?" David asks.

"All of you spoke to me. Sometimes you would tell me that I deserved what was happening, and that I was getting my just rewards and sometimes it was one of you there to talk and spar with me simply because I needed it to stay sharp, but Henry was always there to beg me to hold on. Even when I could still remember him calling me the Evil Queen, the thoughts I had of him telling me to be strong was enough to keep me sane for another day. He was my rock for almost three years, and then he was just gone."

"I don't understand," Emma states, her brow wrinkling in confusion. "It's totally normal for you to have stopped seeing him after you got out."

"But that's the thing: I didn't just stopped seeing him; I forgot everything about Henry as much as I've now forgotten everything about the taste and feel of magic," Regina answers, and for a moment she looks absolutely gutted. "After I woke up, and there was nothing in my mind that was concrete and real, he wasn't there, either. Even when I remembered who I was, and how to get into the bank accounts I'd hidden out in the real world, I still didn't remember my son. Until one night when I did, and then I knew who I was and that everything I'd thought I done, I had. It was all real."

"And in the past now," Snow tells her, her tone strong and determined.

"You're always the optimistic princess," Regina chuckles, but there's unmistakable humor – and perhaps for the first time even appreciation for Snow's previously thought of as infuriating constant
positivity - in her tone.

"Yes," Snow agrees. And then she grins. "Always."

Emma sighs. "And on that note, I think we're probably done for now." She offers Regina a small smile. "You look like you could use a nap."

"So do you, Sheriff," Regina shoots back, an eyebrow lifted in challenge.

"Yeah, but I'm —"

"A lot of time has passed, and thankfully, we're no longer the enemies that we once were, but I think perhaps we still know each other as well as we ever did," Regina breaks in, her dark eyes locked with Emma's green ones. "You're exhausted, but think you have to be the Savior even now because so much has changed but so much hasn't. Well let me tell you, dear, we all have our limits, and I think this town needs you not to be at them."

"She's right, Emma," Snow says gently.

"Fine. I'll get some rest. And Regina will get some rest. And then…"

"And then we'll meet at Granny's for dinner," David says.

"That might not be a good idea," the former queen protests. "Ten years may have passed, but I'm sure there are many who would prefer me gone."

"Well that's too damned bad. They need to get used to seeing you again," Snow replies, her chin lifting up in stubborn defiance. "You're home now, and as long as you want it to be, this is going to stay your home."

"As I said: always the optimist."

"And as I said: always."

"Good."

And Emma – unable to stop herself from letting out a breath of relief – thinks: well at least some good has come out of this horrific tragedy.

Now if they can just manage to stop the Home Office from ruining everything that's worth having all over again.

TBC...
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Some language, and a bit more about the torture Regina went through. There's also a non-graphic electrocution scene. Again, if you are sensitive to any of this, I advise skipping this story.

7.

STORYBROOKE, MAINE - JANUARY, 2023

Walking into Granny's Diner next to Emma is awkward more than anything else. It's been ten years since she was seen here, and though some memories are still strong for the people of Storybrooke, it seems – judging by the more curious than frightened looks that are thrown at her - as though most of the citizens have moved on with their lives.

Or maybe they just find it difficult to be afraid of their former queen as she hobbles into the diner, her shaking hand rested uneasily atop her cane, but her head still held high. Perhaps some of the folks gathered for their evening meal recognize that her time spent away from Storybrooke has clearly treated her as unkindly as they might have ever wanted to.

"Regina," Ruby says softly. She's older now, just like everyone else, and there's a kind of almost sad maturity in her dark entirely too keen eyes. Her clothes are still far more indecent than should be allowed in a place of business, but they seem more for show than Regina has ever remembered them to be; in fact, everything about Ruby seems like it's some kind of big production meant to convince everyone that she's doing just fine.

Regina makes a mental note to ask Emma about this later.

For now, she simply offers up a polite half-smile and nods her head in greeting; she has no desire to attract too much attention to herself, and she wants even less to have to answer the many questions that she can see are burning deep in Ruby's eyes. People surely want to know where she's been and why she's like this, but absent Snow making another terrible mistake – and for reasons that Regina can't quite understand, she truly believes that Snow won't betray her again – they'll be left wondering because she has no intention of talking to them about any of this.

It's bad enough that she has to bare her soul to Emma, Snow and David about it all.

"Hey, Rubes," Emma greets with a much more honest and friendly smile that reaches her eyes. "My parents aren't here yet?" She glances around to confirm her words, and true enough, the diner is decidedly Charming free.

"Not yet, but David called ahead to let us that about your guest. Just to be safe, you know?" Her eyes flicker over Regina again, and then quickly away.

"Yeah. You care where we sit?"

"Not if you don't, but I figured you guys wouldn't want eyes on you the whole time so I set
something up near the back for you." She shrugs her shoulders. "You know people will start wandering in when they hear."

Regina can't stop her lip from curling up into an indignant sneer.

"I know," Emma says. "Just run interference, okay?"

"That's not necessary," Regina states, her hand tightening on the cane hard enough to make her knuckles go white. "If the idiots of this town want to leave their houses on a cold night to come see me as I am now, let them."

"Yeah, I don't think so," Emma answers. "They may need to get used to you being back and around town, Regina, but that doesn't mean they get to act like morons."

Regina smiles slightly at Emma's instinctual protective nature; touched more than she'd care to admit. "Very well," she says. "Miss Lucas, the booth in the back will be just fine."

"Okay," Ruby nods as she leads them towards a booth settled near the way back. It doesn't offer much privacy, but a little is still something.

"Thank you, dear," Regina says, and there's absolutely no sarcasm in her voice, just a gentle harmless honesty that makes Ruby's eyebrow lift.

"Yeah, sure, of course. Hey, let me know if you need anything," she says, and then turns and heads back towards the counter, her hands jammed into the pocket of the hoodie that she's wearing over her waitress uniform.

"The years haven't been kind to her either, I take it?"

Emma frowns as she watches her friend depart, her eyes catching the way Ruby's shoulders slump as she leans over the counter. "She made mistakes."

"Love, loss or ambition?"

"Love and loss. Granny died a couple years ago, and she had a relationship go pretty bad on her," Emma tells her, but then clams up. Just as Regina's nightmare is her own business, so is Ruby's pain and anguish hers.

"I see," Regina says. She folds her hands together in front of her, and stares at them for a moment – watching the way they tremble even when she tightens them up to try to stop them from doing so – and then she laughs.

"What?" Emma asks, her brow knitting together in confusion.

"I'm waiting on your parents."

"Okay?"

"Emma," Regina explains with another laugh. "I am waiting on your parents to arrive for dinner, and I'm actually looking forward to their arrival."

"Oh."

"Yes, oh."

"We move on," Emma shrugs, and then reaches out to settle a hand over Regina's shaking ones, the
contact firm but still gentle. Her green eyes lift towards Regina's darker ones and she smiles as if to punctuate her point.

"So we do," Regina agrees after a moment.

It's then that the door opens and David enters hand in hand with Snow. The two of them say something to Ruby, and then head back towards the table where Emma and Regina are. "Hey," Snow greets. "Everything okay?"

"Fine," Emma nods, not at all surprised when Regina pulls her hands back.

"Good," David notes and drops down into his chair. "Sorry that we're late, but we wanted to go talk to Gold before we came over here."

"Gold," Regina repeats, unable to completely hide the distaste that colors her voice as she thinks – really thinks – about her former teacher for the first time in a very long time. "I'm sure that he was thrilled to hear I was back."

"Surprised actually," Snow offers. "Maybe even pleased."

"That's doubtful."

"What were you asking him about?" Emma pushes, inserting herself into the middle of the conversation before it can take a darker turn.

"The shield around Storybrooke," David replies. "We wanted to know if there was anyway that he was aware of that anyone from outside could have snuck their way into Storybrooke. He's fairly adamant that if they weren't around when the cloaking spell was enacted or they don't have blood that originated from outside of this world, then there's no way that they could have gotten back inside now. In fact, he was quite certain of it."

"Who's to say that the Home Office doesn't have people from our world working for them," Regina notes. "They may be anti-magic, but I imagine they have a place in their organization for useful idiots who can be turned."

"Possible," Snow admits. "But we're such a small amount of people; I think we'd notice someone that none of us knew wandering around town."

"She's right," David insists. "Even more than before, we all know each other. We may not all get along, but we know who each other is."

"Okay, so what that basically means is that whomever is spray-painting all these idiotic Home Office calling cards all around town has been inside of Storybrooke for the last ten years," Emma says. "Which is...fantastic."

"We'll stop them," David assures her. "All of them."

Both Regina and Emma look like they're about to argue against David's optimistic words; their lives having been spent understanding that you fail more than you succeed, but before either one of them can speak up, Snow cuts in with, "He's right, and we will. But since we can't do anything about any of that right now, how about we have a nice dinner instead?"

And then she smiles brightly, and for a moment, Regina understands why it is that people have always followed Snow White's lead.
Amazingly, in spite of a revelation that years ago would have sent sparks of furious rage through her blood and despite the fact that she's still so scared right now, Regina finds herself answering the smile with one of her own.

*** ***

Though Regina participates somewhat in the friendly if decidedly shallow dinner conversation with the three members of the Charming family, she just barely eats; she picks at the hamburger and nibbles on the fries, and she drinks a lot of water. Her lack of an appetite is noticeable, of course, but no one says a word because they're not sure if this is the usual for her or just a matter of nerves due to the company.

Afterwards, though, when it's just Emma and Regina, and they're back at the townhouse together, and the sheriff is watching her with those intensely knowing green eyes, Regina knows exactly what Emma is thinking about.

"What?" Regina sighs as she lowers herself down onto the couch with a wince that she can't quite hide. This will certainly be a night for painkillers, she thinks, and her stomach rolls as her mind once again accepts her basic weakness.

"You don't eat much at all do you?"

"Never did."

"But less now."

"The painkillers I utilize tend to disturb my appetite," the former queen admits reluctantly. "Anyway, I eat enough to keep myself healthy."

"If you say so. What about exercise?"

"I did physical therapy for a time. I've recovered as much movement as the doctors believe that I will," Regina replies, eyes sharply narrowed as she tries to figure out where exactly Emma is going with this line of questioning.

"You know that this doesn't sound like you, right?"

"Excuse me?"

"Ten years ago, Regina, if a doctor – if Whale – had even dared to tell you that this –" she indicates towards the cane that Regina is gripping hard now and then towards the stiff and uncomfortable way that Regina is holding herself – "would be your fate forever, you would have told him where he could stick it. You would have told him that one day not only would you not need to use the cane again, but you'd be better than you were before."

"Ten years ago, my dear, I'm not sure that I could have imagined what I went through or that my body could be so damaged and still survive."

"And I get that. I do. But this feels like surrender."

"It's not surrender. It's not. It's…it's merely facing the facts."

"Well then, maybe it's time to face different facts, Regina; face the ones that say that maybe what you need to do is to start moving again. Starting living again."
"You're the one who scolded me for not using my cane with Henry."

"Because that was pure stubbornness and pride, and he's your kid and doesn't give a damn what package you come in, Regina. This is…well this could use a little bit of that old stubbornness. You could. For yourself."

"What do you want from me?" Regina asks quietly. Her hands are trembling again, shaking so badly that holding anything at all would be impossible.

"A little bit of fight."

"Why?"

"Because we're going to need that fight if these Home Office bastards are in town, and because the Regina Mills that I remember –"

"Is gone," Regina grows, eyes blazing. "And she should be. Because the Regina Mills that you remember - the Evil Queen - well, she was a horrible monster, wasn't she? And…” she swallows hard. "She deserved what she got."

Emma's head snaps back hard on her neck, her eyes widening. "No. Regina, no."

"Yes!" Tears slip down her cheeks. "Do you know what years of intense psycho-therapy bring a person like me to, Emma? Especially when that person begins to realize that the nightmares that everyone has are the ones that they themselves have caused over and over. Do you know what that brings someone to?"

"Regina…"

The brunette woman shakes her head, unwilling to be pushed off course or to be coddled or comforted right now. "It brings you to the understanding that there isn't a person alive who wouldn't be better off if I had never been born."

"Henry. Henry wouldn't be better." She laughs humorlessly. "Henry wouldn't have been born if you hadn't."

"So I get one in the plus column, then."

"That's a pretty big plus, Regina."

Regina nods her head slowly, thoughtfully and for a moment Emma thinks maybe she's broken through the self-loathing that has suddenly gripped the former queen, but then a second later, Regina continues with, "Maybe this sounds like a pathetic self-pity party to you, but to me this, this is my reality. And my reality is that the woman that you knew ten years ago deserved every moment of torment that she received in that monstrous place. That evil woman earned every horrible touch, every awful shock, and every drop of her blood that she lost. And now? Now she deserves every nightmare that plagues her, every memory that reminds her of who she is and what she's done. She deserves it, Emma. I deserve it."

"Jesus."

"Oh, dear, I would think by now that you of all people would know that are no such things as higher powers. Especially ones that protect innocents."

"Then I guess that's my job isn't it?" Emma replies, her tone defiant and something unreadable and
almost frantic in her bright green eyes.

"Perhaps. So you should start somewhere else. With an actual innocent."

She stands up then, and tightly clutching her cane and then the walls, she pushes herself up the stairs to Henry's room. She shuts the door behind her, drops herself onto his bed, and then presses her face into his pillow.

*** ***

"Good morning," she hears just as she's blinking herself awake. Her head is – as always – pounding away, and her dark eyes are bleary. Her mind is a bit cotton-balled thanks to the painkillers that she'd taken just before she'd turned in on the previous night, but she can figure out enough to know that Emma is standing over her bed, dressed in workout clothes.

"Miss Swan?"

"Yep," the sheriff says brightly, a travel mug of coffee clutched tight in her gloved fingers. In her other hand, she's holding what looks to be a pair of sweatpants and a red hoodie. "It's time to get up and get moving."

"No."

"Get up."

"Still no."

"We can do this all damned day, Regina," Emma says dryly. "And we will. Or you can get up and out of the bed, and throw on some sweatpants."

"Why would I ever want to do that?"

"So we can go for a run."

"Run?"

"As in jog. As in move your legs in a…moving motion."

"Still so eloquent. I see that you're choosing to ignore what I told you about my limitations," Regina drawls as she remains flat and horizontal.

"Actually, you didn't mention anything about running. I thought about it all night, and you didn't say a damned thing specifically about it. So, since you didn't, I figured it was fair game and well, here we are."

"I don't enjoy running. Or jogging," Regina replies petulantly.

"When was the last time you actually did it?"

"During my physical therapy. It was…unpleasant."

"I bet, but I also bet that you didn't have a running partner like me."

"You're not actually making it sound more pleasant now."

"Perhaps not, but I am going to irritate you until you get up out of that bed, throw on these sweats
and come out with me. And you know what? Ten years away from Storybrooke may have changed a whole hell of a lot about both of us, Regina, but it hasn't changed how irritating I can be."

"So I've noticed. Fine. Leave."

"Are you getting up? And dressed?"

"Yes. But on one condition."

"Name it."

"You can't say a single word the whole time we're out…there."

"There's my Regina."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You're an asshole; I really did miss you," Emma chirps and then tosses the sweatpants that she'd been holding in her hands onto the bed. "See you downstairs," she says before turning and leaving the room, the door.

It occurs to Regina then that she hadn't actually extracted a promise.

*** ***

The jog around town – slow as it is - is incredibly painful, and Regina is not able to get very far before all of her muscles cramp up and she thinks that she's about to fall to her knees, but when she does start to falter, Emma doesn't point it out; she simply slows completely and offers Regina water from one of the bottles in her backpack and then like nothing is wrong in the world, talks to her about some of the physical changes around Storybrooke.

They do this strange little dance of theirs half a dozen times before they finally head back to the townhouse, and then Emma just grins at her on her way to the shower and says, "Your kid called while we were out."

*** ***

She phones Henry back while Emma's in the shower, and listens to him tell her – like this is completely normal for them to talk about these things - about his shift the previous night, and the date he'd be going on that evening.

When he notices that she's barely spoken at all, he stops his story about dropping spaghetti all over a famous politician and asks her if everything is all right and she chuckles and tells him that perhaps she's never been better.

Because Emma had been right; Henry is her one thing that is beyond regret for her.

*** ***

Her first week back in Storybrooke passes in a haze of conversations about the Home Office that she'd rather not have, painkillers that she'd rather not take and exhaustion that'd she just prefer not admit to.

Unfortunately - or fortunately for her, perhaps - Emma is dead-set on getting her moving as much as possible, and though she protests each time the sheriff insists on them going out for a run
together, she discovers that she does indeed find some degree of comfort in the companionship of the now daily - and sometimes twice a day - jogs.

Even if Emma rather obnoxiously refuses not to speak during them.

Thankfully, though. Emma doesn't dare to bring up the conversation from the night of the dinner with Snow and David.

Regina is infinitely glad of this because she's not sure how she could walk back the honesty of what she'd said, and though part of her doesn't want to do so anyway (she'd come to terms long ago with feeling as though she deserved what she'd gotten, and though her shrink had told her - while not understanding at all while she'd feel this way - that such thoughts weren't at all healthy, she'd clung to the realization as a form of penance). The reality is that so much bitter truth is frightening. It's one thing for Emma to be aware that her former enemy has changed, but it's quite another for the sheriff to be so very much aware of just how strongly Regina despises her own mere existence.

These are things best left unsaid.

Not that she doesn't catch a worried look from Emma – or Snow when she's over (and her former stepdaughter is always over these days) from time to time.

In any case, these things hardly matter because it's Friday, and Henry has just called from the gas station about fifty miles out of Storybrooke to say that he'll be home within the hour, and he'd sure love some lasagna.

She's not even sure she remembers how to make it anymore.

It might hurt to remember.

It does hurt.

She doesn't care.

*** ***

Snow and David come over for dinner, and it almost feels like what one would expect a family meal to be like. Henry and Emma and David are like hyper children throughout the whole meal, and it's utterly beautiful.

Regina wonders why she couldn't have had this year ten years ago.

She picks up the dishes from the table, and it feels so damned domestic to take them into Emma's kitchen and wash and rinse them next to Snow as the two of them watch the other three tease each other mercilessly.

"Emma told me you've been working out a little," Snow says.

"I've been joining her in the morning," Regina replies with a dismissive shrug. "Mostly she runs in place and I hobble. And she babbles about whatever cat she saved yesterday. I never realized what a talker she is."

"She's not always a talker," Snow chuckles. "But when she's running, well…suffice it to say, she's not my favorite partner." She frowns, looking almost perturbed. "Especially since she makes fun of my running style."
They share a laugh together, and then look at each other like they're wondering what this is; how can so many years of pain and anger just melt away because of a decade of absence and knowledge of torture?

And then she remembers something.

Something from ten years ago.

"You might take away some odd kind of relief from this, Your Majesty," the icy cold voice of the British woman says, her hand settling on Regina's cheek. "Or you might not because you realize how very close you came to not having to be here at all. Either way, it's interesting isn't it that the very people that you tried to destroy time and time again chose to try to save you from this fate that you so deserve. Snow White tried to save you. I find that...fascinating."

"Regina," she hears Snow say.

"Tell me, Regina, do you ever think about the lives you've ruined? The people you've destroyed all in the name of magic and power? Do you think about destroying Snow White's life? Ruining a child's hope and innocence? No? Not yet? Oh, but you will. I promise you that. Remorse is good for the soul, Regina, and you are going to feel so very much of it."

Everything dims out after that, darkness in the edges of her vision.

It's Snow who catches her when she goes down.

*** ***

She comes to slowly – barely – and keeps her eyes closed and just listens.

"You should have called me in sooner," he says. The man's accented voice is familiar – perhaps even terrifyingly so – but she can't quite place it yet.

"Why? She hasn't needed medical assistance until now," Emma retorts.

"Is my mom all right?" Henry demands. "She just went down...is she hurt?"

"No, I don't think so."

"What do you mean you don't think so?" David demands. "Whale..."

Oh, Regina thinks, Victor. For reasons she doesn't quite understand, this realization sends a spark of dread and fear through her body and mind.

"I mean it's hard to say how she is exactly. You haven't told me what's wrong with her, only that she passed out, but there's clearly more to this."

"Which is nothing that you need to know about," Emma replies.

"No? Our fallen Queen reappears after ten years away using a cane and looking frail and losing consciousness and that's nothing –"

"No," Snow answers shortly. "We just need to know how she is now."

"Why do you suddenly care? Shouldn't you be overjoyed that the -"

"Hey," Emma cuts in sharply.
"That's my mother," Henry reminds him, his words practically a snarl.

"Henry…"

"All right, all right. I got it. Relax, okay?"

"Just…answer the question, Whale," David presses.

"Fine," the doctor replies, and his voice causes something sharp in her brain spark up in a way that makes her stomach roll. "Regina's blood pressure is a bit high, and her heart-rate is accelerated, but her vitals are overall within acceptable ranges. I think that she's just exhausted and needs to rest."

"Are you sure?" Henry demands. "There's nothing else wrong?"

"I don't know. I can't tell you that from here. I'd recommend bringing her by the hospital and letting me run a full battery of tests. I'd know more then."

Yes, Regina thinks, he probably would. The thing is, she doesn't want Victor to know more about her; she doesn't want him to touch her ever again.

For whatever that means.

Apparently very little because a moment later, it all just fades away again.

*** ***

She dreams of a room that's far too bright, a metal table that's far too cold and a blonde woman with a chilling smile, and a perfect English accent.

"It would be so much easier for all of us - including you, Regina - if you'd just let go," the woman says. "This won't work - can't work - until you let go and allow yourself to just fade away."

Regina tries to tell their Queen that she has let go in every single way there is, but the words catch in her throat when the electricity fills her body again. It's cold and makes her feel like someone is forcing shards of ice into her skin.

One by one and as slowly as possible.

"It can all be over and you can finally rest, but you have to surrender," the woman tells her.

She doesn't know how else to surrender.

" Regina, why do you keep fighting, darling? You're just making it worse. Stop holding on and let go."

The switch gets thrown again and she screams.

*** ***

They're down in the kitchen sitting around the table, none of them saying a damned word (they haven't said much since Whale had left an hour before) when Regina starts screaming as though someone is murdering her.

They're all up the stairs in a flash, but Henry is far up in the front, his long legs going two steps at a time as he races to get to his mother.
He almost stops cold when he gets to his bedroom and looks inside. He almost completely freezes when he sees the way she is shaking and shuddering on the mattress, as though she's being…

As though she's being electrocuted, he thinks, as he sees the way her back arches up off the mattress and her mouth tears open to let out another terrible screeching scream. Her hands are in tight fists at her sides, and he realizes that it doesn't matter if she actually is being tortured right now because quite plainly, she believes in the dark depth of her mind that she is.

"Mom," he yells as he races over to her side. He puts his arms around her and starts to shake her, refusing to listen to the words of warning from behind him. Things like "be careful" and "maybe you shouldn't do that".

"Henry," Emma cautions, stepping behind him.

He doesn't hear her; he imagines she means well, and is trying to warn him because deep inside his psyche he knows that trying to pull someone out of such a violent nightmare can cause a physical reaction but he doesn't care. All he cares about is stopping this. All he cares about is protecting the mother that he's missed for so damn long, and refuses to lose again.

"Mom, wake up. Wake up!

Her closed fist flies out, then, and collides violently with his cheek, tossing him from the bed and onto the ground. It's that contact – as unexpected in her nightmare as it is in her reality – that pulls Regina from the dream.

She blinks and looks up, seeing the faces above her through the sheen of tears in her eyes. Her body aches and her muscles burn and there's an intense pain in the back of her skull, but all she sees is Henry as he rises up to look at her, the side of his face already blooming with a vibrant bruise.

"Henry," she gasps. She hears voices asking her if she's all right and what had been happening, but she blocks this all out and just looks at him. Her hand moves towards him almost on its own and she reaching for him.

He shakes his head, and she's almost certain that he's going to do what he's always done when she disappoints him. Turn and run away from her.

But then he steps forward and pulls his mother into his arms. "It's okay," he promises her, his lips pressing against her hair. "You're okay."

She shouldn't do this – he's her son and deserves better, but she folds into him so easily and her hands grip his shirt and his arms and she takes from him the strength that he so freely offers. "Henry," she says again and again.

"I'm here," he says, repeating the words until the rest of the world just fades away from the both of them, and it's just a son protecting his mother.

Until she calms against him.

He hears the door to the bedroom close quietly, and he feels the way Regina has sagged against his chest, exhaustion dragging her down again.

"I got you," he promises her. "And we are going to be okay. All of us."

TBC...
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Thanks as always for the many kind words.

Chapter warnings: Salty language, some emotional angst and discussion of torture inclusive of a few ugly details.

If you'd like to look me up on Tumblr, I can be found at SgtMac7

8.

STORYBROOKE, MAINE - JANUARY, 2023

She's more than a little surprised to find Regina already waiting for her in the kitchen when she comes down the stairs. "Hey, didn't expect to see you this morning," Emma notes, her tone cautious and careful as her fingers loop lazily behind her head as she ties her blonde hair into a messy ponytail. She pulls out a backpack from behind the table and fills it with two water bottles. There's a first aide kit in there as well. Just in case.

"Really? And why exactly is that?" Regina tosses back at her. It's not lost on Emma that the former queen is dressed in her high style running clothes (after the first day, she'd had Emma pick up ones more to her liking from the local athletics store). She's not smiling, and the look on her face is serious and closed off.

Like she doesn't want to even begin to discuss the events of the previous day. Either the passing out in the kitchen or the screaming fit later on.

Still, Emma can't quite stop herself from offering up a knowing smile as she says, "You had a pretty rough night. Even I would have understood if you had wanted to sleep in. I probably would have wanted to if it were me."

"Yes, well, you're not me are you, Miss Swan?" Regina snaps back, her dark eyes blazing with an icy defiance that seems both disturbingly familiar and deeply unsettling to Emma; while she'd wanted Regina to find her fight again, she hadn't meant that she'd wanted the former queen to start rebuilding the impenetrable walls that had kept her emotions and heart locked so far away from everyone who might have wanted to care for her.

"No, I'm not," Emma replies, her tone so very gentle and non-combative.

Which is clearly quite the opposite of what Regina actually wants right now. "What's that supposed to mean?" she challenges, her tone biting and harsh. "You don't think I can handle this? Oh, let me guess: you don't think I should be doing this because I had a silly nightmare. Weren't you the one who just a few days ago was bullying me into being your running partner?"

"Just so you know, I think you're having an entire conversation without me," Emma chuckles. "But all I was doing with agreeing you. That's all."

"Bullshit," Regina replies, stepping close to Emma, and this is also familiar to the sheriff. This was
a tactic that the once mayor had used to try to intimidate others into backing down or away. It doesn't quite match the woman standing in front of Emma now, but damned if Regina isn't trying.

Trying to fall back into old safe habits.

It must have been one hell of a nightmare, Emma thinks.

Or perhaps, it was waking up and realizing that she'd shattered apart in her twenty-two year old son's arms that had shaken Regina up this badly. Either way, she is now quite clearly trying to shield herself from fear, humiliation and shame, but she's not nearly as good at it as she used to be, and Emma is just patiently watching her with eyes full of understanding and sympathy, and goddamn it if all of that doesn't piss Regina off just a little bit more.

"You think I'm weak," Regina hisses. "You think because I'm on painkillers and have to use a cane to walk that I'm soft now. Isn't that right?"

"No," Emma shrugs. "I don't think you're weak at all. In fact, Regina, I think you're still probably the strongest person that I've ever known. But you're also still the proudest, and sometimes – even ten years later – that pride hurts you more than it helps you because you don't have to be. Especially not with me" She meets Regina's eyes, and then adds a soft smile that's completely free of judgment. "The only thing I want from you is for you to forgive yourself and let yourself be happy. Nothing else really matters."

Regina looks away from Emma for a brief moment, a bit of red flares around her neck and cheeks as she fights back on whatever embarrassment she's currently feeling. Finally, she mutters. "Let's just run, Sheriff. Quietly."

"If I say 'okay', will that bring on Evil Queen mode again?" Emma jokes.

Regina's eyes snap up to her, hard and furious and almost violently frightened. "Don't ever say that again," she orders, a tremor in her voice.

"I'm sorry," Emma replies, palms out to show sincerity. "I didn't think."

To her surprise, that brings on a small smile from Regina. "No, you never do," she says almost affectionately, and then she turns and heads for the door, her movements these days completely lacking the grace which had once been such a crucial part of her. Emma watches for a long moment, and then sighs.

Because it occurs to her that Regina making life interesting feels normal.

*** ***

"Henry," Snow says with a large smile as she opens the front door to the loft. She's surprised to see him here so early. It's not even eight yet, and it's still pretty cold out as is evidenced by the bright red blotches on her grandson's cheeks. He's bouncing on his feet, as if anxious and agitated, and immediately alarm bells start going off in her head. Because she has a pretty good idea what he's here about. And what she is supposed to do.

What she has to do.

"Hey, Gram," he replies, his hands in the pocket of his dark peacoat. "I figured I'd drop by and see what you guys were having for breakfast."

"Neither one of your mothers wanted to cook this morning?"
"They were both gone when I woke up this morning," he answers shortly.

"Well, we haven't started cooking yet," Snow tells him, "But you're more than welcome to join us. You know that." She steps out of the way so that he can enter the loft. His steps are slow, cautious, like he's deep in thought.

"Thanks," he says as he shuffles his way over towards the breakfast table. David is sitting there already, his holster strapped over his chest like he plans to go into the station shortly. "You have any idea where they went?"

"I'm sure they just went out for a run," David tells him with that calm easy smile that seems to just live on his face. "I know that they've been doing that almost every morning for the last week or so. Emma thinks getting her moving again will help Regina's flexibility. That's probably where they are."

Henry nods his head slowly, thoughtfully. Then: "She woke up screaming last night," he reminds them. "And she looked like someone was trying to...you know I have no idea what was happening to her because even though my family is full of fairytale characters, I've lived a pretty good and safe life, and I've been pretty damned protected so I have no clue what was happening to her, but I know she was remembering someone hurting her."

"You know that she was...wounded," Snow says carefully.

"I do," he admits. "I see the cane that she has to use to get from room to room without pain and I see my medicine cabinet being full of different kinds of pills." He laughs humorlessly. "When I was younger, she would never let me see what she was taking even if it was aspirin. Because I wasn't supposed to know that she might have been hurting in any way, but now she has so many different things going on, she doesn't even try to hide it."

"Henry…"

"Look, I know this is the part where you and Gramps tell me everything is going to be okay because we have family and we'll all get through this together, but you know what? I didn't come over here to get patted on the back and given a pep talk. I came over here because I am sick to death of being lied to by everyone. I want to know the truth about what happened."

"It's not my truth to tell," Snow replies, her eyes flickering over towards David. He's put his newspaper down, and his arms are across his chest.

"Ma said the same thing. She said that it was mom's story to tell. But we all know she will never tell me. She'll hit me – "he gestures to the dark bruise on his cheekbone – "and she'll cry in my arms, but she won't be honest."

"Are you upset that she hit you?" Snow asks, her head cocked to the side.

"No," he replies. "Because at least it was a real reaction instead of all this bullshit where she tries to smile at me and pretend she's just fine."

"Maybe after all that she's been through, maybe that's what she needs to believe," David states. "Have you considered that? You mean the world to her, Henry, and the very last thing that Regina wants is for you to have to take care of her. She doesn't want you to look at her like she's broken."

"She is broken," he insists, his hands balling into fists.

"No," Snow replies immediately, more adamantly than she would have thought humanly possible.
"As the one person in this whole family who has known Regina the longest, I know what broken looks like, and believe it or not, Henry, this isn't it. She may not realize it, but she's still fighting, and her wanting to protect you from the truth? That's her best way of doing it."

"But I don't need it, anymore. I can be the strong one for her. I can protect her now," he says, his eyes full of emotion. "But not if I don't know."

"I'm sorry," Snow says. "But I won't."

Henry shakes his head. "I don't get it. When it was important not to say anything, you did and her fiancé died, and now when you should say something that I can help my mother get better, you won't."

"Henry," David says sharply, his blue eyes ferocious. "Not okay."

There's a moment when Henry looks from his grandmother to his grandfather, and he sees the anger in David's eyes and the hurt in Snow's and then everything sags away from him. "I didn't mean that," he whispers. "I… I'm sorry, too. I just… I want to do something right now. I need to do something to make this okay for her. I need to do something to make that look she had in her eyes last night go away." He runs his fingers through his hair, his face suddenly becoming years younger and older simultaneously.

"I know," Snow says, reaching out to touch his forearm. "But that's where you have to trust Emma. She knows what Regina went through, and she's there for her. And even now, she knows how to get Regina talking."

Henry's head snaps up. "How does she know?"

"Excuse me?"

"How do my ma knows what my mom went through?"

"She told us some of what happened," Snow replies, but unfortunately for her, she's a terrible liar and there's a slight tick to her cheek that the son of a bounty hunter and a queen doesn't fail to see. That she hadn't completely lied is irrelevant; Henry can tell that there's so much more to this story.

"Right," Henry nods and then he smiles. "Then my mom will handle it."

It's too damned easy, and both Snow and David know it.

"Henry," David tries again.

"It's cool. I'm really hungry, though so maybe some bacon and eggs?" He smiles up at Snow when he says this, his most impish grin on his lips.

And she knows that absolutely no good will come of this.

She figures that once Henry leaves, she'll call Emma and give her a heads up. And she'll try to reassure Regina that for once, she hadn't said anything.

The problem is: she's afraid that she actually has.

*** ***

They get all the way down to the docks before Regina's injured leg cramps up badly, and before she can stop herself – or Emma can catch her - she collapses to the wood planks, her hand settled
over the offending muscle.

"Can I help?" Emma asks, standing just a few inches away from her, a hand still outstretched as if try and help Regina stay on her feet.

"No," Regina replies shortly. "It's just a simple cramp, and well, suffice it to say, I've gotten pretty good at dealing with these over the last few years."

"Okay." Emma takes a final step towards Regina and then kneels down next to her, her hands settled atop her cotton-covered knees, earning a curious look from the older woman. "Just in case anyone wanders by," she explains.

"Because the two of us sitting on the ground won't look strange?" Regina queries, looking up at Emma with an expression of bland disbelief.

"We're who we are and instead of arguing with each other or trying to defeat each other, we're out on a morning run together," Emma replies with a far too amused smirk. "That's already strange as it. I figured maybe you could do without anyone rubbernecking you, though, yeah?" She'd almost called them by their given labels – Savior and Evil Queen – but Regina's strong reaction to being called that before had stilled her tongue.

"Indeed," Regina sighs, grimacing as she continues to gently rub out the cramped muscle. She gratefully accepts a plastic bottle of spring water from Emma and downs several gulps from it before handing it back to the sheriff.

"So," Emma says after a few moments of just watching the deep knuckling patterns Regina is utilizing to rub out the cramp "I think we should talk."

"Aren't we?"

"About Henry."

Immediately, Regina tenses up. It's a familiar reaction, and though Emma continues to be thankful about seeing signs of the old Regina, the doubt, fear and suspicion are things she could do without. "What about him?"

"You know he's going to want more than ever to know what happened."

"I do, and more than ever now, I'd think you would understand why he can't know," Regina replies. "It's already bad enough that I struck my son while he was trying to comfort me," her face contorts in an expression of brutal remorse and self-loathing when she says this before she continues on with, "But I refuse to allow him to have the same visuals in his mind that you now have in yours." She meets Emma's eyes, daring her to refute her words.

"So you know."

"Depends on what you think I know, dear."

Emma chuckles. "You know that I know…some of what happened to you."

"From what I told you or from what you found out from my files which you illegally obtained," Regina asks, lifting up an eyebrow in accusation.

"Truthfully?"
"Always preferable. And yes, I'm aware of how ironic that is coming from me," Regina replies, smiling in a way that is coldly self-depreciating.

Emma sighs. "You're right; I did get your files illegally. Well, kind of. Your police record was shareable between agencies once the right paperwork was sent over, and even though Storybrooke doesn't exist on a map, my credentials actually do thanks to the few months we were visible to the world. All I had to do was ask the right person who wouldn't ask the wrong questions about why I'd want information on a seven year old cold case that had apparently stumped everyone who had touched it or even looked at it."

"What other file did you get?"

"Your medical one. That one, well that one I called in some favors on."

"Illegal favors," Regina reminds her, just to be petty because honestly at this point, legalities between the two of them are just useless words. She's a woman who burned entire villages to the ground, and though Emma doesn't have blood on her hands, she's hardly lived a life between the narrow lines.

"Yes."

"What about my psychiatric one? Did you call in favors there, too?"

"No. And I didn't even request it. After I found out about the memory loss, I asked for the files so that I could find out what done to you in order to help you, but I think we all learned our lesson awhile ago about you and shrinks."

"Said as righteously and as delicately as ever," Regina replies. "And I would argue, Sheriff, that the bridge of ethical morality that you are attempting to stand on is questionable at best. You illegally gathered information on my past that I might not have wanted you to see. Information I haven't seen."

"I was about to ask you about that, but I guess I should apologize first."

"For invading my privacy?" Regina asks with a lift of an eyebrow.

"Yes."

"Don't bother," Regina says with a wave of her free hand. "It's oddly endearing and rather nice to know someone cares enough to do so."

"Wow."

"Yes, I know; everyone thinks that what happened to me broke me, and it did, but apparently it also made me something of a simpering fool who is even willing to put up with your babble and half-assed good intentions."

"I think that was something of a compliment. Maybe."

"Close enough," Regina chuckles. She reaches out to the metal rail, and with a gentle hand under her elbow from Emma, pulls herself back up to her feet. Absent her cane, the walk back to the townhouse will be slow, but she'd be lying if she were to say that she doesn't welcome the crisp air in her lungs.

Because she can still remember the stale air of her dark little jail cell.
"So," Emma starts again. "You never saw your own police file?"

"Nor my medical one. At the point when I woke up, all I knew was that I'd been hurt badly; the marks were still all over my face and body. When I finally started remembering who I was and what I'd been through, the very last thing I wanted to see were the clinical explanations for everything that had been done to me. Somehow the term 'deep laceration' when used to explain numerous whip marks is both insufficient and far too much."

"There were pictures," Emma says quietly. "Color pictures."

Regina's head shoots up, her dark eyes wide. "Did you look at them?"

"No. The words were like you said…far too much. And more than enough. I think actually seeing the damage done would have been…"

"Believe me, I know. And thank you." She leans towards the railing and stares out at the choppy ocean water. "As a Queen, I led my troops into battle on numerous occasions, and I suffered more than a few injuries along the way, but even though healing was never an art I was well versed in, I was always able to magic my wounds away with a wave of my hand."

"How does that work? Self-healing?"

"I take it you haven't stayed current with your own magical studies?"

"I wasn't going to let Gold teach me, and well, things have been quiet."

"Until I returned," Regina sighs. "In answer to your question, self healing is essentially moving energy around. You heal a cut and have a stomach ache."

"So when they say all magic comes with a price…"

"They mean it."

"But you still can't feel anything?"

Regina wiggles her fingers. "Not yet."

"And if you could, could you heal your leg? Or any of your injuries?"

"I don't know. Perhaps a bit, but not completely. Some of my injuries are just too deep, and the price would be significant and likely a poor trade-off."

"What about the scars? Would you remove those?"

Regina shrugs her shoulders as her eyes catch on a buoy that's bouncing around in the middle of the water. "Before what happened…happened, I had quite a bit of money stored away in accounts that I had created early on in the curse as an escape hatch for myself, and those accounts allowed me to buy the condo, and live comfortably, but after awhile, I got bored. It's the same reason I started doing actual Mayoral things in Storybrooke."

"Okay," Emma say quietly once Regina falls silent. She waits then, because though she can't for the life of her figure out where Regina is going with this little story of hers, she has a feeling that it is leading to something that will likely leave her breathless and feeling like she's been gut-punched.

"About two years after I escaped – was released, whatever we end up finding out - I decided to open up a little high-end accounting business in Bangor. I've always been exceptionally good with
numbers, and it seemed like an easy way to waste time and keep myself busy. Sometimes the job took me to other places to meet with new and old clients. That's why I was in Boston when I saw Henry. Anyway, during one of my very first trips out of the city, I was staying at a really nice hotel. I remember coming out of a lovely hot shower, and I happened to catch my reflection in the mirror." She suddenly drops her head down and looks at her palms, her right hand reaching out to draw thoughtful lines across the soft supple flesh of the left.

"Regina?"

"I didn't have any mirrors in my own condo," Regina explains, not looking up. "Nothing besides a pocket mirror to help me put makeup on. I had forgotten what my back looked like. I'd forgotten the scars." Her voice is just barely more than a shuddering whisper, and she's practically trembling.

"But scars get better," Emma says quietly, experiencing speaking for her.

"Do they? I'm not sure the change in color from bright red to dull white makes them better because every time I see them, even though I can't remember my first Christmas with Henry, I can vividly recall the very first time that my captors strapped me to a wall with chains. I can still hear her reminding me that I'd done this to many of my own subjects, and hadn't I ever wondered what it felt like to be on this side of things. And you know what? I hadn't." She shoves her hands into her pockets. "Now I know. So in answer to your question about if I'd use magic to remove my own scars, the answer is no because I don't have the right to remove them."

Emma bites her lip to stop herself from responding with anything that might sound like pity; she'd already known about the whip marks, of course. Both the medical and police files had been repeated reference to the generous new and old scarring that had – and apparently still does – littered the queen's far too frail body. There'd been one in particular that had chilled her to the bone. Something about a mark across one of Regina's breast.

"Regina," she says, deciding to ask about what that particular thought evokes in her mind. "You're aware that when you were found, you were wandering through the middle of a busy street buck ass naked, right?"

"I was told about how I was found, of course. If you're going to ask if it meant anything to me, well then the answer is yes. And also no. I don't remember past what I already told you and your parents about my escape, but that I emerged nude isn't surprising to me. Nor is the fact that I was found without any hair. For all of the unthinkably cruel things that they did to me to make me bleed, some of the very worst of things were done to me without so much as a drop of blood falling. They touched me liberally and unapologetically, routinely left me tied naked to stretchers so that I could be leered at by dirty men, and they shaved all of my hair off every single time it returned to it previous length. These were all efforts to humiliate and dehumanize me. Both were things I'd done to others as the Evil Queen."

"That doesn't make what happened to you all right."

"An eye for an eye."

"But you said you didn't know who their Queen was. What makes you think that you owed her this eye?"

"The funny thing is I'm fairly certain that I don't personally owe her. She knew of me and of the many horrific things that I'd done as the Evil Queen, but I don't think that I was the one that caused her hatred of magic."
"Which means that even if – and I don't believe it – this was justified for what you did to people while you were the Queen, she wasn't the one who had a right to do to you what was done. She had no right to vengeance."

"Which was likely irrelevant to her," Regina shrugs. "Besides, I never got the impression that she was in this for personal vengeance. She wanted to break me because of who I was, but she also wanted something else from me."

"And now they're back."

"Indeed."

"Which brings us back to Henry."

"And my answer hasn't changed. Just because you know doesn't mean he ever can. I don't know how I could look him in the eye if he knew the truth."

"About your scars?"

"About one in particular. How much detail was in my medical file?"

Emma thinks for a moment, running over the details in her mind anew. "I presume you're talking about the one that was mentioned as being on the underside of your left forearm? The one that looked like the letters –"

"H and E. And you never looked at the pictures?"

"No," Emma says again, frowning as she again confirms her previous words.

"Right. Well then, I suppose you get to hear this from me, and maybe once you have, you'll understand. Not all of my scars were inflicted upon me by the Home Office goons. One, I carved into myself with a shard of glass that I'd found on the floor of the lab after one of my…sessions." She rolls up the sleeve of her sweatshirt – and it occurs to Emma then that she hasn't seen Regina not wearing sleeves since the woman had come back into her life – and then turns her left arm over so as to reveal the soft flesh there.

Flesh, which has been cut into it.

Flesh, which has the letters H and E carved jaggedly into it.

"That's as far as I was able to get before they saw what I was doing. You'd think they would have loved the idea of me hurting myself, but she was actually furious with me." Regina runs the tip of her finger over the H.

"Why were you carving Henry's name into your arm?"

"Because I was starting to forget him. By the time I was, my mind was starting to scramble badly. I'd been put through dozens if not far more than that of electroshock treatments, and there were days that they could have told me that I was Snow White or Little Red Riding Hood and I would have believed them without question. Henry was my anchor. He was there, Emma, for every single torture session." She shakes her head in disgust. "How horrible is that? I needed my son to make me strong enough to endure torture. I made him witness it so that I didn't have to be alone."

Emma stares at Regina for a long moment, trying to figure out how to deal with guilt brought on by fake Henry having witnessed something real Henry hadn't. She takes in the flexing of the former
queen's jaw, the way she's gazing out at the water, and how her hands are moving within her pockets.

"Regina, holding on to what is good and pure and safe in your life when you need it the very most doesn't make you a bad person," Emma finally says, desperately wanting to put her hand out so to steady Regina, but choosing not to as she somehow understands that Regina is far too lost in her own broken past right now to be appreciative of such physical contact.

"No," Regina agrees. "Everything else that I've done makes me that."

"Do you really believe that you deserve what happened to you in there?"

"Yes," Regina says simply. "I do."

"Because of what you did as the Queen?"

"Because I was the Queen, Emma. And even if you can look at me and say that you didn't know that woman, you know that my very last action in Storybrooke before Greg and Tamara abducted me was to obtain a magical trigger that would murder everyone in this town. Including you, my dear."

"But then you told Hook how to disarm it."

"Coming to my senses after five rounds of electrocution doesn't absolve me of the crime. Or of the deaths that followed my disappearance." She meets Emma's eyes when she says this. "Because of me, Henry lost his father."

"A man he barely knew. I mourn what they might have one day been to each other, but they weren't that yet. What he lost with you meant far more to him than losing Neal did," Emma reminds her. "But either way, Neal went out saving my life, and you're not to blame for what the Home Office did."

"Really? I'm not?"

"No, you're not. They may have used Greg's vendetta against you –"

"I vendetta I created."

"You did," Emma agrees. "But that doesn't justify what he did. As for the Home Office, well they used Greg to find a way into Storybrooke. From the moment that I broke your curse, they were looking for us. They were always eventually going to find this town, and for whatever reason, they always wanted to destroy everyone inside of it. That's on them and not you."

"You're incredibly magnanimous, Emma, but tell me, what would you have done if I hadn't been abducted. If you had come across me with the trigger in hand and I'd been seconds away from killing everyone, what then?"

"I would have tried to talk you down."

"We weren't talking very well back then," Regina reminds her. "You likely would have failed, and everyone would have ended up dead."

"You never know; I've always had a way with you," Emma replies.

"You continue to think entirely too highly of yourself," Regina retorts, but she's smiling just a bit,
looking almost fond of the presumptuous sheriff.

"Yeah, probably. In any case, that we weren't communicating very well back then, well that's on both of us. But the past – that part, anyway – is the past and it should stay there. For better or for worse, I've chosen to let it go and move on. So has Henry, and so have my parents. Now it's your turn."

"Oh, but I have," Regina says softly. "The only thing I haven't let go of is the blood on my hands. Every time I look down, I see it. I owe that much."

"And where has owing gotten you? You could have come back home to us years ago. You could have returned to our son before his first kiss."

Regina doesn't answer that, can't possibly begin to answer it.

And then before Emma can push her to, the sheriff's cell rings. She gives Regina a "saved by the bell" kind of look and then pulls her phone out. A quick glances shows that it's her mother calling. "Hey," she says as she answers it and presses the phone up against her ear. "What's up?"

"It's Henry," Snow says, and she sounds worried enough to put Emma on edge. Worried enough to tell her that this is something she should probably pay attention. "He came over to the loft this morning demanding answers."

"And I assume you didn't give him any?" Emma queries, glancing over at Regina who is now starring at her with her dark brows knit together in worry. It makes the former queen look so much older, so much more frail.

"Of course not," Snow replies immediately, almost urgently. "But I think he may have derived from what I tried not to say that you might know more than I do, and that you might have come upon that information…"

"Illegally?" Emma offers up.

"Something like that. Either way, Henry might be looking for something that Regina would probably prefer he didn't see."

"Gotcha. Thanks, Mom," Emma says.

"Of course. Emma, how is she?"

Emma glances back over at Regina, then asks with a grin, "How are you?"

Regina laughs because it's so uniquely an Emma Swan kind of move. "Tell your mother that I'm fine. It takes more than a nightmare to take me down."

"You hear that?" Emma asks into the phone.

"I did. If it's all right with the two of you, we'll be by this evening for dinner; I figure maybe we can try doing one tonight with a little less excitement."

"Sounds good. And hey, thanks for the heads up."

"Tell her I didn't say anything. I swear I didn't."

"Don't worry; we know," Emma says kindly. "Bye." She hangs up the phone, pockets it and then turns to Regina and sighs. "Our kid is a little shit."
"You're going to need to elaborate," Regina replies dryly.

"Of course," Emma nods. "Our kid is a smart little shit who doesn't listen to directions or really anything at all and doesn't know how to leave well enough alone. I'm pretty sure he takes after both of us in that regard."

"Meaning what?" Regina asks, dread sweeping through her.

"Meaning he went over to see my mother, and though she didn't tell him anything, he may have put together how I found out some things because he's helped me out with a few data gathering jobs in the past. He knows what kind of information I have the ability to get my hands on."

Regina reacts immediately, her eyes widening and the color running from her cheeks as she stammers out, "He knows about the files?"

"No, but I think he suspects that something exists, though. We should probably get back to the house and try to stop him in his tracks. Right now, he doesn't know what he's looking for so I think we have time, but well…"

"He's a smart little shit," Regina repeats to herself under her breath.

Emma can't help but laugh. Because even though this could end up being a very ugly situation, it'll never fail to be funny to hear Regina curse.

Of course, her mirth earns a sharp look of reproach.

"Sorry," she mutters. "You think you're ready for the trip back?" She glances down at the leg that Regina is still absently rubbing at.

"Yes, I think so, but we'll need to move slowly," Regina says, even though she wants to run as fast as she possibly can to ensure that Henry doesn't have a chance to see the information.

"Yeah, sure. You know maybe magic can't help your leg, but perhaps Whale can? In many ways he's better than some of the doctors on the outside."

"No," Regina says shortly. "Not Victor."

"Is this about your old world issues with him?"

"It's about knowing that I don't want him touching me. Never again," she says cryptically, and then a strange look of confusion crosses her face for a moment before she shakes it off and asks, "Where are they? The files?" As she says this, she takes a step forward as if to move back towards the pier that will return them to the house. Emma's arm slides around her waist just before she stumbles, and she allows the contact because she knows in that moment that she's too sore and scared to be as strong as she needs to.

"On my laptop in my office back at the townhouse."

"Would he check there first?"

"I have it password locked so he's more likely to check my desk drawers, and anything else that requires minimal effort. He knows how to hack –"

"A vital skill all young men should know," Regina snorts derisively.

Emma chuckles. "It has its uses believe it or not."
"We'll let's hope it doesn't have one this afternoon."

The two women exchange a look, and Emma sees the absolute terror on Regina's face, the fear that their son could be just seconds away from discovering the dark secrets that Regina herself hasn't yet fully confronted.

So Emma moves faster.

Unfortunately for everyone, they're still too late.

To Be Continued...
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Discussion of torture, extreme violence (at the very end of the chapter), some language and some tears.

9.

STORYBROOKE, MAINE - JANUARY, 2023

Regina is in agony as they reach Emma's townhouse, her bad leg and hip screaming at her that she has to stop moving right now because her body simply can't endure this kind of constant high impact activity. While she and the sheriff had left the docks moving slowly but steadily, they had both rapidly increased their pace until it had become a near full steam ahead run, and now Regina is paying the price of this sense of urgency.

She doesn't care, though, because the price of not getting to Henry in time to stop him from seeing and reading things that he doesn't need to is far higher than the one she will pay because -

There's a horrible crashing sound that echoes through the townhouse just about half of a second after Emma and Regina tear through the front door; it sounds like something has been thrown and immediately, the two women know that their twenty-two year old son is somehow involved in this.

Which means –

*Oh, God no.*

*Please, no.*

Moving together, they tear through the kitchen and down the hall to where Emma's office is, and then they just both stop in the open doorway and stare almost stupidly ahead because the room looks like some kind of bomb has gone off in it. Every cabinet has been yanked out and has been left hanging that way, and there are papers scattered in every which direction.

And then there's Henry.

He's standing in the middle of the room, his head down as he stares at the shattered remains of Emma's laptop (she only allows herself a few seconds of anger over this because there are bigger issues right now). His shoulders are shaking and he's breathing rapidly and harshly, like he can't quite figure out how to pull oxygen into his burning lungs. His hands are clenching and unclenching rapidly, his blunt fingernails digging into the flesh of his palms.

"Henry," Emma says first, her voice low as she tries to be calm and steady.

Because right now, someone has to be.

Henry simply shakes his head, but he doesn't look up. His eyes never leave the laptop, and though it's powered down now – perhaps forever, Emma groused to herself before again shaking the thoughts away – it's like he can still see whatever it was that was on the screen. It's like he's still.
staring right at whatever awful image had caused him to have such a violent and terrible reaction. Emma has a few guesses, and none of them are very good.

"What did you do?" Regina whispers, and that's when Emma notices that the former queen's suddenly ferociously dark eyes are on the laptop, too.

Like she, too, knows.

"I just wanted to know the truth," Henry finally mumbles out, and he sounds so very strange and distant, like he's not quite in this moment of reality with his two mothers. He shakes his head again and Emma gets the feeling that he's trying to find a way to un-see something he shouldn't have seen at all.

But it's that old line about a rung bell and if what has happened is what they all believe has happened, well then there's no un-ringing this one.

If Henry has seen the files, then they'll have to find a way to deal with this.

Emma tries again, tries to get to the truth. "Henry, tell me you didn't –"

His head shoots up and he looks at Emma with his eyes full of unshed tears that seem to be weighing down his eyelashes. "Tell you I didn't go through your laptop? But we both know that I did." He gestures wildly around the office. "I checked everywhere else first, but I knew where it was. Because they wouldn't have mailed you the files. They couldn't have, right? Nothing has gotten in or out of this town besides mom in ten years. And I knew you wouldn't have printed them out because you didn't want me to see them."

"Henry," Emma says, as she glances quickly over at Regina and sees the horrified realization that is dawning on the former queen's face as she understands just how much he' seen, and how much it's affected him.

He gestures at the broken computer. "I didn't want to see them, either."

"Then why did you look?" Regina demands, stepping towards him. She winces for a brief moment as her hip protests the sharp movement, but then she's up in his face, a hand on each of his cheeks in a way that is half tender and half intense. Her fingers are pressing hard into his pale skin, and it's like she's trying to ground herself before all of this just sweeps her away again.

"You were hurting," he says weakly, his eyes locking with her as tears trickle out. "I didn't want to see it, but I had to because you needed me."

"Oh, Henry. Not like this, my sweet little prince," Regina whispers. She suddenly looks so much older – and she already looks her biological age in a way that Emma is still not terribly comfortable with – than she is.

And so very tired and scared.

"You needed me," he says again, and then closes his eyes tight like he's trying to find a way to force the visuals behind his eyelids to just go away.

"Henry, what did you see?" Emma asks, and she sees Regina flinch because that's the very last question that she had wanted Emma to ask their son.

It's necessary, of course, because no one can be helped not without the truth, but perhaps Regina had been hoping that they could just ignore the debris scattered everywhere around the office.
Maybe she had been hoping that they could just not talk about it, and she could find a way to pretend that Henry doesn't know the truth.

But that's not how this is going to play out, Emma thinks, because Henry is wide-eyed, and he looks haunted in a way that no twenty-two year old boy should ever look, and if Regina wasn't so damned terrified herself right now, she'd realize that they've crossed the point of no return with hiding what's happened to her away. Henry knows something, and it's time to talk.

Though it curdles her stomach, Emma suddenly wishes that she had looked at the pictures – not because she had ever wanted to see the actual physical damage done to the former queen – but so at least she could understand.

So at least she could understand the images flashing through his mind now.

But she can't and so she waits for him.

And waits.

Until he looks up at Regina and swallows hard like he has a rock in his throat before asking in a broken voice, "Do you still have them all on your back?"

"Henry," she gasps out, and it's a desperate plea for him to stop. Now she's the one who is clenching her hands, like she's trying to fight for strength.

"And on your arms? Are there still burn marks on your legs, mom? What about on the soles of your feet? Have those healed yet?" His face contorts into something awful because he's clearly seeing everything all over again.

And so is Regina judging by devastated look on her suddenly far too pale face. She doesn't look angry. No, she looks heartbroken, like she thinks that the truth will take away everything that coming back home returned to her.

"Kid," Emma pleads because she quite suddenly wants to try to stop this conversation from happening almost as badly as Regina does. She wants to halt it this vicious discussion in its terrible and sure to be bloody and soul crushing tracks before both mother and son come completely apart.

He looks over at Emma, and his eyes are more green than she's ever seen them before and he's just staring at her like he's begging her to make everything he's seen just go away. Like he wants her to have somehow made him listen to her. That's not possible, though, and he finally looks back over towards the woman who had raised, loved and protected him for the first ten almost eleven years of his life. "Momma," he says softly, and he's addressing Regina in such a soft and pained voice that it physically hurts.

"Please. Please, I can't do this," Regina says, and it's unclear what she's referring to, but she's almost trembling now, and her usually dark but somehow still bright eyes have completely fogged over. They look dull and unfocused and she's swaying on her feet almost like she's drunk on something. Down by her side, her left hand scratches absently at the right.

And Emma suddenly remembers a quick fleeting notation in the medical intake file about how Regina's hands had both been cut dozens and dozens of times. Small little cuts no deeper than the kind that would be made by an accidental nick from a kitchen knife. Just deep enough to sting and ache.

She wonders if there are still scars there, too.
"I don't understand," Henry says, nearly shaking with anger and so many other emotions that he can't put into words. His eyes are completely back on Regina now as he says, "Who does something like this to a person?"

"I'm not a person," Regina tells him dully. "I'm the Evil Queen."

It's not the answer he'd been expecting. Perhaps he'd been thinking he would get something about bad people who do bad thing. Instead, he gets his first real look at the bottomless pit of self-loathing within his mother.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Henry snaps back at her, his lips curling into a furious sneer. The angry look isn't directed at her, but rather at her comment. "Is who you were five decades ago supposed to justify what they did to you?" Tears leak down his face in watery streams and he wipes angrily at them. "Is what you were supposed to make that they…that they…" he stops suddenly and turns away from his mother, his fist going to his mouth to keep him from saying words that he can't pull back.

"Henry," Regina tries again.

"Stop saying my name! Stop trying to placate me like I'm an idiot child."

She looks at him with wide hurt eyes, like she can't understand why he's so angry with her, like she can't possibly figure out what she's done this time to bring on his rage at her. "I'm sorry," she says as starts to step away, her head lowered in a way that neither Emma nor Henry has ever seen before.

Before she can get even an inch away from him, Henry steps in her way. "Mom, no. Don't you get it? You're not the Evil Queen to me; you're my mother. That's the only title that means anything to me. I don't care who you were once upon a time; I only care that they hurt you," Henry tells her.

"You weren't supposed to know about any of that," she says because there's nothing else she can say to explain to him why the Home Office had hurt her as badly as they had; even believing that through her own evil actions she has brought on all of the punishment that she has received in life, she doesn't understand why they didn't just kill her and be done with it.

She doesn't understand why they broke her and then did it over and over again. Like it was all just some kind of game instead of true punishment.

But whether they had intended it to be or not, it had been punishment, and she can suddenly feel the scars on the bottoms of both of her feet, thicker on the left one. They'd used dollar store lighters to burn her, foregoing expensive technology in order to cause her an excruciating amount of pain.

That unwanted memory had returned to her one frigid January evening a few years ago when she'd been trying to start a fire for herself in order to help keep her too think body warm during a cold snap. Ever since that night, the sight of flames of any kind has caused panic to surge within her.

"But I do know," Henry explodes again, his face bright red. "I do." He takes a step towards his mother, then, his hand reached out to her as if he wants to try to touch her and make this better, but for whatever reason – perhaps it's the almost pitying look in his eyes, the way he seems to see a victim now – she pulls back and away from him before he can make contact with her.

"Okay, we need to step back," Emma interjects almost immediately. Her eyes are on Henry, and she sees the stricken look on his face. A look towards Regina shows something almost skittish about her – something that Emma knows she wants to steer Henry well clear off. "And take a deep
breath." She looks at Henry. "Go get some air, kid. Nothing good will come out of trying to have this discussion when you're both as upset as you are."

But Henry's not listening, not hearing a word she's saying. Instead, he's trying to figure out why his mother is suddenly pulling away from him after having spent the previous night clinging to him. "Did I do something wrong?" he asks, again approaching Regina. "Do you hate me because I know what happened?" he sounds so young and devastatingly innocent.

"It's impossible to hate you," Regina tells him. What she doesn't say to him is clear, though; that she hates herself instead is written in bold across her face. "You are the only reason that I'm alive today," she whispers out.

He shakes his head like he doesn't understand, and Emma knows that she really does need to stop this because Regina is crumbling and her ability to keep the secrets inside of her isn't near as strong as it once was.

Emma knows that Regina doesn't want their son knowing about how she'd created a mental companion of Henry to hold her through her nightmare, but if this goes on much longer, he will know, and then God only knows what will happen once Henry realizes that the mother that he'd always felt like he'd let down had never stopped believing in his ability to make her strong. That's too much weight for a kid – even a twenty-two year old one.

"Okay, enough," Emma states, her voice firm. She puts a hand lightly on Henry's shoulder. "Go take a walk, kid. I'm going to clean up, and Regina is going to go lie down –" her eyes flicker over to see if Regina is about to protest, but the former queen is just gazing at the wall, her eyes glassy with physical and emotional pain that Emma can't even guess at – "And we will try to deal with all of this later. When we have all calmed down a little bit."

"Fine," Henry replies, his hands jamming roughly into his pockets. He looks back over at Regina and his green eyes seem to sweep over her – like he's recalling what he'd seen in those horrible color pictures in her medical file.

"And then later," Emma continues, her tone a little bit harder and her eyes a bit more intense as she stares him down.

"Maybe the two of us can talk about respecting someone's privacy. And don't even start on the bullshit about reminding me what I do for a living. You know that this is different."

He blinks slowly, and she sees tears there because yeah, he does know.

And he probably wishes he hadn't looked as much as they wish it.

But he had and now both mother and son are fighting for solid ground.

"Go," Emma prompts gently.

He nods and starts for the door of the office, but before he can get too far away, Regina – who'd seemed to have completely drifted away for a few moments, disappearing into the torments of her own mind – reaches out for him and wraps a small hand around his wrist. "I love you," she tells him.

And really, that's all that matters.

He takes a tentative step forward and then into her arms, and though she quite clearly hadn't wanted Henry to touch her earlier for whatever reason, those reasons are long gone for now and she's
holding her son as tightly as she can and she's letting him hold her and Emma lets out a long breath.

It's not better, but it's not worse.

Not yet.

"What happened?" Snow asks as she and David step inside the townhouse.

"You were right," Emma replies with a grunt and then a loud sigh. "Henry figured out that I'd done some research, and he knew exactly where to look to find it." She indicates towards the shattered laptop, which sits rather miserably on the kitchen table. "That sucker cost me almost two grand. Kid destroyed it in twenty seconds. Maybe ten."

"Well, he is your son," David says absently as he touched the bent aluminum.

"Meaning what?"

"You break a lot of things," Snow replies with a shrug. "What did he see?"

"Everything, unfortunately. Even the things I refused to look at." Emma sighs loudly. "There were pictures in there. The ones they took when she was first brought into the hospital. They showed every injury that she had."

"They were bad?" David asks.

"I never looked at them so I don't know, but considering what I read in that file, I would say that they were. She has scars everywhere, dad. Some of them are pretty deep and some of them are awful just because of where they are. And some...some of them tell you exactly what was done to her." Emma shakes her head. "He's having a hard time dealing with that. So am I. So is Regina. Obviously." Emma looks towards the stairs when Snow glances around as if to find the former queen. "She took a couple of painkillers about a half hour ago; I think she'll be down for awhile."

Snow follows her eyes towards the stairs, and it occurs to her that she's done this a couple times over the last few weeks. Many years ago, looking upwards for Regina would have been done with a sense of trepidation as she'd been awaiting one of her former stepmother's grand entrances, but so very much has changed now and the woman upstairs isn't about to sweep into the room declaring her intent to destroy everyone's happiness.

The woman upstairs doesn't have a clue what happiness is anymore.

Well, Snow thinks, that's going to change. Even if it takes another ten years to make it happen, she'll find a way to make Regina understand that she doesn't have to look into the mirror and see the monster there anymore.

She can be happy and they can do this together.

As family always should do.

"You mind if I go up?" Snow asks. "I'd just like to sit with her for a little bit."

Emma's eyebrow lifts for a moment in surprise, but then she shrugs her shoulders. "Course not, but I'm not sure how much conversation she'll be if the painkillers have already kicked in."

"That's okay." She looks over at David and he smiles at her as if to say go ahead. To Emma, she asks, "Henry went out for a walk, right?"
"Yeah. He needed some fresh air. I wouldn't expect to see him for awhile."

"That's good," Snow says, and she sounds so very serious. She nods at her husband and then turns and heads up the stairs towards Henry's bedroom, her footsteps soft.

"There's something new that I'm not going to like, I take it?" Emma asks.

"Yeah," David sighs as he reaches into his pocket and pulls out his cell. It's an older model, and the camera on it is fairly pathetic (the down side of having been pretty much trapped in a town where Gold's magic had been used to supply most of the inventory of both food and supplies for almost ten years; both Henry and Emma have brought things back from their many trips to the outside world, but technology here is still quite dated for the most part, and that's unlikely to ever really change), but the picture he shows her is still clear enough to make it.

It's more graffiti. Red spray paint of some kind.


"I'm thinking that maybe this is in reference to the Queen," David notes. "Maybe they figure that even though Regina is back with us, they've still taken her out."

"I don't get this at all," Emma replies, still looking at his phone. "In chess, the most powerful piece in the game is always the queen so if you want to take her off the board, why give her back to us? I get playing with us, but this just doesn't make any sense at all. And now they're taunting us?"

"They didn't get what they wanted from her," David says simply. "After three years of doing whatever they could to her, they still couldn't get it."

"I'm guessing that we're both still believing that this probably has something to do with the magic that Regina has inside of her, yeah?"

"Even if she can't remember how to access it, Gold insists it's still in there. He says she should needs the right motivation to be able to tap back into it."

"So maybe the only way that these Home Offices sons of bitches can get to Regina's magic is if she's back here in Storybrooke where it's more than just elemental, it might actually even be active again," Emma says in an almost excited tone, finishing the unhappy thought that they've both been having.

Like father, like daughter apparently.

"Exactly," David confirms, sounding like he wishes that they were wrong.

"I hate your theory," Emma grumbles.

David smiles in understanding, and then lightly nudges her shoulder with his own, affection shining brightly in his blue eyes. "Me, too," he admits.

Regina isn't at all restless in her sleep. Right now, drugged almost completely up, she isn't really anything besides entirely too still for Snow's liking. It reminds her rather uncomfortably of her former stepmother's early days in the castle. It recalls for her how Regina had moved so quietly down every hallway. Her motions had been reserved and tuned. She had been trying not to be noticed, and she had mostly succeeded in that.
Over time, though, that stillness had given away to a kind of strange madness that had come over Regina. Not everyone had seen it, of course, but Snow had. Even a selfish girl who struggled to ever see the world as it turned outside of her own needs, Snow had noticed Regina's darkening.

She just hadn't recognized it for what it was until it had been far too late.

Regina had gone from still to furious, from quiet to thundering.

Oh, but that's all in the past now, Snow thinks as she pulls a chair up next to Regina's bed. The older woman looks fairly strange and out of place curled up in Henry's brightly colored blankets, her head rested against a striped pillow, her dark hair fanned out. She seems warm enough; perhaps even too warm judging by the light layer of perspiration around Regina's brow.

A quick trip to the bathroom, and Snow returns with a washcloth.

This is familiar, she thinks, remembering a time when she'd taken care of a wounded Regina in the woods. Then, it had all been something of a trick; a game Regina had been playing so as to get close enough to Snow to kill her.

Well, no, not completely. Regina had been wounded, of course. And perhaps, absent help from Snow that day, she would have died of infection.

Or maybe Rumplestiltskin would have come to her aide.

It hardly matters.

They've all paid enough now.

She places the cool cloth on Regina's forehead and gently dabs the sweat away, the touch so very light. "It's okay," she whispers. "You're safe now."

"Am I?" she hears.

Her eyes lift up and she sees Regina looking at her through vision made hazy by painkillers. Her head is lifted off the pillow, but her eyes are drooping, and Snow has no doubt that it won't be long before Regina succumbs to sleep again, but for now, she's staring back at her former stepdaughter with something that looks like clarity.

Something that looks like understanding of the gravity of this moment.

"You are," Snow tells her.

"You're so sure of this?"

"I know I won't let anyone hurt you again."

"Why?"

"Because you saved me, and I didn't save you."

It's an overly simplistic summary of their relationship, and for a brief moment, Regina looks like she's about to argue it, but then whatever strength had been within her sags away again and she slumps to the pillow.

"Sleep," Snow says. "I promise I'll be here when you wake up."
"It's funny," Regina comments. "I've spent so very much of my life alone, and now I'm here and everyone wants to stay with me." Her words are without recrimination, coated only in a curious kind of mystified wonder.

"We all change," Snow tells her. "I wanted you gone and out of my life for so long, but every single time that I had the chance to make that happen, I couldn't do it, Regina. It's taken me a very long time to understand why."

"And what did you come up with?" Regina asks, her words slurring.

Snow reaches out and brushes hair away from Regina's eyes, tucking it behind her ear. "I love you, Regina. I always will. We're family even when we hate each other, and we will always be family. I was never willing to let go of you because I always hoped that one day, we could forgive each other."

"And have you? Forgiven me?" Regina asks, rolling her head so that their eyes are meeting. Her own are cloudy, but she's clearly fighting hard to stay conscious and lucid enough to have and understand this conversation.

"Yes. I just didn't realize it until just now." Then, quietly, sounding so very much like an uncertain and yet hopeful little girl" Have you forgiven me?"

Regina smiles at that. "Ever since I got free of them, I've been having memory flashes, but I had a few when I was there, too. One of the times they had me in insolation for...it must have been weeks, I got sick from being in such damp conditions and I start hallucinating you. At first I thought you were just like the shadows that always seemed to be around for all of my sessions with her, but you were different in that room with me. You were actually you and we..." she laughs to herself. "We argued a lot."

"Yeah? Did it help?"

Another almost amused smile, and then Regina's eyes slip closed as she whispers, "I think I finally figured out where Emma gets her stubbornness from. You were a real pain in the ass in there, wouldn't let me just die."

"Good," Snow states. "Good."

Regina's right hand lifts up, hangs in the air for a moment just swaying around, and then it reaches blindly out as if trying to find something to hold on to. As if finally understanding, Snow slips her own into Regina's.

"Yes," Regina says quietly. "I did. And I do."

Snow nods her head, and bites her lip to keep a sob from breaking loose, but she's only somewhat successful because she hears Regina chuckle.

"No rainbow kisses today, dear," Regina mumbles. "I just washed the car."

The words are, of course, utterly nonsensical, but they hardly matter.

All that does matter is that Regina is still holding her hand.

"Shut up and go to sleep, Regina," Snow replies, her voice rough with thick knots of emotion. "And I will be here when you wake up."
Regina responds with a light grunting sound and then drops back beneath the veil of consciousness, her body once again so very still and quiet.

Snow exhales, and then with her free hand, reaches out and starts dabbing away at the sweat gathered on Regina's brow once again.

"Hey, Henry," he hears from somewhere behind him. He's sitting on a bench in the middle of the park and has been for the last hour or so. Everything is still swimming around in his head, so very many ugly images and words. He wishes so desperately that he had listened to Emma and not pushed to know the truth about what happened to Regina, but what's done is done.

He turns his head and watches as Ruby approaches, a coffee cup in hand.

"Hey," he says with a smile. She'd been his first real crush, and though those weird teenage feelings have given away to a sense of sibling love instead, he can't help but regard her with a little bit of sadness. Because he'd been old enough to understand the heartbreak she'd gone through when she'd been betrayed by a selfish lover who'd only ever seen her as a monster.

"Saw you out here," Ruby says as she sits down next to him. She offers him the cup, and then gazes out ahead towards the water fountain in the middle of the park. It'd been put there years ago as some sort of tribute to those who had fallen in the Home Office's first attack. Somewhere on the base of it is Regina's name. It makes Henry want to throw up to even think about it.

"Needed to think," he says, tipping the cup towards her appreciatively.

"I can go," she says.

"You don't have to."

"Then I can listen."

He chuckles at that and offers her a thankful smile. "I'm sure that my grandmother has been keeping you updated on everything."

"She has," Ruby allows. "But I wanted to see how you're doing."

"Terrible," he admits between sips. "I saw her medical and police files."

"Emma showed you?"

"No."

"Oh. Henry —"

"I know. Believe me, I know."

"It was bad?" Ruby asks.

"They burned her feet," he replies, and though that's one of the very least of things that they'd done to her, for some reason it sticks in his mind.

"Right," the waitress replies, and it's like she just understand that what he's telling her is just the tip of the iceberg. She doesn't need to know more – doesn't want to know more. What she already knows is more than enough.
"And she said she deserved it because she's the Evil Queen." Henry shakes his head fiercely, angrily. "That's such…it doesn't make…did you deserve what he did to you because of what you turn into once a month?"

"It's not exactly the same thing," Ruby says. "But no, I suppose I didn't."

He turns to look at her and narrows his eyes. "What does that mean?"

"It means that sometimes you lose faith in yourself, and sometimes you start to actually believe the very worst things that people believe of you. All he did was take my blood and my DNA, but that was enough for me to understand that all I ever was to him was an animal to be experimented on."

"Ruby –"

"I know, Henry; Snow and Emma and David and everyone else tell me all the time that I'm better than that, but it's hard to believe that when you realize that the person you chose to love never loved you and never could."

"I never understood why we don't lock him up and throw away the key."

"Because I didn't want them, too," Ruby says softly.

"Why not?"

"Because he has more value outside of a cell than inside of one. He's our only doctor, Henry; it's not like we have a lot of renewable resources."

"He should have paid for what he did to you."

"He took blood and broke my heart." She smiles sadly. "No one ever made me pay for what I did to Peter. Someone made your mother pay too much."

"You're about to tell me that vengeance is bad?"

"It is, and it's not what any of us want for you." Ruby reaches out and ruffles his hair and because he's twenty-two and a man now, he scowls at her and ducks away, but she just laughs. "You're our Henry; you remind all of us of the best of ourselves. Please don't let anger change everything that's good and right inside of you. If you do, then all of us have failed you."

"I'm okay," he promises her.

"Good. Then finish the coffee and go home and be with your moms."

"Come with me."

"Not tonight."

"Ruby –"

"Another night, I promise."

"You always say that."

"I keep my promises," she assures him as she stands back up. She winks at him, and then starts to walk about, but stops when he calls her back.
"He wants to see mom. Run some tests on her. Will he hurt her?"

I wouldn't let him do it," she answers. "No matter what Victor says, there's not a real man inside of him. I'm not ever sure that there ever has been."

"Okay. You sure you won't come back with me? We can do shots."

She laughs. "Another time."

"He was a fool, Rubes," Henry says, his voice serious. "A stupid fool."

"Keep saying that, kiddo."

"Every day."

They share a smile, and then Ruby takes her hands into her pockets and walks back through the cold air towards the diner. It's starting to snow, and within an hour, Storybrooke is likely to be coated in nothing but white.

Snowfall is supposed to signify new beginnings, he thinks.

And maybe that's what this is: a new beginning for everyone.

It's as he's thinking this that his cell buzzes in his pocket. His eyes on the flakes as they start to tumble down, he answers it. "Hey, ma," he says.

"Hey, kid, you on your way home?"

"Yeah, just about."

"You okay?"

"Is she?"

"She's sleeping. Are you okay?"

"Better."

"Good."

"And I'm sorry," he says. "About not liste-"

His words cut off abruptly, and the phone drops from his hand as he slumps to the ground, face first in the now slightly snow dusted yellowed grass.

He doesn't hear his mother calling out for him.

The only thing he hears is what sounds – and feels - like his jacket and his shirt being pulled off of him and then he hears something sizzling.

And then there's an intense pain in his shoulder.

"Sorry about this," he hears, deceptively low (like his attacker – definitely a man – is trying to hide his voice) and directly in his right ear. "You're going to be okay, Henry, but she needs to find her magic. She will for you."

He doesn't ask who needs to "find her magic", doesn't really care right now.
Because Emma is still calling out for him, maybe even screaming now.

He thinks he might be screaming, too.

She jerks forward in her bed, and everything hurts but she doesn't care.

Because she never dreams when she's on the painkillers, and she's just had one horrific nightmare – the kind that she thinks that she'll never forget because it had involved Henry and him being hurt and...

"Regina," Snow says, sitting up abruptly from where she'd drowsed off.

"Henry," Regina whispers, and she's already climbing from the bed.

That's when they both hear Emma practically crying out for Henry. Begging him to hold on and promising him that she's on her way to him right now.

"Regina," Snow whispers, and she has no idea how she'll finish the sentence, but whatever she might have said simply slips away when she sees the old familiar purple gleam of magic sliding through Regina's dark eyes.

It's unsettling and terrifying, but Snow just reaches out her hand and takes Regina's and hopes and prays that she can ground her former stepmother in a way that she never had been able to do in the past.

"Take us to him," she says softly. "Take us to your son."

TBC...
CHAPTER 10

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks as always.

Warnings: Some language, some non graphic discussion of torture and of course, angst.

STORYBROOKE, MAINE - JANUARY, 2023

The two women reappear down in the kitchen about half of a second after Regina's purple smoke covers them up. It's an unsettling feeling to be transported by magic – a rarity for Snow and an old not quite welcomed memory for the former queen – but neither of them choose to think too much on this – or the sudden reappearance of Regina's magic - just yet.

Not until they know for sure that Henry is safe.

"What happened?" Regina demands sharply as they appear in between David and Emma. "Where is he?" Her eyes are practically glowing.

"Jesus Christ," Emma gasps, a hand covering her heart, and it occurs to Snow that for the last ten years or so, they've had relative peace here in Storybrooke and there just hasn't been a need for these kinds of panics.

Relative being relevant, of course, because a town full of drama loving storybook characters can never be that pleasant and happy all the time.

"Yes, I've found my magic," Regina snaps. "What happened to Henry?"

"I don't know," Emma says. "We were on the phone and then he wasn't and then he was screaming. Can you…bring…us to him?"

"I think so," Regina replies, and she has no real idea why she's so certain of this considering the fact that five minutes earlier she'd been completely unable to even feel magic within her much less use it. "Give me your hand."

"Emma," David says, his brow crinkling as he looks from his daughter to his wife. It's never been a secret how much he dislikes magic, and he'd be lying if he were to claim that he hasn't enjoyed the lack of it. Gold has had it, and Emma still the power within her, but there hasn't been much need for it over the last few years, and so it's been easy to forget his wariness, but now seeing the former queen's eyes bubbling with purple energy, it scares him because he doesn't want to return to the past when every day was a fight.

"It's all going to be just fine," Emma tells him even as her emotional eyes are saying otherwise. He thinks that she's trying to offer him some kind of comfort him about the magic, though, and not the Henry situation. "You two be on stand by," she says. "I'll let you know where we end up."

He nods his head, and snaps his mouth shut because now isn't the time.
Regina notices that he doesn't offer Emma any kind of empty platitude or promise of hope, and for once neither does Snow, and just as the smoke covers her and Emma and whisks them away, she thinks that perhaps she's just a little sad about how even the Charming's have lost some innocence.

But then she and Emma are standing in the park together, and Henry is lying on the snow-covered ground stripped down to only his blue jeans and his boots and there's the horrific smell of cooked flesh thick and pungent and intolerable in the air and she just knows what's happened to her little boy.

Because she can still vividly recall being strapped down on her belly to a metal table, naked to the waist. She can still hear the sizzle of the brand, and she can still smell the burning of her own flesh. She tries not to think about the pain she'd felt or the way she'd screamed until she'd passed out.

"He's alive," Emma says, exhaling her relief.

Regina barely hears her, is already scrambling towards her son. "Henry," she gasps out. She can feel Emma right behind her, and then beside her as they both tumble down to the soft new snow next to Henry's unconscious body.

That's when they both see the brand on his back. Angry and red, it has been cruelly burnt into the once flawless flesh just beneath his right shoulder.

"No," Regina whispers, because she knows that mark – that brand – well.

She has it on her right shoulder, too. She'd know since the moment they'd arrived that something like this had been done to him, but she'd been praying that they wouldn't have put this specific one on to him. Bad enough that they'd done it all, but he of all people doesn't deserve this one.

"He's going to be okay," Emma says. "Can you get us to a hospital?"

Regina looks up at her, and that's when Emma notices that the misting purple magic is completely missing now. All that remains is big brown eyes gleaming brightly with tears. This isn't anger, Emma realizes, this is fear.

"It's gone again," Regina whispers, sounding almost bewildered. Her fear getting the best of her, her hand strays out and she touches Henry's hair.

It's just as she does this that Emma grabs her wrist, and she's about to protest, thinking that Emma is about to push her away from their son (she's reminded of a time when after Emma had saved Henry from being killed in the mines, she had forced the sheriff away, and refused to allow her to take comfort in Henry's safety), but Emma has always been the better person.

"Easy," Emma whispers, her grip tightening on Regina's wrist. She slides her fingers down, intertwines them with Regina's and then lifts their hands up towards Henry's neck and presses it against his pulse point, allowing both of them to feel the way his strong heart is still hammering away in his chest.

They both exhale at the same time, and Regina nods her head in gratitude.

"He's in shock; we need to get him to the hospital," Emma says, then. "If you can't get to your magic again, we'll have to take him there by foot."

What Emma means, though, is that she herself will have to carry Henry to the hospital because they both know that Regina's body isn't strong enough to be able to support extra weight, especially that of a grown man. Regina's eyes close for a moment, and an expression of such pain and hurt
creases her face as she tries to concentrate on finding the thread again.

Once upon a time, Rumplestiltskin had showed her how to find magic deep within her body, even when that magic had been trying to hide away like a shy child. He'd laughingly compared it to pulling on the tiniest edge of a loose end. With a knowing smirk that she hadn't understood back then, he'd instructed her to pull hard enough to make everything unravel into energy and chaos, which only she could then control. Those airy easy words had been something of a lie, but there's still truth to be found in the method.

She'd be lying to claim that it doesn't frighten her, though, because she knows that once she really finds and pulls forward the magic again and is able to use it even when she's not just angry, it will all be real once more, and what's to stop all of her addictions and temptations from surfacing?

What's to stop the Evil Queen from coming back?

And what's worse, why is she wondering if it would be such a bad thing for that woman – a woman she hates worse than she has ever hated Snow – to resurface now? Wouldn't the Evil Queen be able to protect Henry at least?

"Regina," Emma whispers, and it occurs to her that their hands are still connected against Henry's neck. The shared touch is warm and safe, and Henry's heart is still so strong and vibrant, and she wonders why it's always hate and anger that allows power to be grasped? Why can magic only be found in the worst of things instead of in the reassurance of life and love?

But perhaps, it can be. Perhaps, she's simply never looked for it there.

"Hang on," Regina says. She thinks about the many books she'd read long ago in another world. The ones that had spoken of white magic, she'd always tossed away because such power is inherently defensive instead of offensive, and she'd always wanted to be the hunter instead of the prey.

Now, she just needs to protect her son.

So she thinks about these books, and thinks about pages she'd scoffed at and disregarded. She thinks of magic that speaks of the beauty of the heart and now the power within in. She thinks of a boy crying out for his mother.

Light purple magic swirls around her. She feels Emma move their hands down towards Henry's, winding their fingers around his. And then Emma puts her other hand atop of all of the others and says, "You can do this."

And so she does.

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She nearly staggers to her knees just seconds after Henry is pulled away from them, and rushed towards the emergency room. Her legs are fiercely trembling and her body is rather loudly and angrily reminding her that she hadn't had the energy to spare – certainly not enough for the repeated use of magic - but somehow or another, Regina manages to stay standing on her feet, a small almost victorious smile lifting her lips up just a little bit.

Because for once, she hadn't failed Henry.

But then Emma asks the question that makes her heart nearly crack in half beneath the weight of her guilt and fear, "What the hell was that brand?"
"What brand?" David asks as he and Snow rush in. They're both red-faced and shivering, and there are white flakes in their hair. Apparently, what had been soft snowfall before is quickly turning into a very cold blizzard.

"Someone burned a brand into Henry's shoulder," Emma notes. "They must have attacked him while I was on the phone with him."

"Jesus," David says, his hand over his mouth.

"Yeah," Emma says, her eyes still on Regina who is now staring down the hallway, towards the double doors that Henry had been taken through.

"Regina," Snow prompts, noticing both the way Emma is looking at Regina and the way Regina is staring away. "Do you know what the brand was?"

"I do."

"It wasn't the Home Office's symbol, right?" Emma queries with a frown. "At least it's not the one that they've been spray-painting all over town."

"No, not theirs," Regina agrees. "One of hers."

"Their…Queen had one of her own?" Snow asks, her eyes wide.

Regina's pained eyes flicker up towards the girl who had once been meant to be her daughter. "Not exactly. The one that you have been seeing all over Storybrooke is the one she created to symbolize her greatest creation – what we know of as the Home Office – but the one on Henry's back…" she takes a deep breath, and it catches hard in her throat, "…the one on my back is one she utilized in order to designate certain people as…dirty."

"Dirty?" David repeats, because such a concept is so foreign to him.

"Meaning what?" Emma demands, anger deepening her voice.

"She considered me impure because of what I am and who I've been."

"The Evil Queen?" Snow asks.

"Yes. To her, I was the very worst of things. I was an abomination of the natural order of things, and branding me was her way to show it."

"But Henry?"

"He's my son."

"Which means he must be dirty, too," Snow finishes. She puts up her hand to stop the immediate protest that is about to come from Emma's lips. "Of course I don't believe that. I don't think anyone sane does, but it's clear that we're not dealing with sane people, Emma, and I think that whatever vendetta they have against Regina, they mean to extend it to Henry, too."

"Then I need to leave," Regina says immediately, her eyes widening in panic. "If I leave –"

"If you leave town, they'll just find a way to force you back to Storybrooke," Emma tells her, shaking her head. "They didn't sit on their hands for seven years just to let you walk away now. No, whatever they need from you – magic or whatever - it has to go down inside of Storybrooke, and we're just kidding ourselves if we think they'll let you leave without a fight."
"I never wanted this," Regina says, meeting Emma's eyes. "You have to believe me. I just wanted to see Henry again. I just…I missed him. If I had known that this would…I'm so sorry." She looks so sad and desperate.

And so terribly broken.

Like all of her mismatched pieces – all of the ones that Emma and Snow and Henry and David have been trying so hard to put back together again over the last few weeks – are all just shattering and crumbling all over again.

"Regina," Emma says, her voice softening. "This isn't your fault."

"But we all know that it is," Regina snaps back, tears on her face, and then on the collar of her jacket. "If for just once in my life, I hadn't been selfish, if I had just left him alone to be the happy boy that I saw waiting tables in Boston, he wouldn't be in that room right now wearing the same horrible brand that I have on me. He doesn't deserve it like I do."

"No," Snow says defiantly, almost even angrily. And then she reaches forward and wraps her deceptively strong arms around Regina, surprising everyone in the room, but perhaps Regina the most. "You don't deserve it, either, and I am glad that you're home," Snow insists as she tightens the hold into a warm hug. "And we are going to stop these people. We are."

Regina lets out what sounds like a strangled whimper, and then she drops her head to Snow's shoulder for a moment and just allows the embrace, and allows herself the comfort that her former stepdaughter is offering her.

After a long moment of this, she straightens up, wipes her tears away, and steps out of Snow's arms and away. "I need air," she says and then quickly turns away and starts down the hallway, towards the doors leading outside.

Snow starts to protest, but David puts his hand in hers and shakes his head.

"Someone should keep an eye on her," Snow insists. "They're out there, and this was a warning to her. Or a threat. We need to keep her safe."

"And we will," Emma assures her. "But today has really sucked for her, and I think what Regina could really use right now is a moment to herself."

"She's had the last seven years to herself," Snow reminds them with an almost urgent shake of her head. "She asked us to stay before. She doesn't want to be alone. Not anymore," She starts to move forward to follow after Regina, but again, David catches her and pulls her back to him.

"She's not alone," David says. "We're just giving her a moment to catch her breath. She doesn't want to be like this when we get to see Henry, Snow. We need to let her try to be strong for him, and this what she needs."

Snow deflates. "All right. Fine. You're right."

"It's going to be okay," Emma promises. "Because we are done with these guys. We were all willing to forget what they did ten years ago, but maybe we shouldn't have been. They killed Neal and so many others, and they did God only really knows what to Regina. But whatever they want, it's over."

"What's your plan?" David asks.
"To go on the offensive," Emma replies, her tone as cold as ice. "They want a war, we'll give them one. And I think they're going to end up being very sorry that they woke up the magic within Regina all over again."

"Should we be as well?" David prompts.

"No," Emma says immediately. "Because it wasn't anger that helped her bring us all to the hospital a few minutes ago. It was something better than that. She's not the same person she was, but they may be surprised to learn that the person she is now is stronger than she thinks she is."

"Okay," Snow agrees, but then adds again, "But we still shouldn't leave her exposed to them, Emma. However strong her heart might be now, her body still isn't and I don't think that she could handle anymore from them."

"I know," Emma replies. She looks back towards the doors that Henry had been taken through. Logically, she knows that his wound is ugly but hardly life threatening. His unconsciousness had been caused by shock and pain as opposed to anything more serious, which means he's going to be just fine.

But he's still her son, and he'd been lying half-naked in the snow with a brand on his shoulder that had been put there in order to taint him as something dirty and impure and good God that just pisses her off.

She breathes in and then out. And then reminds herself that Henry is completely safe now. He's in Whale's capable if not necessarily good hands.

And that all of this – Henry even being out tonight – had happened because he'd wanted so desperately to protect the mother that he'd been without for ten years; he'd left the house because he'd been emotional and upset about what these sons of bitches had done to Regina. Which had left him vulnerable to them. Just as Regina – now in the same state – is.

"Text me the moment Whale comes out," Emma instructs.

"We will," Snow promises.

"And if you see anyone that you don't know –"

"They won't get past us," David assures her. "Trust me, they won't."

"I do," Emma says with a smile. One last look at the doors, and then she follows after Regina, out towards the bitter wind and the whirling snow.

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She leaves the hospital and keeps on walking; she knows that they'd been expecting her to just step outside and take a breath or two, but suddenly her feet are moving and she finds herself standing in front of Gold's shop.

And then he's looking up at her through the window.

He beckons her to enter so, of course, she does.

"Gold," she says upon entrance.

"Regina," he addresses her, his eyebrow up. He looks exactly the same as he always has, frozen in
time by the magic within the Dark One's blade.

"I need help," she says, her voice quiet and unsteady. She knows that she doesn't want to be here, but she thinks that she'll do anything for Henry.

Even descend into hell all over again.

But Rumple has changed as well, it would seem, because instead of jumping at the chance to destroy her soul all over again, he simply smiles at her and shakes his head. "What kind of help, dearie? Assistance with pain?"

His dark curious eyes flicker down towards her wounded leg and hip, and it's like the steel of his gaze causes every one of her nerves to suddenly spark at once because where as before there'd just been a familiar aching pain there, now she feels an actual burning agony, and her hand shoots out to grab a surface as she remembers that the cane she's been using is currently leaning against a wall in Henry's bedroom back at the townhouse.

She clenches her teeth to stop herself from crying out, but then he's touching her – his hands dry and cool – and she looks up at him curiously.

"Breathe, Regina," he says almost gently. "The pain is in your head."

"It's not," she growls back. "They did this to me."

"They did and the injuries are very real, I'm afraid, but what you're feeling at this moment is not," he assures her, his hand on her elbow. "Breathe and calm yourself, and then we can talk about what you really need from me."

So she does, and slowly but surely, the pain ebbs, and slides back to being a buzzing constant discomfort right beneath the edges of her awareness.

"We always become conscious of what hurts the most when someone else becomes aware of the same," Rumple says as he moves away from her.

She nods her head for a moment, still getting her balance again, and then she asks, her voice shaky, "Did you hear what they did to Henry tonight?"

"Belle did," he confirms, his expression grim. "And so yes, I did. I heard it was some kind of brand, but she wasn't clear on what it was exactly."

"It's this one," Regina says as she turns around and pulls both her jacket and the top of her sweater down so that she can see the ruined flesh of his back. She tries not to think about the whip marks that he can surely see or the other kinds of burns; she hopes that he's just looking at the mark and nothing else, but knows better. She feels his cool hands on her again, and knows that he's touching the warm skin around the brand he finds there.

"I've seen this before," he says, removing his hands from her, and indicating that she can now pull her sweater and jacket back up. If she didn't know better, she'd think that he almost looks a bit horrified at what he's just seen, but surely that can't be because even time couldn't have made him sp kind.

No, perhaps not time, she muses as she meets his eyes and sees what is absolutely some kind of strange compassion. Perhaps love, though.

"Where?" she asks as she turns to face him, readjusting her clothing.
"A girl from a very long time ago," Rumple replies. "One that I became aware of during my search for my son. Through no fault of her own, she had been touched by an evil far worse than either you or I could ever aspire to be, and it had changed her terribly. It seems it altered her into such evil."

"You know her name?" Regina asks, stepping towards him, an old familiar kind of excitement brewing in the middle of her chest. She has a feeling that a name hardly matters because unless this woman is from her home world – and Regina doesn't believe that she is – it won't make much of a difference.

But it'd sure as hell to know at least something about her tormentor.

"Of course," Rumple replies.

"Because you always did traffic in names," Regina finishes.

He nods his head. "Will it change anything? To know who she is?"

"No," Regina admits. "I will still have spent three years in a nightmare and seven years trying to heal myself, but at least when I see her again, I'll know what to call her." She shakes her head. "She called me by my name over and over, like she had some kind of power over me just by using it. She did."

"She did," Rumple agrees. "Her name is Wendy Darling."

Regina tilts her head. "Why is that familiar to me?"

"Because I presume you once read Henry the story of Peter Pan," Rumple replies. "But as we well know, Regina, all stories comes from some truth."

Regina blinks. "The little girl in the story –"

"Had her entire life destroyed by the use of magic," Rumple nods. "She lost first the brave boy who would protect her – my son – and then both of her brothers to Peter Pan, who I might add is not quite the happy little prankster that the movies of this world would have us believe him to be."

"He's the great evil you spoke of? A teenager?" Regina asks, unable to hide her disbelief that a child in a green leaf cap could be made of darkness.

"He may look like a child, but he's been alive far longer than even I have been," Rumple corrects. "And where I might traffic in names and deals, he traffics in souls and youth. He consumes the energy of those he brings to him, and discards them when they serve him no further purpose."

"And this girl? She survived him, yes? So what did he do to her?"

"Sometimes dead is better. She tried to follow her brothers to rescue them, but was turned away from Neverland with that mark that you now have on you on her. It was Pan's way of calling her too impure to be on Neverland with him and the other children. Apparently, she wasn't innocent enough."

"So she branded me as some kind of…transference?"

"I wouldn't waste time trying to understand the psychology of this woman," Rumple cautions. "My son found her after he returned from Neverland. She was in a psychiatric hospital. He tilts his head. "Though a good deal older than he was. She was in her seventies, and suffering from severe dementia."
"Then it can't be the same woman."

"He specifically mentioned the brand that she had. She showed it to him, and he recognized it as one Pan placed on those he rejected."

"I don't understand," Regina says with a shake of her head. "The woman who tortured me for three years wasn't older; she was in her thirties and she was cold and hard and cruel, but she wasn't suffering from dementia. She was very clear about what she was doing, and how much she enjoyed it."

"Magic changes everything," Rumple replies, his voice so solemn and dark and knowing. "Just because she's the one running the Home Office now doesn't mean that she was the one who originated it. Perhaps something changed inside of her mind when she saw Bae again or perhaps someone from whoever was running the Home Office first finally found her."

"Owen did say that he was found," Regina says to herself. "And that would have been before your son returned to this world. I think it's safe to say, though, that Wendy Darling overthrew whatever power structure had been in place. While I was their guest, she was the one running the show."

"Which means she's quite likely in possession of a lot of technology, power and knowledge. All which was used against you during your stay."

"I remember," Regina murmurs, for a moment losing herself in an awful and far too clear memory of the blonde woman standing over, reading to her from a book on the history of magic. She'd been getting angrier by the moment, her words sharper with each word that she'd spoken aloud.

And then when she'd finished, and when she'd slammed the book closed, she'd ordered in a furious voice that her captive be purified with fire.

Regina shivers and shoves the memory away, trying not to think about the burn marks on the soles of her feet or the ones on her inner thighs.

"So she's keeping herself artificially young?" she asks instead.

"Perhaps, though I wager she doesn't want your magic just for that."

"No, probably not," Regina allows with a tired sigh of resignation. She looks up at Rumple, then, "I need a favor from you, and in return, I will give you whatever it is that you want from me. I don't care what the price is."

His eyebrow lifts. "Clearly a big favor, then."

"Yes. The biggest."

"You know better than to offer me deals that you can't control."

"I don't care," she says. "Henry is the only thing that matters to me. I came back here because I wanted to see him and I endangered him, and now he's hurt because of that. I don't care what it costs me to fix that for him."

"You want me to remove his memory of what happened?"

"No," she says immediately. "I want you to remove her brand. It's still fresh and it hasn't settled into his skin yet, which means you can still heal him. He shouldn't have to wear that mark. He's not…he's not what I am."
"And what are you, Regina?"

"I don't know," she admits. "It keeps changing. Will you help me?"

"Yes," he says. "I'll visit the boy this afternoon, and remove it."

She sighs in relief. Then, "What do you want from me?"

Rumple leans towards her, and a sinister sneer overtakes his features, "I simply want your word that you will find the strength and power within yourself to stop the Home Office once and for all and that when you do, you will strike down Wendy Darling yourself. Or bring her to me to do it."

"Why?" she asks.

"Because what she did, for whatever her reasons, she was responsible for my son's death. They were looking for us even without Owen Flynn's vendetta against you; that woman who was his fiancée manipulated him on orders from her boss. The same woman who held you for three years."

"So this is vengeance for you. Haven't we all had enough of that?"

"No, this is about my son, Regina," Rumple says with a short sharp shake of his head. "You want me to help yours, and I will; all I ask in return is that you help mine get the justice that he so richly deserves. Do we have a deal?"

"We do."

"Very good." He looks her over then. "Now, about the matter that you actually came here for: you can feel your own magic inside of you again?"

"I can. But it comes and goes. It feels…unfamiliar."

"Like before? After the curse broke?"

"No, like when I first started learning."

"Interesting. And you want my help in making it stronger?"

"No, she doesn't," a sharp voice says from the entrance to the shop, and for the first time, they realize that the door has been open during the entire conversation. They both turn to see Emma standing there now, wet and cold looking and glaring at Gold like she wants to kick him somewhere improper.

"Miss Swan," he greets, and some things haven't changed because there's clearly still very little love lost between these two. "So good to see you."

"Can it. Regina, what are you doing here? I've been looking for you."

Regina's eyes widen in alarm. "Henry –"

"Is fine. I was worried about you with those Home Office goons around."

Regina exhales. "Oh. I'm…I'm fine." She seems a bit confused, like she's still trying to come to terms with the idea of anyone being worried about her.

"Which is good," Emma says. "Getting help from Gold with your magic, though, isn't. You don't need it. You took care of us without him earlier."
"I teleported us," Regina protests. "A lot of good that will do in an attack."

"You'll figure it out," Emma assures her. "We will. But you didn't go through what you did, and you didn't come home to end up back where you were."

"Far be it from me to ever agree with Miss Swan," Rumple says, his voice sounding almost deceptively lazy, "But she's right. And I would wager that if the Home Office does want you here to get at your magic – which is what I would suspect is what they're after – then what they want is the darkest that you have within you because that truly is the most powerful and potent of all actionable magic. It would be quite a shame to hand it over so easily."

"I just want to be able to defend him," Regina offers up weakly.

"And we will, but not with you becoming her again," Emma insists.

Regina considers the sheriff's words for a moment, turning over the last ten years – what she can remember of it – in her mind. Ever since waking up in the hospital, she's been trying to rebuild herself into something better than she was. Part of that has been facing the sins of her past, and part has been about trying to make better choices. Ones that don't end in pain and hurt.

She still wonders about the one to seek out Henry, but that choice has been made and there's no way to turn back that clock. This one, though, the choice of whether to let the darkness back inside, well that one is still hers.

As a young girl, it'd never really been a choice, because her life had all been just a well played out manipulation, but this is so different now because Emma is watching her with eyes that speak of faith and hope and a hundred other things that Regina feels like she doesn't deserve and never will. Like the one that seems to be saying that Emma believes in her.

Believes that she'll make the right decision for herself and for Henry.

So she sighs and does just that, her shoulders sagging.

And Emma lets out a breath of relief and says, "We should be getting back; my mom just texted me to tell me that Whale came out and –"

"You let Victor next to our son?"

"Yeah, why?"

Regina swallows hard. "I…I don't want him around Henry."

"He's a terrible human being who I'd happily see locked away in a dark basement somewhere, but he's also the best doctor in this town."

"Maybe he is," Regina says. "But I want him away from Henry. Please."

"Okay. We can do that, but in order to, we need to get back." Her voice is gentle, almost soothing, and Regina knows she's being handled, but she allows it because there's a strange kind of familiarity to it; Emma has always been good at talking her down from high ledges and keeping her calm.

Now is apparently no different.

"Gold," Regina says. "Another favor? This one without payment preferably."
"I presume that you want transport."

"Yes. You have a promise to keep, and I'm…"

"All out of magic, yes, of course."

"Wait, what promise?" Emma demands, her narrowing suspiciously.

"Henry isn't wearing that mark," Regina states, and then she looks directly at Emma and dares her to contest her words. Her eyes are blazing, and it's the strongest that Regina has looked since she returned to Storybrooke.

So Emma simply nods her head because this isn't a fight worth having.

And to be honest, it's not like she wants her son wearing the brand, either.

"Hang on," Emma says just before Rumple snaps his fingers. "Since you seem to know what's happening here, why did they attack Henry?"

"To get Regina to find her magic," Rumple says, sounding like he thinks she's a complete idiot. "And that's exactly what happened. They confirmed that she has it, and still has the ability to access it with extreme emotion."

"So their attack was a success," Regina says dully.

"Your boy is alive," Rumple replies, and there's a sadness in both his voice and eyes that makes Emma look away, her heart suddenly aching. "So no matter what they did, they failed to actually hurt you where your heart lives and if you stop them, then you will continue to make them do just that."

"Regina," Emma says, reaching out to lightly take the former queen's hand in hers. "Let's get back to Henry. We can't protect him from here."

"All right," Regina answers. "Send us to him."

Gold inclines his head and then snaps his fingers, dark blue smoke curling around the two women for a brief moment before they disappear.

He watches the spot where they've disappeared from for a long moment, thinking about a boy that he'll never see again, and the many ways that life seems to destroy the people who deserve it the very least.

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His bleary green eyes open when he hears the sound of his mothers entering his room and then sitting down next to him. He tries to smile, but he's too doped up and in too much pain to really make it work. "Ruby?" he asks, slurring his words. "Is she okay? Tell me they didn't hurt her."

"What?" Regina queries. "What is he talking about?"

"Ruby was in the park with him a few minutes before the attack."

"And she didn't smell or hear anything?"

"She's not the same person that you remember," Emma says cryptically. Then, to Henry, "Ruby is fine, kid; she's out in the waiting room with your grandparents. She wanted me to tell you that
you're an idiot."

"Yeah, I am," he says with a goofy grin.

"But she's worried sick about you, kid. We all are."

"But I'm okay."

"You're going to be better than that," Regina promises him, her eyes on the white bandage wrapped around his back and chest. "I promise you that."

He nods his head slowly, and then rolls it towards Regina. "I'm sorry," he says, his voice cracking slightly. "I just wanted to protect you and I didn't know how to do that. I shouldn't have looked at the files. I didn't want to see them. I don't want to know that someone hurt you like that."

"Oh, my sweet little prince," she says, and suddenly she feels the sharp pain again, screeching like fire through her leg and hip. Thankfully, Emma sees the falter, and immediately moves a chair under her and urges her into it. "I'm okay," Regina tells him. "As long as you are, I will always be okay."

"Promise?"

"Yes."

He looks up at her and then over at Emma. "Promise me I won't lose either of you to this. Promise me that we're all going to be okay, and that no one is going to take our family away from us again."

His eyes suddenly seem so clear and focused and it's the pain and fear causing this, but it's real.

He needs this.

His mothers exchange a look, and then each of them take one of his hands.

And they squeeze tight. They don't say the words he's asked them to say, but he find he doesn't need them to because they're both with him now, and they're holding on to him and he to them and this is how it should be.

"Stay," he whispers as his eyelids droop down low, the darkness of drugs and pain slipping towards him and then overwhelming him.

And though he never hears their answer, he knows without a doubt that they will both be next to him when he wakes up.

They are.

TBC...
A/N: Apologies for the long wait between chapters. Hoping to have another up this week.

Warnings: Some language, some non-specific talk of torture.

STORYBROOKE, MAINE - JANUARY, 2023

"How are you holding up?" Emma asks, her voice soft and the lines around her eyes (Regina wonders when she had gotten those) creasing with worry as she gazes across at the older woman who is sitting entirely too straight in an uncomfortable hospital chair. The posture is so rigid and controlled and Emma just knows that it has to be hurting Regina's already injured hip and leg.

"I'm fine," Regina responds, her tone meant to be sharp but failing on account of the fact that both she and Emma are sitting over their sleeping son's body, watching him fitfully slumber after a brutal attack on him by the very same sons of bitches that had held her captive for over three years. She means to be cold and disinterested so as to push the concern away, but there's a slight tremor clearly audible, and she's damned tired and worn down right now.

"Fine," Emma repeats, looking down at Henry. The bandages are still there, but they won't need to be for much longer; Gold will be stopping by soon enough to heal the injury and then there will be nothing left on the flesh.

Then, all of the wounds will all be inside of Henry's head.

A glance across at a still agitated Regina – a look at how the older woman is anxiously rubbing at the scars on her palm – and Emma knows that Henry got off easy. Not that it feels like that right now, but oh God it could have been so much worse than this. The Home Office could have hurt him badly enough where even Gold and his magic couldn't heal him.

They could have killed him.

But they didn't.

Because they'd wanted him to give a message to his mother.

The Home Office – or more precisely, their Queen who in a strange twist of lunacy is the once innocent but now deeply twisted girl from Peter Pan (that's a whole other weird story Emma doesn't want to think about at the moment) – apparently wants Regina of old to come out and play. They want her to unleash the dark magic that is suddenly surging within her again and they want her to face them. The worst part is, Emma has a feeling that they'll continue pushing at Regina – that they'll keep threatening everything she holds dear - until she does exactly that. The question, of
course, is why a group dedicated to destroying magic is so eager to shove a person who just days earlier had been unable to feel that kind of power and energy within her to return to using it. What is their ultimate endgame?

"I'm not fine," Regina admits after a moment, her voice quiet and still shaking. "I'm...I'm scared." She smiles ever so slightly – humorlessly, really – when she says this because she knows how odd it must sound to Emma.

After all, the Evil Queen is afraid of nothing.

But the problem is, she's not really that woman anymore no matter how much people might want her to be, and she's terrified that if the Evil Queen is, indeed, the person that the Home Office desperately wants to bring out, then a whole lot more blood could be spilled before this is all over.

Blood that will be on her hands, heart and soul.

She doesn't want that any more. She's not sure that she ever really did.

What she wants now, is just to have peace and family.

But then her eyes slip down to the bandage, and she feels a flicker of something dark deep within her, and she knows that she's not going to be allowed to have either of those things until she wins or loses this war.

"Yeah," Emma agrees. "Me, too."

"You probably hate me right about now," Regina murmurs with a self-depreciating chuckle. "I come back into your life two weeks, and suddenly everything goes upside down. Suddenly, Henry is in danger all over again."

"Well, I'm not overly pleased," Emma admits. "But I'm also not angry at you. Two things I've figured out: one – they've been waiting on you for seven years, and maybe they could have waited forever, but chances are that they would have eventually found a way to force you back to Storybrooke."

"And two?"

"And two, Henry loves you, and he's been missing a part of himself since you were taken from him. No, I'm not happy that my – our – son has been hurt, but well, his happiness means more to me than anything else. And you know what? I can't believe I'm saying this considering how much both of us would have done just about anything to get rid of one another ten years ago, but I'm actually enjoying having you around, Regina. Even if you are a stubborn bullheaded pain in the ass who still refuses to let anyone in."

"I have let you in," Regina insists. "You know almost everything that I know about what I went through in that...place."

"I doubt that," Emma says, and their eyes meet – green on brown – in a way that suggests that the sheriff understands how many things Regina will never be able to find the words to explain. How many dark secrets need to stay buried down deep because speaking of them can only bring on pain.

"You know enough."

"And I'm okay with that, because I do understand why you don't want to talk about some things. I'm not sure that I'd want to, either, and I won't push you anymore than I have - I promise you that -
but I do hope that I'm helping," Emma says, tilting her head in curiosity. "I am trying to."

"Because you're a fool," Regina replies, her words gentle enough to remove the possible sting of them. "A fool who tries to be a good person to someone who doesn't deserve it even when she shouldn't."

"Yeah, well, that's me, I guess."

"Indeed. And you are. Helping. I have felt better in the last two weeks – at least physically – than I have since I was kidnapped." She shrugs. "That's probably not saying much because everything still hurts, but it's still better."

"So, progress?"

"I suppose."

"You said physically," Emma notes.

"A lot has happened," is all Regina will allow before her eyes slide back to Henry again, and then her hands darts out to move hair from his forehead. His skin is warm and slightly damp, but he seems comfortable enough when one considers the rather intense trauma that he'd gone through tonight.

"It has," the sheriff allows.

"I didn't come back here to deal with the past," Regina continues.

"Didn't you? That's why you sent my mother that letter."

"Allow me to correct, then. I didn't return here to deal with what the Home Office did to me; I came back because I was tired of being lonely and I…"

She shakes her head and laugh, the sound hollow and sad.

"You what?" Emma prompts.

"I need to make amends."

"For the Evil Queen."

"Yes." Regina frowns, then. "Why didn't your mother have another child?"

Emma's eyebrow leaps into her hairline as if indicate her surprise at the seemingly abrupt change in subject. "Excuse me?"

"Ten years have passed, and yet you don't have a sibling. Considering how large a family your mother always wanted, that makes no sense to me."

"They tried," Emma answers sadly. She glances across at the far wall as if she's trying to figure out how best to phrase this. For a moment, as Regina watches the sheriff struggling to find a tactful way to tell the truth, she finds herself missing the brass impulsive woman who would have just blurted it out no matter how inconvenient or painful it might have been.

But she doesn't need that now, anyway.

Because the truth is painted all over Emma's face.
"The curse caused irreparable damage to her, didn't it?" Regina suggests.

"Yeah," Emma admits with a tired sounding sigh. "After the Home Office was defeated and the barrier was put up, everyone started talking about the future, and what kind of headcount would be needed to maintain upcoming generations." She shakes her head at this like she finds it absurd that she had even been part of a conversation like this. With a laugh, she continues with, "What we discovered was that a small amount of the folks in town were affected by some kind of strange after-effect of the curse; something that quite literally made it so their biological clocks failed to start up again. Which meant no aging, but also no reproductive capabilities."

"Your mother looks older. So does your father."

"Whale found a way to get everything moving again," Emma explains, her green eyes narrowing at the way Regina seems to flinch back and away from his name. "It involved a lot of science and some magic, and it worked. Kind of. Those who had been afflicted started aging like they were supposed to, but parts of them didn't start back up again. My mother was..."

"Barren," Regina says dully, thinking of the uncomfortable irony of how she now shares yet another kind of horrible fate with her once mortal enemy.

"Yeah."

"What about your father?"

Emma shakes her head. "Eventually, we realized what the connection was. Everyone who had been in my parent's castle on the night that I was born, the night that you stormed it got hit by whatever this secondary thing was."

"And I'm guessing adoption isn't much of an option here?"

"Not really, no."

"I didn't know," Regina insists. "It wasn't a clause that I built into a curse."

"Gold told us. He said that it was an unintended consequence, and that dark magic tends to have such things baked into it, which often goes completely unnoticed by the caster. You know, he actually seemed amused by you not knowing. Which got him a broken nose from my father. Bad timing."

Regina groans.

"What?"

"He may be useful, but he's still a son of a bitch."

Emma chuckles. "Yeah, he is. And I meant what I said before: you don't need whatever revenge or anger that he might be able to give you."

"Perhaps not," Regina agrees, once again reaching out to stroke Henry's hair, her fingers weaving into his dark locks. "But if they come near Henry again, I may stop caring what I need, and stop worrying about who I'm trying to be. They touch him again, and I will destroy all of them."

"They touch him again, and I'll be there with you," Emma says. "But they're not going to; we're not going to let them."
"Oh? And how do you propose that we stop an enemy that I just today finally identified? I'm all for taking this fight to them, Emma. I'm all for pushing them out of Storybrooke once more, but my dear, we both know that they're not going to make it easy to do. They want something from me – my magic, my heart, I don't really know – and they won't stop until they have a chance to get it. I imagine they won't come until then, either."

"Probably not, but there is another way to get information."

"There is?"

"There is, and once Henry is back home safe and in his bed, and all healed up, I'll show you," Emma tells her, a dark shadow passing over her face.

"You have my curiosity."

"Hold onto that because I don't think that's what you'll be feeling the most of when I show you who we have down below."

"Down below? The hospital? Inside the sanitarium?"

Emma nods her head slowly, a dark shadow falling across her face.

"You have a prisoner."

"We do, and I'll bring you to him later. He likes to talk, but so far he hasn't said much that's useful. Maybe we haven't been asking the right questions."

"Well –" she's cut off by the sound of the door opening, and then whatever words she'd been about to speak just slip away as she sees Victor enter.

He smiles at her, and her skin crawls. "How's our patient doing?" he asks, appearing to be oblivious to their prior conversation, but for some reason or another, neither woman quite buys it completely. They also don't think too terribly much if it, though, because people around here are overly nosey.

It's an Enchanted Forest thing, apparently.

"He's sleeping," Emma replies, her eyes on Regina. She can see the way that the older woman has stiffened up, reacting uncomfortably to him.

"Good. And Regina? How are you?"

She眨s and gazes right at him, clearly surprised. "What?"

"You passed out yesterday. And from what I understand, you used magic for the first time in a long while today. After what you've been through –"

"You have no idea what I've been through," Regina snaps. Her eyes dart towards Emma as if to confirm this, as if to verify that Emma hasn't passed on anything to Victor about the nightmare that she'd gone through.

Emma offers her a small smile of confirmation. As if to say she'd never.

"You're right," Victors allows, but there's a strange lilt to his voice. He's always been someone that has rung a bit false to Emma, but her lie detector is pingning like crazy, and though even she admits that it's prone to false reads, that usually doesn't happen when she's not even trying to use it.
And she hadn't been.

But he is lying about something. Or at least, he's playing coy.

She wonders if he'd gotten ahold of Regina's files all on his own.

Is that even possible?

"But I do know that magic can be rough on a system that isn't used to it," Whale continues, his tone genial like they're all just good friends having an easy chat. "And again, last night I was called over because you collapsed."

"I'm...I'm fine."

"She is," Emma confirms, moving to her feet. "And you should go."


"I mean no harm," Victor insists, his hands up as if in surrender.

"That's what you said to Ruby, too," Emma snaps back.

His eyes harden. "You could never understand what happened there."

"I don't need to. I just need to know I want you away from my son."

"Is that what you want as well, Regina?"

"Yes," the former queen answers immediately.

"All right. But what about you?"

"What about me?"

"Regina, whatever bad blood or history there is or isn't between us, you know that I'm good at what I do. I saw the way you were limping, and I know something is wrong. If you let me, I might be able to help you."

"You've helped enough," she says, and then she frowns because she really doesn't know what she means by that. Perhaps she's speaking of his deception from decades earlier or maybe she means the mob that he had once led to her door. Either way, she feels a cold certainty within her, an absolute need to keep this man as far away from her as is humanly possible.

"Of course," he says, and then he reaches out and touches her shoulder.

She freezes, and her eyes go wide with horror and for a moment, she's back on that metal table and there's so much pain and she can hear someone screaming and she knows that she's the one doing it but she can't seem to stop herself. Everything hurts, and she's bleeding so much and there are voices above her. Familiar and unsettling and one says softly, "I think we should stop for tonight; I don't think her heart can take much more of this."

She looks up at Victor, the white walls of the hospital room around them blurring, and though Emma and Henry are right nearby, all she sees is the doctor looking down at her with a knowing smirk on his lips as his fingers dig hard into her skin of her shoulder and his cold eyes stare into her soul.
Like he does know everything that she's been through.

Like he knows how broken she is.

Like he was there for it.

She opens her mouth to say something, and she almost even does, but then the sensible part of her brain catches up to irrational part, and she stops herself from speaking because this wild insane thing that she's thinking – that Victor had worked with the Home Office – well it's impossible. He couldn't have been in that warehouse and in that horrible room with her; Emma said no one has left town besides she and Henry for almost ten years.

Regina blinks and he's not smirking at her.

She blinks again, and Emma is pushing him away, and it's her hand on Regina's shoulder instead. Gentle and supportive.

"Whale," she growls, trying to ignore for just a moment how pale and shaky Regina is. How much it seems like she's trapped somewhere else entirely.

"Well, Regina, I see that you have the Savior protecting you again," the doctor says with a low chuckle, and there's something vaguely cruel and angry about the way he says this. "But you don't need it with me."

"Go," Emma tells him. "And have your nurse come back so we can start getting our paperwork done. We're checking Henry out of here tonight."

"I wouldn't recommend that," he protests, almost whining.

"We're leaving," Regina says suddenly, softly. She looks up at him. "And, Victor, you are not to come near me ever again. If you do, I'll kill you."

There's a moment where something strange goes through his eyes, and then he sneers. "Same crazy Queen," he mutters, and then turns and leaves.

"Okay, what the hell just happened?" Emma demands, stepping back and away from Regina so as to give her some much needed breathing room.

"What do you mean?"

"You've been super weird about him ever since you got back here, and then he touches you and it's like you're somewhere else entirely. Where?"

"There," Regina replies. She doesn't need to specify more than that because by now, they both know exactly what the dark place in her mind is.

"Because of Whale?"

"I suppose he reminded me of the Home Office's doctors," Regina provides. "He was always very cold about how he did things. I actually did him a small favor when I brought him over here and gave him something of a bedside manner and a soul. The real Victor is a cold bastard – an actual sociopath."

"I know," Emma tells her. "We found that out the hard way."

"Because of whatever he did to Ruby?"
"Yeah," Emma answers.

"Which you won't tell me about."

"No, I can't do that to her, but I think she would tell you if you really want to know what happened. You might not want to, though; it's bad."

Regina looks down at Henry. "She means something to him."

"They've become friends over the years. He was there for her after what happened with Whale. And after Granny died."

"Will knowing what Victor did to her help me to be there for him?" Regina asks, looking up at Emma with so much confusion in her eyes. It's a bit strange, really, because years ago, Regina never would have doubted her parenting instincts. Even when she'd been screwing things up by holding on too tight to her son, she'd still believed that she'd known what was best.

Now, she's the one asking for help.

"I think being next to him when he wakes up is all he cares about right now," Emma tells him. "Talking to Ruby might help you because she might be the one person in this town who actually understands what you went through, but what Henry needs from you? Just you, Regina. That's it."

"I hope you're right," Regina says. "Because every part of me wants to run."

"That's my gig, not yours."

"They're after me, not you."

"They'll come after him again, and we both know it."

"We do."

"So we fight these sons of bitches off together," Emma tells her. "Because he's our son, and no one is hurting him again, and you know what? I've kind of enjoyed the last few years of relative quiet. I'd like to get back to it."

"I never should have returned."

"But you did, and it's time you stop seeing that as a bad thing."

"I don't understand you."

"You never have."

"You hated me before," Regina reminds her.

"No, you pissed me off before," Emma corrects. "That's not the same thing as hate. You frustrated the shit out of me, Regina, because I knew that you could be happier if you'd just allow it, but you just kept making choices that I couldn't understand because they always seemed to hurt you most of all."

"They did."

"I guess maybe now I'm hoping we can all make better choices."
"We? And what bad choices did you make?"

"I should have trusted my gut when your mother framed you."

"Water under the bridge," Regina replies with a wave of her hand. "I forgot about that a very long time ago, dear."

"I didn't."

"You should have," Regina tells her. "Because even if that attempt had failed, my mother would have kept coming for me until she got me. I wasn't strong enough to resist her temptations or her promises." She shakes her head in disgust at just the memory of this "You know what the funny thing is? The Home Office kidnapped me, tortured me and damaged my mind to the point where remembering the past is almost always painful, but in doing so, they also gave me clarity where there was none before. I saw the truth about my mother and what she'd done to me. About how easily I'd let her."

"Regina –"

"It's all right," the former queen soothes. "Most of those memories are lost to me, too. I recall what happened in Storybrooke with her, and there are bits and pieces from my life with her back in the Enchanted Forest, but so much about my time with my mother is gone now."

"Gone or –"

"In the shadows. Where I'd prefer they remain forever."

"Including Daniel?"

"No such mercy," Regina admits.

"Right. Well, I'm still sorry."

"And I'm sorry I didn't realize that none of this ever needed to happen. I have deep remorse for what I've done and who I am. I will always have that remorse, and there will never be penance enough for me, but I admit that I don't regret it as much I know that I should because all of my actions – good or evil or somewhere in between - they gave me Henry. I do regret that I didn't see you for the ally that you could have always been to me."

"I wanted to take my son back," Emma admits with a sheepish half-smile, something that looks a bit like disgust. "I didn't even realize it at the time - I certainly wouldn't have been able to admit it to myself if I had - but the reason I chose to stay in Storybrooke wasn't because I believed what Henry was telling me about the curse or my birthright and it wasn't because I didn't believe that you loved him; it was because I had my own regrets and I let them distort everything. If our places had been reversed, Regina, I wouldn't have seen me for the ally that I was, either. Because I wasn't one."

They stare at each other for a long moment, the honest truth finally hanging between them like a breath of cold fresh air. Finally, Regina nods her head in understanding of this new alliance and says, "I need your help to do this."

"You have it," Emma promises her.

"Well, this is lovely moment," a low voice rumbles from the doorway. They both look up to see Gold standing there, an eyebrow lifted as he watches them. "Two mothers coming together to
protect their boy once again."

"Jesus, is it fuckwad day at the hospital?" Emma growls out.

"He's here to help Henry," Regina reminds her. Then, "You are, right?"

"Of course. As promised." He steps into the room and approaches Henry's bed. "But it is ever so lovely, Miss Swan, to hear your colorful vocabulary."

"Whatever. Heal him."

"Certainly. I'll need the bandages removed."

The two women exchange a look and then both of them step towards Henry. There's another moment of uncomfortable uncertainty as they try to figure out who will do what, but then Regina leans down and starts removing the bandages from around Henry's chest. Once they're free of him, she hands them to Emma who tosses them into the nearby garbage.

It's as in-sync as these two difficult different women can get, and it works.

Once the bandages are gone, and Henry's back is visible, Regina finds herself having to gulp in air because suddenly the vivid red and black burn mark is there to see, and just the memory of her own horrifically painful branding, and the reality that they'd done it to her son as well is enough to make her stomach suddenly flip over and her knees almost give out.

But she has to be strong for him so she simply turns her head away.

"Do it, Gold," Emma says softly, not looking at Regina, but at Henry instead.

She thinks about the color pictures that Henry had seen earlier that day, and wonders if any of Regina's wounds had looked like this one. She knows for a fact that Regina has a brand of her own, and she imagines that when it had been fresh and new, it'd probably been as horrifying as the one on Henry is at this moment. Now, years after receiving it, it's likely just an ugly scar that will forever torment the former queen, and remind her of the past.

Thankfully, Henry will never have to worry about that.

"Regina," she says. "He's going to be okay. Look."

Maybe it's this new trust that has suddenly developed between them – stronger tonight than it has been even though the last two weeks have given them abundant opportunity to bond and grow closer – or maybe it's Regina's own need to see Henry healed, but whatever it is, she turns around and watches with wide eyes as Gold waves his hand over Henry's shoulder and then does it again and again until the brand is completely gone.

Until he's fully healed.

And then she allows herself to breathe slower. Like she's okay again.

Like she remembers how to.

"Don't forget our deal," Gold says quietly.

Her eyes flicker to Emma. And then she nods her head.

"I won't," she promises him.
Because perhaps Wendy Darling's inevitable downfall – and likely death if the past is any guide to the present - doesn't have to be by her hand.

Or maybe it does.

But for now, she can pretend that she doesn't have to be the one who will end up with more blood staining her hands. For now, she can allow herself to believe that they can find a way to end this without any more pain.

She knows better.

It's nice to pretend.

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It's well past midnight when they finally get back to the townhouse, and David is the one who helps her onto the couch after they've deposited Henry into his bedroom. Her hip is screaming, her leg is burning and her head is pounding. She knows that she'll be lucky if she's able to stand up straight come morning, and though she's humiliated to have to admit her physical weakness, she doesn't bother to deny it, either.

Because David doesn't say a word to her when he lowers her down.

He just smiles and then steps away, back towards Snow.

"I know that you would much rather be upstairs with him," Emma says as she comes over with a tall glass of water and a painkiller. "But the kid kicks like an ox in his sleep and neither one of us really needs that right now."

"I can handle it. I want to be there when he wakes up."

"And you will be," Emma assures her. "As soon as he starts coming to, I'll wake you up, and we'll both be there. But for now, he needs sleep. In the morning, he's going to have questions about what happened, and why he doesn't have the brand, and I think we need to be as honest as we can."

Regina swallows hard.

"He already knows everything," Emma reminds her.

"He knows what was in the file," Regina counters. "That's as honest as I'm willing to be. Everything else, I can't."

Regina pretends not to notice the look of horror on Snow's face.

The one that says that it hadn't occurred to her that there could be worse things.

"That's good enough," Emma assures her. "Besides, I wasn't saying we needed to talk about the file or what happened to you. I was thinking more about why they're after you now, and why what happened to him did."

"Is that better? For him to know that he was hurt because of me?"

"He's more likely to be pissed on your behalf than mad at you."
"She's right," Snow says with a smile as she thinks endearingly of her grandson. "He doesn't like the people he loves being hurt, Regina. Your son is brave and he's strong and he wants to protect those he cares about."

"So much like you," Regina says, looking at Emma. "A fool rushing into battles that they don't understand because they're too stupid not to."

"If it makes you feel better, he's a snarky asshole like you."

"So, you mean he has my fantastic wit?"


"All right, then we'll be honest with him."

"Good. Now take your pill and sleep. Tomorrow is going to suck."

"You really do have a terrible vocabulary," Regina comments.

"Gold said colorful, not terrible," Emma reminds her. "And thank you."

Regina rolls her eyes, and then knocks the pill back with the water. It'll hit her quickly, and then everything will just fade away to static, but for now, she allows herself the calm of knowing that everyone she cares about is safe in this house and though there may be pain to come, for now, there's calm.

"We can stay," David says to Emma, for at least the fifth time since leaving the hospital with Henry sound asleep in the backseat of Ruby's Cadillac.

"I know," Emma replies. "Or you can go home and get a good night's sleep and be ready to deal with whatever we have to deal with in the morning."

"She's right," Snow tells her husband. "But if something happens –"

"You'll be the first to know."

"Okay," She steps towards Regina, then, and for a second, their eyes meet like they both want to say something to each other. Snow's hand moves forward, and it almost looks like she might take Regina's – it's not like they haven't touched each other since Regina's return – but then she pulls back because this moment feels wrong for this kind of emotion. It feels like even though they've come so very far, they haven't come far enough for this.

Not yet.

So Snow simply smiles, tucks her hands into her pockets to keep them from rebelling on her, says goodnight to her former stepmother, and then moves to leave. She's only slightly surprised when Emma follows them outside.

"I have a favor to ask," she says, her voice quiet and conspiratorial.

"Anything," David replies.

"I need to know where Whale was ten years ago. The night Neal died and Regina was kidnapped."

Snow tilts her head, as if remembering something from very long ago. "He wasn't at the hospital when we got there. He was…hard to find, right?"
"He was," David confirms, frowning. "When he did show up later, he said that he'd been sleeping, and hadn't heard his phone ringing, but we knew that he hadn't been at his own house because we'd looked for him there."

"No one asked any more questions than that," Emma reminds them. "We all had bigger concerns once Greg and Tamara tried to take everyone down. But maybe we should have asked more. Maybe we should have looked at him closer."

"Why?" Snow prompts. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that Regina freaks out anytime he comes near her. I'm thinking that he touched her tonight and she just about panicked. I'm thinking that there was an inside man who helped them, and we never did find out who it was."

"You're sure this isn't just about Ruby?" David asks. He looks over at Snow and sees her look - she's wanted Whale to pay for what he did for a very long time - and puts his hands up. "I just want to be clear about this."

"I honestly don't know if this is or isn't about Ruby, but I am sure that Whale knows more about Regina than he should," Emma states. "And whether that's because he knows the same way I do or because he has actual personal experience with what she went through, I don't know, but I do think we should find out because if he is involved in this, then he could have been the one to hurt Henry tonight. Or at least he knows who did it."

"Okay," David nods. "I'll ask around."

"Thank you," Emma replies. "And for what it's worth, I hope I'm wrong on this."

"Me, too," Snow confirms.

"One more thing," Emma says. "I'm taking her to see Greg tomorrow."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Snow asks, thinking about an angry man who has been held away from everyone - thought dead and buried - for almost ten years.

"We've been asking questions, and he's been stonewalling us for ten years," Emma answers with a look of grim determination. "Maybe seeing Regina again will get him talking. Maybe even get him to tell us the truth for once."

"But it could also hurt her."

"I know, and before we go in, I'll make sure she understands who it is that she's about to see. If she doesn't want to do it, we won't, and if she reacts badly to seeing him or whatever he says to her, we'll leave immediately."

"You're sure about this?" Snow asks, echoing her husband's previous question.

"No, but I think that we need to understand what we're dealing with."

"Do you want us there?" David asks.

"Maybe. I'll let you know."

"Okay," he leans in and kisses her on the cheek. "Just call."

She smiles, squeezes Snow's hand, and then steps back inside.
"What was all that about?" Regina drawls, her head lolled against the couch.

"I was telling them about our plans to go visit an old friend tomorrow," Emma replies. It's a bit of a half-truth, but she's not about to tell Regina about her suspicions of Whale. Not yet, at least; Regina is already anxious enough about the man, and until she's certain, Emma just won't do that to her.

"You'll tell me more in the morning?" Regina asks. "When I can remember?"

"I will," Emma assures her, her eyes tracking the glaze that's settling deep within Regina's own. "Would you like me to stay around for awhile? Until you fall asleep, at least?"

"Why? Did you want to talk, dear?" Regina asks, her eyebrow lifting up lazily. It's probably supposed to be haughty, but these painkillers have always moved mercifully quickly through her system, and she can already feel herself drifting out and away. Things hurt less, and she feels less.

That also means she understands less.

But she understands that Emma is trying to be there for her.

Trying to be a rock in case she needs it.

"Only if you want to," Emma replies, shifting around anxiously.

"For a minute," Regina admits, realizing that no, she doesn't really want to be alone just yet. In a moment or two, the world will slip away, and she won't care who is sitting beside her, but for now, she craves company.

Even if she's had it all night.

It's a bit like someone who has been in prison for a very long time suddenly wanting to gorge themselves on everything that feels like living again.

No, it's exactly like that.

"But only if you promise that you will wake me up when Henry wakes up; I want to be there."

"I said I would and I will," Emma confirms. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

"I didn't want to, but since you're asking, why don't you have a lover?"

"All right, wasn't expecting that." She shrugs. "I've had relationships on and off, but Henry always came first, and well, I'm the daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming. There are surprisingly less suitors than you'd think."

"I don't believe that."

"It's the truth, sad to say."

"But it shouldn't be; being alone is awful."

"I'm not alone," Emma tells her, a bit of defiant defensiveness in her tone. "I have my parents, and I have friends, and Henry comes home from school whenever he can."

"It's not the same."

"Maybe not, but I'm not an easy person to love."
"And I thought you were the one with a lie detector."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Emma asks. She's standing above Regina currently, her hands settled on her hips, looking down at a sleepy and now heavily drugged woman who seems to be seconds away from passing out.

"It means you're very easy to love, dear; you're a hero with a stupid heart."

"Stupid heart," Emma muses. "So the painkillers are working."

"You should open it up and allow yourself to be loved."

"I have everything I need right here."

"Until you don't," Regina murmurs, her eyes slipping closed, and her body sliding down against the couch into an undignified half-slump. "And then you're just lonely and broken, and it's no one's fault but your own."

Emma's about to reply – though she's not entirely sure she knows how to respond to something that is so clearly self-referencing – but she stops when she sees the way Regina's breathing has slowed; she's sleeping now.

"You ridiculously stubborn woman," she mutters. She picks up a blanket and settles it gently over Regina's heavily slumbering body, tucking it lightly around her waist (not too high up or tight because she doesn't want Regina to feel trapped by it should she awaken in a confused and disorientated half-drugged state sometime in the night). "I'll see you in the morning, Regina," she says with a bit of a wry chuckle. "And the morning after that. And the morning after that."

She gets no reply.

But that's okay.

Because come morning, she'll be here. And so will Regina.

And then yeah, together, they're going to bring down Wendy Darling, the Home Office and whomever their inside man is once and for all.

TBC...
"I think that's enough for now," she finally says, her accented voice like poisoned honey. She's standing off to the side of the all white room (it's not quite all white, anymore, Regina muses, her gallows humor apparently still intact), clear of any blood splatter, but she can see every blow and hear every strike with devastating clarity, and though Regina's eyes are closed in pain, she knows that the woman is smiling.

Or at least making an expression that somewhat resembles a smile.

This woman – the Home Office's Queen – she could give the Evil Queen a run for her money in the category of cruelty and insanity. She's cold, barbaric and devastatingly focused. She's also dedicated and wickedly detail orientated. She never misses a session, never seems to find any of the torture distasteful or pedestrian as Regina had.

Not that it really matters, anyway, because the fact remains that Regina is the one hanging by chains from the ceiling, her back torn open and blood dripping down her shredded skin. She's just barely conscious, just barely aware of the coldness of the room and the agony of her flesh. She tries to push herself deeper towards the darkness, prays for it to steal her away.

But it won't because her captor would never allow that. Not yet, anyway.

"Bring her down," the woman says. "Place her face forward onto the table."

Rough hands grab at Regina's body, and though she hates herself for it, she whimpers when they pull her down too quickly, and her skin stretches and tears even further. She grits her teeth, but she can't stop the horrible sound that forces its way out of her abused throat. A palm settles across her nude hip, and she's reminded for a moment that she's bare to their eyes. Another game, another way of letting her know how little control she has over this.

She's lifted into the air by heavily muscled male arms, carried for a few feet, and then in contrast to her previous handling, almost gently deposited onto a cold metal table. The soft front of her naked body presses hard against it, and she shivers involuntarily. It's a strange small mercy, though, not to have her wounded back against the surface, and she's confused because this horrible woman understands mercy even less than the Evil Queen had, and well, Regina had been quite exceptional at denying even the smallest amount of it to those who had displeased her.

"You held up quite well, darling," the woman purrs as she leans in so that she's speaking directly into Regina's ear, her voice a mere whisper. "You continue to impress me. I never would have expected a woman of royal blood to be so adept at absorbing a whipping. One might almost mistake you for a dirty peasant."

Regina says nothing in response, refusing to rise to the bait. She's played this game with their Queen a half dozen times already, and though this whipping had been by far the worst of them,
she's come to understand that this wretched woman is trying to get something from – or out of - her.

"Oh, but you're far from simply that, aren't you?" the woman chuckles, the sound so cold and darkly amused. She reaches out towards Regina with a hand and places her palm against the feverish skin of the former queen's torn back. A moment later, Regina gasps in pain when she feels a nail lightly trace over one of the fresh lash marks, even the gentle pressure causing new bright red blood to bubble up and out of the wound. "You're a terrible horrible soulless witch who has caused so very much pain, and so this? This is just your just reward, and we both know it, don't we?"

"Why won't you just kill me?" Regina whispers, wincing as the nail continues to run across the different deep lines on her back. The pressure is getting harder and more intense, and it's quite clear that this is supposed to hurt.

"Because I don't want you dead," is the simple answer she gets. "Not yet, anyway. We have so many more conversations to have before that day will come. So very much more to learn about each other before I burn you at the stake."

"If you don't want me dead -"

"Oh, but I do want you dead. Just not yet."

"Then what do you want from me?" Regina demands, though she knows that she won't get an answer that actually makes any kind of logical sense. She's been asking this question since the first day that she'd woken up – bound and gagged - in this nightmare, and she still has no idea why this woman continues to torture her as opposed to just outright killing her.

She figures that she'd done something terribly wrong to someone that this woman had once loved dearly, and if so, then this is surely some kind of revenge. That would make sense to her, but there's something wrong about that theory, she realizes. When she herself had been bent on revenge, she'd been an emotion tornado of fury and rage, but not her captor.

No, her captor seems to be completely emotionally detached from what she's doing in this room. Like the pain that Regina is going through is just a secondary pleasure, and there's another purpose behind it all.

The question is what, but even this fades away when the tip of one of the woman's nails presses hard into one of the open wounds and then down into hard enough to force a scream out of Regina's mouth. Hot tears bubble up in her eyes, and in that moment, she's so acutely aware of the fact that she's tied naked to a cold metal table and a maniac is torturing her.

She supposes that this is supposed to be some kind of karmic justice, but it's hard to think about right and wrong when someone is trying to make you bleed and they're watching you like you're a human science experiment.

"What I want is simply for you to give in and show your real self to me," the woman says sweetly, her nail again driving into one of the bloody wounds."Once you do that, this can all be over for everyone."

"I don't know what that means," Regina gasps, smoky darkness swirling near the corners of her eyes. The pain she's feeling is intense, and she can feel the mercy of unconsciousness stealing towards her. She can only hope that her captor will allow it to take her away even if only for a few minutes.
"You will, darling," the woman chuckles.

"But for now, Mom, you should rest."

She looks up and she seems him standing there, dressed in jeans and a red and black flannel shirt. He's smiling sadly at her, and his right hand is outstretched towards her, like he wants to touch her, but doesn't dare try.

"Henry," she whispers, smiling in relief. It's wrong – so very wrong – to be depending on him, but almost since the first shock of electricity had surged through back in the Cannery with Owen Flynn, her little boy has been here with her to try to hold her up and make her stronger. She knows, of course, that this is all in her mind, but she just doesn't care.

"I'm here," Henry tells her. "And I'll be here when you wake up, too, but for now, you need to close your eyes and go away to somewhere that's better than this. Maybe you can go to the beach where you taught me how to swim, okay?"

"Why?" she asks, lifting a hand up as if to try to touch him. It occurs to her, then, that she's not actually being held down by anything, but the pain she feels is so significant that even the slightly bit of movement is too much.

"Because she's going to hurt you again," he says, his voice quiet and sad.

"Henry –"

"Mom, please. I don't want you to be hurt. Please, close your eyes."

"Okay," she whispers, her eyes closing, and her breathing slowing.

The last thing she feels before she passes out is her captor's fingernail being jammed as deep as possible into one of the open wounds. The last thing she smells is the scent of blood in the air. The last thing she hears, though, well that's Henry calling out for her. "Mom," he says. "Mom, I'm right here."

And then she lets it all just float away.

*** ***

"Mom? Mom, I'm here. Wake up. Mom!"

Her eyes snap open and she rolls – gracelessly – towards the voice that is calling out for her. Her body is heavy and drugged, and she thinks that it must be early in the morning and somewhere deep in the cycle of the painkillers that she's on because she normally doesn't feel quite this badly out of it when she's completely conscious. "Henry?" she asks, though she's not quite sure if she actually says his name or mumbles it.

"I'm here," he says again, his hands on her shoulders like he's been shaking her. He probably should have learned his lesson from last time - she had punched him - but he just doesn't seem to care or be worried about that.

"What happened?"

"You were crying and calling out for me," he says, sitting down next to her on the couch. It takes her a moment to adjust her bloodshot eyes, and then she sees that the boy beside her isn't eleven years old anymore and he's not in checkered flannel. Instead, he's twenty-two and wearing a faded
tee shirt and sweatpants. He also has dark fuzz all over his cheeks.

She wonders why she hadn't noticed his attempts at growing facial hair before. And then wonders why she's thinking about that of all things right now. "I was?" she asks, shaking her head to try to get some focus back into her befuddled brain.

"Yeah, you were," Henry says softly, and then he reaches out as if to touch her face and wipe the tears away. Halfway there, she catches his hand, and it's like a switch gets thrown because suddenly she remembers that just a few hours earlier, he'd been the one hurting thanks to a brand on his back.

"Your back," she presses.

"It's gone" he says immediately. "There's nothing there. I don't understand."

She exhales. "Gold healed you."

"Can he heal you, too?" His eyes light up with hope, like he thinks that maybe it could all be so very easy to fix her.

"No, my wounds are too old for that. Where's Emma?"

He frowns at her first statement, but answers the questions, "When I left her, she was sound asleep in the chair next to my bed. She looked so tired; I didn't want to wake her up. I think I'm actually doing better than you two are."

"We're fine," Emma says from the doorway. "And you did wake me up because you walk like an elephant."

"I walk like the prince that I am. And by the way, you both are liars because neither one of you looks fine," Henry contests. "You were knocked out practically upside down in the chair and she was crying in her sleep again."

Emma's eyebrow lifts up in concern, but a glance over at Regina, and she realizes that the older woman is still too drugged up to actually have a coherent conversation with her. As it is, it's clearly taking every bit of concentration that Regina has for her to even stay aware of what's going on around her at the moment. Emma watches as Regina's eyes keep drifting around, and there's a decidedly lazy quality to the muscles in her face; like they've already returned to sleep without her.

"We're fine," Emma assures him again. "But we'd both be a lot more fine if you could show us your back."

"You know that's kind of creepy, right?"

"So is that half mustache or beard or whatever that is that you're currently trying to grow, but I wasn't going to say anything about it," she shoots back, looking almost proud of herself.

"I kind of like it," Regina notes with an almost ridiculously large smile.

"Yes, but you're high as a kite. When you see it in the morning, you won't think it's so special."

"Hey!" Henry protests. "It's very early. Just three days old. Be nice, okay?"

"Uh huh. Your back, kid. Shirt up."

"Pervert," he groused before turning around so that he's facing away from them. He then he lifts up
the tee shirt so that it's practically over his head. This view allows them to see the smoothness of his skin. It also allows them to see that the only mark still on their son's back is a tattoo of a bright red apple on the opposite shoulder from the one that had been branded.

Emma's pretty sure she sees Regina smile, even through her drugged haze.

"Good enough," she says. "Now get your ass back to bed."

"What about her?" he asks as he lowers his shirt and turns to face them. "She shouldn't be alone for these nightmares."

"I can handle them," Regina insists. She tries to sit up to convince him, but her muscles refuse her.

"Because you're fine."

"Yes."

"You're not, and I wish you'd stop saying that you are. I wish everyone would stop saying that right now," Henry shoots back. "I know everything that happened to you now, Mom. Let us help you. Let me help you. Please?"

"Emma," Regina pleads, because the other words all stick in her throat.

"We can talk about all of this in the morning, kid," Emma offers. "But for now, we all need to get back to bed. It's only two in the morning, and I could use another eight hours of sleep and I think both of you could, too."

"Yeah," he admits. "But with her leg and hip thing, she shouldn't be here."

"Henry," Regina says, blinking her eyes rapidly as the painkillers starts to pull her down again. She shifts a bit to keep herself aware and in the now.

"You're hurt," he says. "You should be sleeping on a bed. If you don't want to crash on mine with me – because Emma lies and says I kick in my sleep –"

"You do," the sheriff drawls.

He pointedly ignores her. "Then you can have the bed, and I'll crash here."

"Absolutely not," Regina says immediately, finally forcing herself up into what she thinks is the sitting position. Everything is spinning around her, and her stomach is rolling, but she reminds herself that she's strong enough to have a simple conversation with her stubborn son. She can be the parent that she hasn't been able to be to him for the last ten years.

"Mom –"

"I am not an invalid, and I will not have my son who was attacked tonight sleeping on a couch. End of discussion, Henry." She evens her gaze at him, and hopes that it doesn't just look goofy and high, but rather intimidating.

She'll never know if she succeeds, though, because Emma jumps in to stop Henry from continuing his argument by saying, "How about you stay in your bed, Henry, and your mom can crash on mine? Will that work for you?"

"What about you?" he asks, his brow furrowing as his mind runs through all of the sleeping arrangements that hadn't seemed so complicated before.
"I can take the couch for tonight –"

"Emma, no –"

Emma ignores her, her eyes locked on Henry because he's the one that she's trying to calm. "And later today, when all of us are thinking straight again, we can figure out what to do on the days that you're home from school."

"I can get my own place," Regina offers. "Or I can stay at the Inn."

"You're not leaving," Henry says immediately, his eyes wide and worried.

"No, she's not. Regina, would you please just shut up and work with me? Because if you keep arguing, I'm going to say fuck it and then you're going to end up sharing a bed with me, and apparently I'm a cuddler."

"She's not lying," Henry admits. "Like, a creepy cuddler, actually. And trust me when I tell you that you don't want to know how I learned that. But it was creepy. Really creepy."

"Shut it, kid," Emma growls, her face slightly red with embarrassment.

The former queen is somewhat ignorant of this exchange, though because her mind is whirling as she tries to absorb the idea of anyone besides Henry sleeping next to her in a bed.

A few years ago, once she'd tricked herself into believing herself stable enough for it, she'd tried to have a brief sexual relationship with a stranger from a bar, but a massive panic attack had ended that before it has even really begun.

Unfortunately, the idea of someone touching her in any kind of intimate (and not even necessarily sexual way) after the Home Office had taken such dramatic liberties with her body over her three years of captivity had been abhorrent and almost nearly incomprehensible to her. That ill-conceived attempt at a one-night stand – out of her usual character as the women she'd once been, but a desperate attempt to find pieces of her old self – had been her only try.

Now she has Emma's joking words about sharing a bed ringing in her mind.

Which is ridiculous because Emma had just been teasing her, and even if she hadn't been, this woman has more than proved her trustworthiness. She's proven that she doesn't want to hurt her former enemy in any way. In fact, she's shown quite the opposite inclination. So why the sudden fear now?

It's the painkillers, Regina reasons; they're clouding her mind up. She can feels the fuzzy edges closing in on her, and the strength is leaving her body. So she sighs before she loses the ability to have an actual say in this conversation, and reluctantly acquiesces. "Your bed is acceptable," she mumbles out, her blinking slowing and her words slurring.

"That super bizarre statement is good enough for me," Emma chirps. "Henry, can you take her left side?"

He stretches his arm as if to test the pain levels in his shoulders and immediately smiles. It's a bit sore around the back of it, but it's still strong enough for this. "Yeah."

"I can walk," Regina tells them, forcing her eyes to open up again.

"Do we want to let her try?" Emma asks.
"No," Henry scolds, shaking his head but smiling because he never thought that he'd miss the old antagonistic edge between his mothers. This one is so much more gentle – teasing instead of sharply delivered shots – but it feels familiar in a way that makes him think that maybe ten years haven’t passed.

But then Regina gasps as they lift her, her body pulled sideways by the differing heights of mother and son, and Henry remembers every line of the police file with horrible clarity. He can see every picture and quite clearly visualize every injury that had been suffered, and he knows that not only have ten years passed, but they’ve done so in the cruelest of ways.

"I've got her," he says, and before Emma can ask what he means, he lowers his knees, swings his arms down, and lifts Regina into them. She’s far too light for a grown woman, and it makes his stomach curdle, but he ignores the protests from both of his mothers, and moves towards the stairs.

She's half asleep and curled completely into him – her head resting against his chest and good shoulder – by the time they get to Emma's room. He tries desperately not to think about the fact that ten years ago, his proud angry at the whole world mother would have walked over broken glass before she would have ever accepted this kind of help from anyone. Even him.

"Go ahead," Emma says, indicating towards her messy unmade up bed.

"You can knock out in my room with me," he tells her as he lowers Regina onto the bed. "I promise I'll try not to kick you."

"I can't promise I won't try to cuddle," she replies with a wink.

"You know that's super weird, right?"

"Whatever. Kiss your mom goodnight, and go away."

Henry chuckles, starts to lean down, and then stops, "She's going to get better, isn't she? She won't wake up with nightmares every night, right?"

"Honestly, kid, right now I'm less worried about her dreams, and more worried about yours. She's had seven years of coping experiences with her nightmares. You're on day one. So tell me the truth: how are you doing?

"I don't remember much," he replies. "I felt pain, but I didn't see anything, and I think I must have blacked out pretty quick. And you know what? After seeing what Ruby went through and reading Mom's file, I guess maybe a mark that isn't even there anymore doesn't really mean a whole lot to me."

He shrugs his shoulders when he says this, and his eyes flicker down towards Regina's shoulder – the one that has a mark like he once had - in a way that tells Emma everything she needs to know about his current headspace.

"It should," Emma says softly. "I don't ever want you to be able to blow off being hurt like it doesn't matter. Because it matters to me. And you know that it matters to her." She smiles slightly. "She used magic for you."

"Is that a good thing?" Henry frowns. "Magic hurt her so much before."

"I know, and I really don't know if it is a good thing," Emma admits with a tired sigh. "But if the
goons that took her and attacked you tonight are after her again, I have to think that we want her to have a way to defend herself."

"You promise you'll watch out for her?"

"I'm drugged, not dead," Regina mumbles, sounding like she has cotton in her mouth. "Which means that I can hear you talking about me. Stop it."

"Sorry," Emma and Henry say at the same time. They exchange a glance of shared mischief that ends a sleepy looking glare from the former queen.

"Mm. Kiss me goodnight, Henry," Regina orders.

"And go away?" he finishes, an eyebrow up as he remembers Emma's almost identical words from just moments earlier.

"What?"

Apparently, Regina isn't intentionally echoing Emma.

Henry laughs. "I love you guys," he says, kissing Regina on the forehead. He reaches down, yanks the blanket up, pecks her one more time, nudges Emma, and then turns and leaves the room, glancing once over his shoulder.

"How much did you hear?" Emma asks once the door closes behind him.

"Enough to know he's lying about his feelings about tonight."

"Yeah, thought so, too." Emma sighs. "We can deal with it later today."

"Yeah," Regina agrees, her eyes once again closing. "Lie down, Sheriff."

"What?"

"It's your bed, and it's been a long day for you, too." She studies the uncertainty on Emma's face, and then says in a quiet voice, "Unless I make you nervous in which case -"

"You don't. Make me nervous, I mean. But like I said, I'm a cuddler. And I don't want to make you nervous or uncomfortable," she replies, choosing not to say that she has a pretty good idea about how at ease Regina is with close contact considering the way she's tensed up at the moment. It's far less than she would be if she weren't drugged, but there's still an awkward and obvious stiffness to her body that tells Emma everything that she needs to know right now.

"I appreciate that, but I don't want to be alone forever, Emma. So put a pillow between us then," Regina replies softly. "And help me get through this." Her dark hazy eyes meet Emma's bright ones, and once again they seem to just understand what the other one is saying and thinking.

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure that in a few minutes, you could probably duct tape yourself around me, and I wouldn't notice. I don't know how I'm awake right now."

"Neither do I, but for what's it worth, I won't. Duct tape myself to you, I mean," Emma assures her as she moves a pillow next to Regina, and then lies down next to it. "And I'll try not to do anything else weird, too."
"I know," Regina whispers, smiling slightly as her eyes close once more.

And moments later, when it's dark and quiet, and Emma is certain that she really is the only one awake in the room, she allows herself a soft chuckle. Because this day had been terrible, and the night had been worse, and she's angry and scared about what's to come, but for now, everything is okay.

And she'll keep thinking that - keep saying that - until she finds a way to make it true.

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It's the sound of Emma's cell going off that wakes her up at almost two in the afternoon later that day. It's playing some obnoxiously inappropriate hip hop song – she's fairly certain that Henry had programmed it in when he'd stolen her phone in order to give himself a cooler picture for when he called her – and once her sleep fogged mind clears up enough to realize what's happening, she recognizes it as the one that sounds when Snow rings.

Grunting, she rolls to pick up the phone.

And then stops cold.

Because, apparently, even pillows can't stop the Savior from wrapping herself around others and forcibly cuddling them into submission.

Or something ridiculous like that.

The pillow that had divided she and Regina when they had fallen asleep is now crushed between them and she has one of her arms thrown across Regina's waist. It's a light hold, but it's a hold just the same. What's even more damning, though, is that her entire body is turned towards Regina and she's pushed up close to her like she's trying to spoon the older woman.

Wincing in embarrassment (and incredibly thankful that Regina appears to still be dead out and therefore unaware of her inability to control herself in her sleep), Emma slowly removes her arm from around the former queen, and then scoots over to the far side of the bed and grabs the cell.

"Mom," she answers, her voice low so as not to wake Regina up.

"Hey," Snow says. Then, after a brief pause, she continues with some concern, "Are you okay? You sound a little strange."

"Yeah. I'm fine, just still kind of groggy. What's up?" Emma replies as she swings her feet off the bed, and starts looking around for her socks.

"We hadn't heard from you. We just wanted to check in."

"Sorry about that. We're all doing okay here for the moment. We're just waking up," Emma answers as she starts pulling on her heavy socks.

"It was a long night," Snow notes.

"It was," Emma agrees, not bothering to add that Snow doesn't know the half of it. Her mother isn't a foolish woman and she was at the house for the night of Regina's electrocution nightmare, so she probably already knows that her former stepmother has bad dreams, but Emma has no intention of speaking about them to anyone – even Snow - without permission to do so.
"Anything I can help with?" Snow asks, like she's reading Emma's mind.

"Everyone's fine," Emma assures her again.

She can almost see her mother's small unconvinced smile as she says, "If you say so, honey." Then, "So, are you going to take her to see Greg today?"

"Depends on if she's up for it. I'm guessing she will be."

"Well if you do decide to go, our offer stands. We can be there with you. I would like to be there for both of you if you'll let me."

"You know I will, and I think she will, but let me figure out what we're doing first" Emma smiles. "I'll call you in a bit, okay?"

"Sure. I love you," Snow tells her.

Emma smiles to herself, and wonders why it's become so easy to call her parents by their titles, but saying those three words still trip her up.

"You, too," she says after a moment.

She thinks she hears Snow chuckle, the sound affectionate in a way that both hurts and continues to heal the Savior's wounded heart. "Bye, Emma."

"Bye, Mom," Emma replies, hoping that that's enough to make her feelings clear. She sets the cell phone down on the table and shakes her head, wondering why it is that she's thinking about these kinds of things again.

It's been so long since she's worried about the things she can't say, and yet now, it feels like every time that she stumbles over the words that should be so easy, there's something inside of her that twists and bends painfully.

"What time is it?" Regina murmurs from her side, her voice low and throaty, but the words clear enough to suggest that the drugged haze has passed.

"Oh, hey, good…morning. Or good afternoon. Or something. And as for your actual question, it's a bit after two PM," Emma replies as she turns to look at the woman who she'd shared a bed with – a woman who years ago had been her sworn enemy. She sees her trying to sit up, sore muscles clearly slowing and hindering her movements. "You need some help?"

"I can stand up on my own," Regina tells her, her chin lifted up in a show of haughty defiance and her dark eyes sparkling furiously. Once she realizes, though, that Emma isn't at all impressed with her performance, she relents with a tired sounding sigh. "But I probably will need my cane today."

Emma offers her a small understanding smile, the kind that says that she understands Regina's need for pride. "I'll get it. You do what you need to."

Regina nods her gratitude. Once Emma is out of the room, she puts a hand out to steady herself, and starts to stand. Before she can get too far up, though, her eyes flicker over towards the pillow in the middle of the bed.

The pillow that had been rested – crunched – against her moments earlier.

Her memories from a few hours earlier are fairly hazy, and they burn a bit to pull forward, but it's
not terribly hard to figure out what had happened.

Well, Emma had warned her that she was a cuddler, she muses.

The strange thing is, Regina knows that she should be badly shaken up by the fact that the sheriff had likely been pressed against her, maybe even touching her. Just a month ago, this would have caused a panic attack.

But she's not panicking right now and she's not at all shaken up.

Because maybe she's missed the kind of human contact that doesn't hurt.

Or maybe it's because she really does trust the woman who had been next to her. That had been the reason she'd let Emma stay beside her in the first place, right? So it actually makes sense that that's why she's not freaking out right now about the sheriff having moved closer than she should have.

Whatever the reason — or reasons — for her lack of a panic attack, Regina knows that she doesn't want to think too deeply on it right now because there are simply no easy answers or explanations as to why everything inside of her heart and mind feels like it's changing at a breakneck speed.

So she simply stands up and takes a breath.

There's someone that Emma wants to take her to see today.

Someone that might help them to finally figure out what the Home Office wants from her, and who it is inside of Storybrooke that is helping them.

Maybe this person can even tell her who it was that had attacked Henry.

Regina feels a flicker of something deep within her belly — it's black and sticky and she recognizes it immediately as the old anger that had once burned within her so corrosively. Her lip curls up in disgust, and she tries to remind herself of all of the things that she'd lost because of her fury.

She tries to remind herself of three years of constant pain and hurt.

Her anger had made her into an ugly horrible person who has caused so much unnecessary suffering. It had turned her into someone who had hated and been hated in return. Someone whom her own son had feared.

She won't be that person again.

She rubs her fingers over the thick scars on her palm and inhales slowly.

"You okay?" Emma asks as she enters the room with the cane in her hand.

"I am. Just reminding myself of a few important things."

"Such as underwear?" Emma jokes.

Regina's eyebrow lifts, a smirk playing on her lips. "My cane, Miss Swan?"

"Right. Here," Emma replies, handing it over to the former queen with an impish grin. "So, seriously, what's on your mind?"

"First, is Henry up yet?"
"Yeah. He's peeing."

Regina wrinkles her nose.

"Sorry, what's the proper way to say that? The Queenly way?"

"He's using the bathroom would have been sufficient," Regina replies dryly.

"I'll remember that," Emma nods. "Now, out with it."

"I'm...I'm angry," the former queen admits, her fingers gripping around the cane and squeezing it hard enough to make her knuckles turn white. "I'm really...I feel like I did before."

"Because of what happened to Henry?"

"Yes."

"I'm angry, too," Emma confesses.

"Yes, but your anger hasn't previously lead to death and destruction. Or well-deserved moniker of the Evil Queen."

"No, it hasn't," the sheriff concurs.

"Well, mind did so I'm just trying to remind myself of how much there is to lose now."

"You're not going to lose anything," Emma says, reaching out and touching her arm. It's meant to force Regina to look directly at her, and it works, Regina's dark eyes lifting up to meet her green ones. "None of us are."

"I believe you," Regina tells her. "And that..."

She trails off, unable to admit how much her trust in Emma frightens her.

"I get it," Emma assures her. She offers a small smile, and then gestures towards the door. "Our kid is probably waiting for us. For you, really."

"You told him that I'm fine, I assume?"

"Of course, but he won't believe me until he sees you."

"I abhor that he's worried about me. He shouldn't be."

"But he is because he loves you."

"Words I never thought I'd hear again," Regina murmurs.

"Well, you're going to get to hear them for the rest of your life. We both are because we're going to stop these bastards and live happily ever after."

"Are we now?" Regina chuckles. "When did you become an optimist?"

"My mother rubbed off on me, I guess."

"I wish I could share your optimism."

"You don't need to," Emma shrugs, hoping that Regina can't read the uncertainty in her own eyes.
"You just need to believe me when I tell you everything is going to be okay. Like you just said that you do."

Regina inclines her head in acceptance of then and then sighs when Emma smiles in response. She then grips her cane again, takes a breath to steady her nerves and then husks, "All right, Sheriff, let's go reassure our son."

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It takes them almost half of an hour to convince Henry that he doesn't need to accompany them on their fact-finding mission. He doesn't know where they're going or whom they're going to see, but the old childlike curiosity is burning in his eyes and it causes both of his mothers to resort to forcing a promise of non-activity out of him. He needs to rest, they urge, and then Regina ignores him when he throws those truthful words right back at her.

Eventually, though, he gives up.

But not before he makes them both promise, too. "Be careful," he pleads.

Though it hurts her to do so – her hip is hurting about as badly as it has since she first arrived back here in Storybrooke – she leans up and presses and kiss to his forehead. "Everything is going to be okay, Henry," she tells him, this time intentionally parroting Emma's previously spoken words.

"You wouldn't lie to me, right?"

"Not anymore."

"Then I'll chill," he says. "For now."

"Good enough," Emma tells him. "For now."

They share a cheeky smile, and it's enough to make an old pang of jealousy go through Regina's heart, but she squashes that down quickly.

Because both Emma and Henry have earned – and deserved – better.

So she waits their moment out, and then sighs in relief when he puts his arms around her and holds her close for just a few short moments.

They feel like a perfect eternity for her.

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"So who is it that we're going to see?" Regina asks as they get into the car. Her hip protests the sitting position, but she ignores the pain; it'll be a short ride, anyway, and she can't afford to take any medication right now.

Emma considers waiting until they get to the asylum to answer the question in order to make it a surprise, but then reconsiders. The major reason that she hadn't told Regina who they'd been holding while they'd been at the hospital holding vigil over Henry's bed had been to ensure that no one could overhear, and she hadn't told her the previous night because she hadn't wanted Regina to obsess over it or have bad flashback nightmares.

Unfortunately, that had occurred just the same.
Which means she might as well just spit it out.

"Greg Mendell," Emma replies softly.

"As in Owen Flynn?" Regina blurts, her eyes wide.

"One and the same."

"I thought he died in the fight after my kidnapping."

"Everyone else did, too," Emma answers. "We found him unconscious and hurt, but not as badly as he should have been. We decided that he needed to be hidden away as much for his safety as for everyone else's."

"Because you thought the same mob that came for me would go after him?"

"Yeah. They would have gone after him – we lost a lot of good people that night – and I'm not sure that my father and I could have stopped them. With you, folks were pissed off at you, but they were also scared enough to stay away. They weren't scared of Greg, and they weren't scared of me."

"They would have kept coming for him until they got him," Regina says. She smiles grimly, humorlessly. "I believe we call that Enchanted Forest justice."

"That's what my father said, too. So we decided to hide him, and see if he could assist us in finding you. As you can guess, he wasn't overly helpful."

"No, I expect not, though he certainly knew where I was the whole time." She tilts her head in curiosity. "Have you told him about my return yet?"

"No, I thought it best to use that as a way to get him talking."

"You mean a way to shock him into an angry rant."

"Same thing," Emma shrugs as she parks the car in front of the hospital. Across the lot, she sees her father's truck.

"He's been down in the asylum for ten years?" Regina asks.

"He has."

"And no one has known?"

"No one but my parents, myself, Archie and Nurse Cratchit."

Regina chuckles. "I presume you mean Lucia?"

"Is that her name?"

"Yes. She was one of my attendants when I was a Queen. She had a bit too much attitude on her, but she was loyal so when we came over, I gave her a good paying job and a reasonably good life, though I imagine she sees it differently considering she spent twenty-eight years babysitting Belle."

"Well, she's still loyal because she's spent the last ten babysitting Greg."

"That's oddly nice to hear."
"I bet. You good?"

"I can deal with Owen," Regina assures her. "I want some answers."

"Then let's go get them."

-TBC
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

A/N: Hey, all. Sorry for the massive delay. Back on track. You should have the next bit - which is pretty much part 2 this chapter - before the mid-season premiere.

Warnings: Mild language and some angst. We're rapidly reaching a major turning point in this tale so strap in.

She's in control all the way until they reach the stairs. Even then, she manages to keep her composure because she reminds herself repeatedly that she is stronger than the broken woman that they'd created, and she won't let the man down below see her shaken.

That's what she thinks, anyway.

Then her heeled shoes hit the stairs and she feels the air catch in her throat with each step down into the darkness of the asylum that she takes.

She's suddenly stricken with the need to find Belle and apologize.

Which makes her absolutely sick to her stomach. Not because she doesn't owe Belle the apology, but because she wonders if the girl had suffered from the same mental torture that she herself had. Belle had been without memories or personality, but she'd still been aware enough to know that she'd been in a dark and terrible room and no one cared enough to come visit her. She'd known that her life had been hopeless and nothing beyond four stone walls and a lot of awful nightmares. No, their experiences aren't the same because Regina had never laid a hand on Belle, but there's these rooms and the yellow lights, and God she wants to throw up.

"Regina?" Emma asks gently, her hand settling lightly upon Regina's right elbow. The sheriff's blonde brow is furrowed, and it's clear that she is quite worried.

About her.

Though she's been back in Storybrooke a few weeks now, and she's had plenty of time to adapt to these new relationships, she's still getting used to anyone worrying and actually genuinely caring about her, and to be bluntly honest, it's an uncomfortable learning curve.

She takes a breath, and then lets it out. "I'm fine," she lies, her eyes flickering down to the ghastly cane that she wishes she didn't have to use. Unfortunately, after the events of the previous day, thanks to the pain in her hip and leg, doesn't really have a choice.

"Hey, talk to me," Emma urges, her tone gentle and understanding.

"It's a dark hallway with dark rooms, Emma," the former queen replies, her voice not nearly as steady as she desperately wants it to be. "It smells like water and mildew, and there are damaged broken people in these rooms."

"Just one," Emma corrects. "Greg Mendell is the only still here."
Regina turns, a frown on her lips. "What happened to Sidney?"

Emma pauses for a moment because she knows full well where Regina will go with her answer. Finally, "He died in the original attack."

"Was he still trapped in here when it happened?"

Emma doesn't answer the question, doesn't even bother to lie; Regina wouldn't have appreciated her doing so, anyway.

"Oh," she says softly. "I see."

"It was quick," Emma assures her. "Most of the deaths here in town were, and though it was your fault for locking him down here, it wasn't your fault that Tamara put a bullet between his eyes. What she and Greg did - to Sidney and to Neal and to others - is on their hands."

"She's dead, though, isn't she?"

"She is."

"Then she got off easy," Regina replies flatly. She clearly doesn't believe Emma – or accept her words meant to ease Regina's enormous guilt – but she's too tired to fight them, and far too focused on Greg and the fact that she has to face him to allow her mind to slip towards Sydney. Perhaps she will have time to grieve for him later. He deserves that much.

But not until Henry is safe.

He will be safe.

"Your Majesty," she hears as they push open the final door that leads down to the basement level and its many terrible and dark rooms. She then looks up and into the eyes of the woman who had served her for so many years.

"Lucia," she says with a thin smile.

"It's good to have you back," the woman says, and Emma thinks that it's the most emotion the normally severe and humorless nurse has ever shown. "You were missed. By me, at least."

"Thank you, dear," Regina replies, uncomfortably aware of the fact that Lucia hasn't been able to stop herself from looking at the cane that she is now tightly gripping. "We're here to see your visitor," she manages.

Lucia's wary eyes flicker up and then over towards Emma, and the sheriff nods her head. "How is he today? Any chance that he's in a mood to be cooperative or –"

"He's in a mood to be exactly the opposite," Lucia answers dryly. "In fact, he's been downright obstinate all day."

"Fantastic," she sighs. "I guess we'll take our chances." She holds out her right hand for the keys. Once they're settled in her palm, she inclines her head down the hallway, as if to suggest to Regina that they should go.

Once they're a few feet away, Regina husks out, "Stop for a minute."

Emma pulls up, and turns her head. "Okay. Am I allowed to ask why?"
"What I was saying up above," Regina tells her, her voice still just barely a whisper. "I spent the greater part of three years in a room like one of these. It just brings back…it brings back memories that aren't as hard to get to as I might like them to be." She scratches at her forehead when she says this. "Some of them are, but not the room. I remember that entirely too well."

Emma almost tells her that they can wait until she's ready to do this, but they both know that they can't; the Home Office is in town and they're running around attacking people, and the easiest way to stop them is to know who is responsible and the only way to do that is to get Greg to talk.

Which means fighting back the memories and the nausea and the pain.

It means pretending that even though she's using a cane to walk, she's still strong enough to face down a man that ruined her as much as she did him.

"You're not in there, anymore," Emma reminds her, her hand once again settling over Regina's forearm. "And you never will be again."

"You don't know that. They're back for me for some reason."

"They'll have to go through me and my mother to get to you."

"Emma –"

"I get it, you've changed enough where you don't want that, and honestly I'm not sure I know what to do with that, but it's the truth, okay? For both of us. For all of us. You're home now, Regina, and unless you want to leave because you want to, you're not going anywhere. Henry needs you and you know, I've said it a few times but I meant it, I really did miss you."

"You're forgetting a lot of our past, Sheriff."

"Time changes everything," Emma shrugs.

"It's supposed to heal wounds, too, but I'm proof that it doesn't."

"We'll see about that. How's the headache?"

Regina smiles softly. It only slightly surprises her that Emma had noticed the way that she's suddenly been squinting against the dim lighting of the hallway. "It's there," she admits. "And I expect it will be until we leave."

"You can do this," Emma assures her.

"I know," Regina replies. She inhales deeply, lets it out and then in a quiet steady voice that somehow manages to effectively hide away her fear (not that Emma doesn't see right through her, of course), she asks, "Which room?"

"The one at the very end of the hall."

"Of course. How dramatic."

Emma shakes her head. "Hardly. It's the biggest one, and we weren't trying to hurt him. Not like what they did to you; he was honestly put here to keep him safe from the townies. Though I think he's there now to keep everyone else safe from him. Time changes and heals, but it also –"

"Destroys just the much," Regina finishes grimly just before she takes a determined step down the long hallway, her hated cane cracking sharply against the hard ground. "Yes, my dear, I know that
"I know you do," the sheriff replies, and while there's certainly sympathy in her voice for all that Regina has been through, there's not pity because Emma more than anyone understands how complicated it all really is.

She more than just anyone alive knows and understands that Regina has been both the predator and prey during the many dark years of her life.

They reach the end of the hallway, and the metal door with the slot in it, and it takes everything Regina has not to turn and run because she remembers – God, she remembers – being dragged back towards a door that had looked just like this one, her body broken and her mind in ruins.

"Does it hurt? I bet everything hurts. You screamed loud enough. I thought Queens were supposed to be tough. I guess everyone but you, huh?"

She wonders why she has to remember such terrors.

She wants to remember Henry's first birthday cake (because surely there had been one), but when she tries to do exactly that, her head starts to pound mercilessly and something awful pulses sharply behind her eyes.

Oh, but she can feel the rough hands of the guards on her bruised and bloodied body as they'd dragged her across the room, and then tossed her to the dirty wet ground, their mocking laughter ringing terribly in her ears.

"A room fit for an Evil Queen, wouldn't you agree, Your Majesty."

She shivers, and there's Emma's at her side again, warm and steady.

"Whenever you're ready," Emma tells her, and it's quite simply a statement meant to calm and reassure her. If Regina needs to stay right here in front of the door to Greg's cell for the next hour, well then that's what they'll do.

So Regina steps forward, holds her palm out for the keys, and then uses them to unlock the door, her hands shaking the whole time. Part of her wants to insist that Emma open it up instead because she simply can't seem to do it, but the part of her that somehow helped her to survive three years of torture refuses to allow a door and a stubborn lock to stand in her way.

The lock turns and she almost lets out a yelp of victory.

And then she scowls when she thinks about how ridiculous that is because all her victory does is bring her closer to being face to face with a man whom she helped to turn into the horrible monster that he became.

She glances over at Emma, sees the deep worry there, and then turns back and pulls the door open. It creaks and whines, but slides open and then there he is, settled against his bed in the back of the cell, a book in his hand.

He's so much older now, his red-blonde hair longer and curlier, and his face covered in a thick dense beard that looks as though it hasn't been groomed in weeks if not more. He's absurdly pale like a man who hasn't seen the sun in years (he's seen it very rarely in fact, and only when David and Emma can manage to sneak him out unseen), but he doesn't look terribly unhealthy.

Physically, anyway.
Regina knows from an abundance of past experience – inclusive of more than just her time with the Home Office – just how damaging solitude can be to even the healthiest of bodies and minds, and well, Greg has neither.

He looks up from his book - Call of the Wild - surprised. Once he recognizes who it is now standing in front of him, anger flickers across his face for the briefest of moments before bizarrely sliding away.

And then he smiles, her blue eyes dancing with hatred and insanity.

"Regina," he laughs, the sound entirely too high-pitched to have come from someone still in control of their mind. It's a sound that Regina remembers uncomfortably well. "I have been waiting so very long to see you again."

"Well I'm here now," she replies, feeling Emma moving in tight and close behind her once again. She doesn't even need to look to know that Emma's hand is on her service weapon, ready and prepared to use it if necessary.

"You are. And now I think the fun really begins for us, doesn't it?"

"I'm just here to talk," Regina replies, her voice embarrassingly unsteady.

"Talk? Really?" He laughs again, and then looks over at Emma. "When did she get back to town? During the last couple of weeks, right?"

"Yes," Regina says immediately, knowing that Emma will stonewall. As much as she appreciates such, they don't really have time for it.

"How long were you away? I've lost track of well, everything in here."

"Ten years."

"Did they have you for the entire ten years?"

"No."

"How long?"

Emma takes a step forward, but before she can take another, Regina slides her cane forward and into Emma's path, lifting an eyebrow up as she does so as if to tell Emma that she doesn't require the assistance for now.

So Emma straightens her spine and steps back, her hands clenched.

"I was held captive for three years," Regina allows. She can feel the pulsing behind her eyes intensifying, and knows that it'll get bad before too long.

She also knows, however, that she can't show Greg Mendell any more weakness than the fact that her body is clearly badly injured already does.

"They hurt you," he says, his eyes flickering to her cane. There's a cruel kind of curiosity in his words, a desperate and twisted fascination clear as day.

"It wasn't a wonderfully pleasant experience," she admits with a sigh, her hands instinctively flexing when she feels a surge of something – magic – moving within them. It feels weak and
unstable, and despite what she'd been able to do yesterday, she has no real desire to tap back into the kind of darkness she'd need for magic to really work for her at this point.

She doesn't want to be that kind of person again.

"I bet." He tilts his head. "Why are you here, Regina?"

"I need answers."

"Don't we all? I came to town to find my father."

"You came to town to murder everyone in it," Regina corrects. "You may have started your journey with your father, but you ended it with blood."

"Condemnation for murder from the Evil Queen. Huh. That's rich."

"I'm not denying who I am."

"Oh you're not?" he asks, his eyebrow up.

"Not anymore," she replies, her voice so quiet that it's almost inaudible.

"So they broke you," he sneers. "Good."

"Okay, that's just about enough," Emma snaps as she steps forward. She's sure that Regina could have continued this uncomfortable back and forth with Mendell for awhile longer, but there's a crinkling around the former queen's eyes that tells her that Regina is starting to lose herself back into her own mind again. Back into three years of dark and ugly memories.

Back into a lifetime of them.

And they've come too far for that.

"Not remotely," Greg replies. "You came to me because you need answers, right? Tell me something, Sheriff: why now? You've been coming to see me every week for the last ten years," he laughs at realizing that he now knows exactly how long it's been. "So why come back now? Why specifically?"

"Because I have new questions. More important ones."

"Such as?"

"I want to know who the Home Office's inside man is. And don't lie and tell me there isn't one because we know there is one. Who is the traitor?"

"Why are you so sure that I know who it is?"

"Do you know?" Regina asks, redirecting his attention to her.

"I do," he admits with a chilling grin that goes all the way to his bright blue eyes. "But if you want to know what I know – and we both that you need to know – well then, you're going to have to give me something in return."

"Something like what?" Emma demands.

"You want information? Fine, but I want information, too."
"Information about what?" Regina requests, a sinking feeling in her gut.

"You."

"I don't understand."

"Yes, you do, Regina. You've been around the block too many times to not understand what I want from you. You know that if I'm going to tell you what you need in order to survive what's coming, you're going to give me something that will help me to be sure that you'll never really recover."

"No," Emma says immediately.

"Wait," Regina cautions, her hand shaking on the handle of the cane, but her resolve still steeled. "Owen, what do you want from me?"

"My real name," he nods. "Nice touch."

"Tell me," she urges, trying to ignore how the sharp pulsating has increased to something that is making her stomach roll and her vision blur.

"I want to know exactly what you went through while you were in there," he says as he leans towards her. He smiles at her with teeth that have been yellowed by improper care. "I want to know what my boss did to you and I want to know how much it hurt. I want to know every bit of your pain."

"Yeah, well, I guess you're going to keep on wanting, aren't you?" Emma growls out. "Because we are done here." She looks over at Regina and sees the way that the older woman has gone almost completely white, so clearly surprised is she by Mendell's horrible request. Perhaps considering who she had once been, she shouldn't be, but her expression shows sadness and fear and it's clear that that'd been the one thing that she hadn't been expecting.

"If you say so," Greg chuckles as he drops back against the wall. "But hey, Regina, if she's in town – if my boss is here – you know that she'll keep coming for you and you know what she's capable of. You need what I have and what I can give you to stop her. I don't actually care who wins or loses anymore; they left me here to rot. I'll give you what you want. You just have to give me what I want back. It's pretty easy and we both know it."

"We're leaving," Emma says, her hand circling Regina's forearm.

"If you want everyone in this town to live, you'll bring her back."

"Shut up."

He looks right at Regina. "You want Henry to live, don't you?"

Regina blinks. "What?"

He's about to answer but before he can, Emma's got him up in the air and pushed up against the wall. "Are you threatening my kid?"

"Me? No. I'm in here, and there's nothing I can do. But Regina knows."

"Put him down, Emma. He's right; he can't hurt Henry."

With a grunt of disgust, Emma drops him to the ground, and then turns and pulls the door back open, gesturing for Regina to go through it.
"I'll be here waiting for you," Greg gasps out from the ground.

"You're so sure I'll be back," Regina notes, looking down at him.

He coughs, and then says, "Because I know you will. Henry is your son as much as he's Emma's. And you know what my boss will do to him."

"Regina," Emma says. "Ignore him."

"You know," he repeats.

Regina looks down at him for a moment longer, and then turns and walks out of the room, her step faltering even with the help of the cane. She waits for Emma out in the hallway, but her watery eyes are focused on the wall.

Until she feels Emma's hand on her shoulder, and then something inside of her just snaps and she spins around and violently pushes her away. "Stop," she demands. "Stop manhandling me and stop handling me like I'm some kind of sick child that can't stand on their own. I'm the goddamn Evil Queen, Emma. I'm the villain of this ridiculous story, and I don't need you thinking that if you don't touch me every five seconds, I must just break in half."

"Okay," Emma says, putting her hands up. "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? For what? For me? What about that man in there? The one who electrocuted me until my heart stopped and yet still wants me to give him a play by play of me being tortured for three years because he hates me that much? He's the one you should feel sorry for, not me. Not ever me."

"I didn't say that I felt sorry for you," Emma explains. "I said I was sorry for invading your personal space. I screwed up, and it won't happen again."

Regina stares at her for a long moment and then finally says in her sharpest and most dismissive tone, "Fine." She then turns away from Emma and starts down the long hallway, her steps getting clearly more labored with each stride. She's in obvious pain, and even though Emma is behind her, she can see the tension in the older woman's body increasing by the moment.

Emma finds herself wanting to go to her, but she doesn't dare.

Because what was okay yesterday isn't right now, and until Regina chooses to let her back in again, there's no point in even trying to assist her. This reminds Emma uncomfortably of old Regina – not the wickedness, but the self-defeating stubbornness – and she knows she needs to wait it out.

And hope that Regina once again remembers who her allies – friends – are.

She sees the fall coming before it actually happens. The one thing that Emma has realized about Regina's injuries is that although they are very much a physical issue, they're also a mental one. Whenever stress and anger and self-loathing start to play around in her head, the severe pain she feels seems to become extreme to the point of being debilitating. Like right now.

She hears Regina gasp in pain and perhaps even surprise, and then sees the cane fall and then the former queen is down on her hands and knees on the ground, her hair curtaining her face. She hears a few curse words that she's pretty sure that Regina would never have uttered in public ten years ago.

"Can I help?" Emma asks as she moves beside Regina, kneeling down next to her but not touching
her. Her hands are balled, but ready for action.

She wants to do something to make this better.

But she needs Regina to be okay with that.

"No," Regina hisses. "I can do this on my own."

"Okay." Emma stands up and steps back, giving Regina room to move.

Slowly, Regina lifts herself up, her legs and hands shaking and her chest heaving as she pulls in
great gulps of air. There are tears are on her face, but God if she isn't trying to show that she can be
strong enough for this.

Once she's back up, she meets Emma's eyes, fierce pride sparking there.

Emma nods, and reminds herself never to underestimate Regina. Because even if she isn't the Evil
Queen anymore (and she's not, no matter what Regina seems to think of herself) she is still the
woman who has survived more than most could even begin to comprehend going through.

"Why don't we head back to the house, and figure out our next move," Emma suggests mildly,
glancing first back down the hall and then at Regina.

"That's a good idea," Regina agrees. She looks towards the door and the stairs that lead upwards,
up and away from this awful floor, and sighs.

"What?"

"I can stand on my own."

"I know you can." She pauses, and then gently adds in an almost tentative voice, "But you don't
have to. Not anymore."

"Do you ever get sick of being so goddamned good?"

"I'm not half the great and mighty Savior of Good that everyone here thinks that I am. What I am,
though, is someone who knows what matters most."

"Henry."

"Family. It's what we've both been searching for our entire lives."

"So it is." She licks her lips, and then, "Will you…assist me right now?"

"Of course." She steps in closer, and is about to put an arm around Regina's waist, but stops when
she sees the way she's starring ahead. "What?"

"I don't want Lucia seeing me unable to even walk down a hallway."

"Can you make it to the stairs."

"I think so."

"Okay. Then let's do this. You take the hallway, and I'll get the stairs. We're a team. It's what we're
actually really good at, you and me."
Regina chuckles, and wonders about the fact that the pain in her head seems a little bit less for the moment. "Very well," she agrees.

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The car ride home nearly ends her. If she'd been feeling better after calming things done with Emma, being crunched up had caused everything to flare again, and now all she's thinking about is the painkillers in the bathroom.

They'll have to wait, though, because there's a conversation that needs to be had, and a decision that needs to be made, and she knows that it is going to be hard for everyone involved because there's no easy answer.

She could refuse Greg's offer, but then they're no closer to stopping the Home Office or finding out who had hurt Henry. She could accept the offer, but she knows that the pain of those memories could cause her significant anguish that she's just not prepared to deal with no matter the support she now has.

The easy way would be to blow off the deal and to try to find their answers in good old fashion detective work, but the truth is that Emma's been kicking over rocks for ten years now, and whomever it is that had assisted the Home Office is still running free and clear of suspicion.

That has to end.

Because Greg is right, and if Wendy Darling is planning to come to town, well she's not doing it just to see what Storybrooke is like. She intends for these to be blood and fire. She intends for them to be pain and death.

So much of it.

She lets Emma help her inside, and settle her down onto the couch.

"You want to take one"?" the sheriff asks. "A painkiller?"

"Not yet. Are your parents on the way over?"

"Yeah."

"Where's Henry?"

"At Granny's waiting tables. Ruby had something she needed to do so he offered to help her out. Or at least that's what his text message said."

"I really should talk to her soon."

"Yeah, you should. But I'm guessing we have other things to talk about."

"We do."

"You're considering taking up on his offer." It's a statement and not a question, and Emma is looking at her with eyes that understand too much.

"It may be the only way to get the answers we need."

Emma grunts in frustration. "There has to be another way. You have enough trouble remembering the good memories. Those ones nearly knock you on your ass. And when you get one of the bad
ones, you look like your head is about to explode. What will a whole slew of new bad memories do to you?"

"I might get lucky, and he'll only ask for what I already remember."

"That would be too easy, and we both know it."

"But of course." She shakes her head, looking resigned. "If you think that there's a better way to deal with this, then please, find it for me, Emma; I don't want to talk to him about what I went through anymore than you want me to, but if we don't start figuring out what's going on, we're going to be too late to stop them from hurting Henry again. They want me for some reason or another. They want my magic, but we don't know why or how. We need those answers, and I think we're running out of ways to get them."

"Emma," a voice calls from the hallway. A moment later, Snow and David enter. Snow immediately offers up a smile, but there's worry creasing her eyes, and Regina wonders why it doesn't bother her as much it once had. Why doesn't it piss her off that Snow is so sympathetic to her?

"Hey," Emma greets. "We have a problem."

"What kind of problem?" David asks, his brow furrowing.

"Mendell will give us the information."

"But what does he want in exchange?" Snow astutely asks.

"My story," Regina replies. "Of my three years in captivity."

"Absolutely not," Snow says immediately.

"There has to be another way," David inserts.

"That's what we were just talking about," Emma replies with a small smile, somewhat amazed by just how much she sometimes echoes her father.

"And we were realizing that there isn't," Regina says softly, looking from father to daughter and sighing at their stubborn similarities. "This may be the only way to get out in front of them and to not just be reactive to them."

"Can you handle it?" David asks.

"If I need to, I will. I've done a lot in my life that I didn't want to, and much of it was without purpose or gain. This, this I could find a way to handle."

"But you shouldn't have to," Snow insists.

"We do what we must to survive," Regina reminds her. "All of us in this room have some unfortunate experience with that, I'm afraid."

"Fine," David allows. "But give us tonight to see if we can find something."

"Tonight?"

"Me and Emma. Let us try to follow some old tracks. Maybe there's nothing still out there to find, but maybe there is. Maybe if we look back at the last ten years and look over what happened that
night, then maybe we can figure it out without his help. I know time is short, but give us tonight."

"Tonight," Regina agrees.

"So there's an upside," Emma notes. "You have time to take a nap."

Regina chuckles because Emma is as always as subtle as a brick. "Indeed."

"So, if we find something, we win there, too. Double win."

"Yes."

"You want some help upstairs," Snow offers.

"Actually, I was hoping to talk to Emma for just a moment."

"Oh. Of course."

She smiles at Snow, then, because how far they've really come that Snow can actually be slightly hurt at Regina appearing to choose Emma over her.

"You'll be here, I presume? After they go out to detective?"

"I will."

"Then I will see you and Henry later for dinner, dear."

Snow nods her head. "I look forward to it."

"Who would have ever thought," Regina notes, and then stands up again and allows Emma to once again guide her up a set of stairs. Once they're up at the top, she turns to the sheriff and says, "I owe you an apology."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do. I lost it because I panicked, and because I got scared of being weak. You have been nothing but kind to me. You've been...a friend."

"I am your friend, Regina."

"I know, and I don't mind the support you've been giving me. Even when you can't seem to stop touching everyone and everything in sight."

Emma laughs. "Like I said, blame your son."

"I do. I suppose I should return the favor. " She then reaches out and very gently touches Emma's cheek, causing the sheriff to instinctively turn her head into Regina's warm palm. Her eyes to widen in surprise, however.

"Are you holding up all right?" Emma asks.

"I'm not. I'm scared out of my mind because of what I might have to do."

"If that's what it comes down to, I'll be with you and my mother will be there as well if you want us to be. You won't have to be alone for this."

"That helps," Regina admits. "But what would help even more is for you and your father to find the
answers that we need. That...would help the most."

"If they're out there to find, I will find them," the sheriff promises her.

"Good." She removes her hand from Emma's cheek. "Thank you."

"Yeah. Do me a favor and try to rest, will you, please?

"I'm going to take a pill that I hate so that I don't feel pain that I hate more; I'm not sure about rest, but I will sleep. That will be enough for now. I'll be awake, hopefully, when Henry gets home. And that's all I really care about."

"Okay," Emma answers with a frown as it once again occurs to her just how little importance Regina puts on herself. Their eyes meet once more, and then the sheriff nods her head as if to agree to Regina's words. She steps back down the stairs and heads into the kitchen to speak to her parents.

Regina watches until Emma disappears, and prays that the thing that once annoyed her the most about Emma – her dog with a bone act – will be the one thing that keeps her from having to return to Greg in the morning.

She takes a shuddering breath, and then retreats into Henry's bedroom.

To sleep.

And to wait.

And maybe even to pray to a god that she doesn't really believe in.

The truth is, though, she knows how this will go.

She knows because she knows deep in her heart that if there had been anything out there to find – anything that would have given Emma the answers she's now looking for – she would have found it many years ago.

She would have found it the first time Henry had asked her to do it.

The answers aren't in files and dark footsteps, they're in memories.

Hers and Greg's.

She'll give them tonight, but she knows.

She knows that tomorrow, she's going to be stepping back into hell.

TBC...
It's just after eleven at night when Emma's already paper thin patience finally snaps like a dry twig. Frankly, her father is surprised that it'd taken this long because she's been on edge all evening. For good reason, sure, but it worries him because David knows his daughter well enough to know the crazy things that she's capable of when she feels like she has no other choices available to her.

Emma and Regina share a lot in common in dangerous times like these.

No, Emma probably isn't likely to curse thousands of people to a miserable existence in a small coastal town, but it's not outside of the realm of possibility for her to pick up a baseball bat and start kneecapping "suspects" until she gets the answers she wants. All of them.

Unfortunately – or perhaps fortunately, as the case may be – they don't have any suspects. Not anyone that they didn't already have on their radar and certainly not anyone that they have enough evidence against to lean on yet.

Which is probably why Emma is now throwing her mug across the room.

"Nice shot," David says dryly, his blue eyes on the wall as coffee drips down it. Broken black glass that had once had the words STORYBROOKE POLICE DEPARTMENT laser sketched across it now lays scattered across the floor.

She grunts in disgust and then jams her hands into her pockets as she paces around the room. "This is ridiculous," she says. "We've been looking over all this information for years now. There's nothing to find in any of these files."

"We knew that," he reminds her. "We're here because we thought maybe fresh eyes might help us to see something that we missed every other time we looked. But, Emma, we always knew that the chances of that were pretty slim."

"I guess I was hoping we'd catch a break for once," she states, frustration causing her hands to clench and unclench.

"Me, too," he allows. He stands up, then, and crosses over to her, placing a hand on each of her shoulders to slow her movements. He forces her to meet his eyes with hers and then asks in gentle tone, "Why do you care?"

"What?"
"Why do you care so much about Regina having to talk to Mendell?"

"I don't understand the question. You know why I care."

"Because she's Henry's mother?"

"Because she was tortured night and day for three years and I don't want her to have to relive that just so that a complete lunatic can get off on her pain," Emma replies. "No matter who she once was, she doesn't –"

"I never said that she did," he interrupts. "And I agree with you; she shouldn't have to go through that again. But that still doesn't answer why you're so frantic about it. Emma, talk to me. What's going on here?"

Emma looks away for a moment, and then sighs loudly. "Okay, yeah, it is about Henry," she admits. "I'm lying if I say it isn't. But it's about Regina. And I guess it's about me, too."

"Tell me about you," he suggests. "Because I can figure out the other two parts of the story. Or at least I can try to."

"So you think," she drawls.

"Emma."

"Right. Me. Okay. So, you know what I did before I came to Storybrooke. You know that I hunted down bad guys and I brought them to justice and all of that crap. Well, during one of my first cases, I had to hunt down a woman who was wanted for the attempted murder of her husband. I caught her and I dragged her back across five states and while I was doing it, she was telling me her story, and if I had been her, I would have killed the bastard."

"You still brought her back?"

"I did. I convinced her that if she told them the same story that she'd told me that they would understand and everything would be okay. I made her tell a bunch of people who didn't give a damn about her how husband had abused and assaulted her in every imaginable way for years and years."

"She didn't get off, I take it?"

"No."

"You have to know that it wasn't your fault. Even if you had let her escape you, she would have been caught by someone, and she would have been made to tell her story."

"See that's the thing," Emma replies with a shake of her head. "Her initial plan was to not defend herself because she didn't want to let him to hear her admitting her weakness. She didn't want him to know he'd hurt her so badly. I didn't understand that at the time. Even after what Neal had done to me, I didn't understand not wanting to directly face someone. I thought that was all I wanted. During that trial, though, when she was on the stand, he looked right at her and the bastard had the balls to grin right at her."

"Damn."

"He scared the shit out of her, and she lost her nerve, and he won."
"Still not your fault."

Emma just smiles grimly, her eyes on the drops of coffee on the wall.

"Regina won't lose her nerve," David assures her. "She's not built like other people. Even in the worst of her states, she's defiant. It's always driven your mother nuts how much Regina refused to back down even when doing so would have helped her to find happiness. I don't see her backing down now that she has a chance to take down the people who hurt her and Henry."

"No," Emma agrees. "I don't see it, either. But she's not the same woman that she was. She's still defiant because I don't think she knows how to not be that at least a little but, but she's also scared. If she does this, he's going to dig into her mind and that could hurt her badly and she knows it."

"She'll do what she needs to do to protect Henry, and we'll do what we need to do in order to protect Regina," David promises. He steps away from Emma then, and reaches for his jacket. "Come on, let's get out of here."

"So the night is over already? We're just giving up?"

"Not yet. I think it's time we head back to the original crime scene."

"The Cannery," Emma says with a frown. Her mind flashes with images of a cold dark room and then she hears the sound of gunshots.

All memories. Just memories.

"Yeah," David nods. "It's been awhile since I've been there."

"Years for me," she admits quietly, her hand going up to touch the swan pendant that Neal had given her so many years ago. After his death, she'd taken to wearing it around her neck once again as a form of tribute to him just as she also wears Graham's shoelace around her wrist. It's not lost on her that she's taken to using her body as a kind wall of honor to the fallen.

She'd really prefer not to add any more names to that wall.

"Then maybe that's where we'll find the something we've missed."

"Okay," she agrees, pulling her jacket on as well. She doesn't have a lot of hopes for this new quest of theirs – not after a night spent flipping through files and finding absolutely nothing helpful – but either way; perhaps it is time to see where things had all begun. Maybe it's time to really remember the day that Regina had been kidnapped and Neal had been murdered.

Apparently, Regina isn't the only one who is going to have to deal with an ugly and bloody past before this whole nasty mess is over.

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He finds his grandmother slumped over on the couch in the living room, a paperback novel with a scantily clad couple (he wonders what she sees in books like these, but every time he's asked her, she's simply shushed him with a nervous smile and reddened cheeks and told him that she just needs to keep her mind busy and shouldn't he be doing something else like taking out the garbage?) in her hands, and her eyelids drooped all the way down. The mischievous side of him that is a bit too much like his grandfather considers scaring her awake, but he reconsiders this idea when he thinks about the craziness of the last few days.
He thinks about being on his bare stomach in the cold snow and he thinks about inhaling the thick and pungent smell of cooking flesh as an unknown assailant had pressed his knee down hard into his back so that he could brand him. That awful mark is gone now – thanks to his mother and Gold – but he well remembers the pain and the terrible feel of being burnt.

He remembers the fear and how it had been even more suffocating than even the smell of melting skin.

He thinks about his mother, and the way that she'd woken up calling out for him the previous night, and he chooses not to go for the freak-out option with his grandmother because he knows that they're all a bit shaken up right now.

He frowns a bit as he leans over his grandmother, a hand lightly settling on her shoulder as he gives her a small shake. She grunts in reply so he gives her one more, this one just a little bit harder. To his amusement, she jerks forward, her eyes wide open and her hands out like she's about to deliver a punch of some kind. It's rather absurd, adorable and hilarious all at once.

Which he feels free to tell his grandmother because she's not either one of his mothers, which means she's okay with not being a badass all the time.

She's okay with letting him know that she's not always the strong one.

"Hey," Henry says as he pulls a blanket up and over her legs.

"You're home," she smiles, her hand going up to his cheek. She blinks then and looks over at the clock. "Oh my God, I feel asleep."

"Yeah," he agrees. "Have you eaten yet?"

"No," she admits. "Regina hasn't, either. Your gramps and Emma are out."

"Cool." He reaches behind him and holds up a brown paper bag full of Styrofoam cartons. "I brought dinner from the diner so we're good." He looks around, and then his eyes flicker towards the stairs. "Mom up there?"

"She was when I fell asleep. She wanted to lie down for a little while."

"Is she okay?"

"She's resting," Snow hedges.

"Cool. I'll go wake her up."

"Henry, honey, maybe you should hold off."

"I brought her dinner," he reminds her with a smile. "She needs to eat more."

"She does," Snow agrees, thinking about just how unsettlingly slim Regina is. "But she had a really long day."

"I know, and I can make that better."

"You always do," the schoolteacher admits with an uncertain smile. She hopes that the painkillers have worn off, but she has a rather vivid memory of how hurt and tired Regina had looked just before she had disappeared up the stairs, and it's hard to imagine that just a few short hours of rest would have made everything that much better.
But maybe, right?

She watches as Henry quickly climbs the steps—two at a time like a young child with too much energy tearing through him—and vanishes behind the wall towards the hallway that leads to his bedroom.

She sighs and hopes that for once, she's very wrong about the feeling in her gut. The unsettled niggling that tells her that despite all of their hopes that this whole situation might end without more pain and suffering, it won't.

That would be too easy, she knows, and well, their lives never have been.

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Henry enters his bedroom to find it pitch black. That's to be expected, though; since Regina has been staying in here, she's been keeping the lights mostly off due to her severe headaches (he's thankful that she hasn't really bothered to hide these from him—not as much as the rest of her issues, anyway). He allows his eyes to adjust to the stark darkness of the room for a moment, and then makes his way over to the bed where he can see her stretched out, his blankets wrapped around her too small body.

"Mom," he whispers as he sits down beside her, the bed sagging beneath his added weight. If he had moved somewhat cautiously with his grandmother below just out of concern for the anxiety and drama of the last few days, he moves doubly so now. Even back when he'd been just a little boy, she had been edgy about being touched, but those issues are so much more these days.

She doesn't move even an inch, her breathing—steady but shallow—doesn't so much as hitch in response to his voice or his touch.

His curious green eyes flicker through the darkness of the room and settle upon a small brown pill bottle that is sitting the nightstand. That she had left it out in plain sight shows sloppiness that seems beneath her, but then again, he's realizing that though much of her is the same as it was, much of her isn't.

She's changed for better and for worse over the long time away from Storybrooke, and it's something that they all have to get used to.

It's not an issue for him, though; he doesn't really care how he gets his mother back; he only cares that he has gotten her back.

Her stillness worries him, however. As a boy, he had always been amazed by just how controlled in everything she'd been. She'd never wasted energy on anything unless there'd been a need to. Not until Emma had come around, anyway. But even then, before the curse had been broken, she'd managed to stay very still and composed most of the time. This reminds him of that.

It shouldn't, though, because what he's seeing right now isn't control at all.

The painkillers on the table suggest that his mother is heavily drugged up, and that's not control at all. He refuses to call it surrender because neither one of his mothers is capable of that, but it's still an unsettling admission of physical weakness that he just knows that Regina loathes having to make. It doesn't make him think less of her, though; it makes him angry.

It makes him want to hurt the people who had done this to her.

He takes a breath, and talks himself down because they wouldn't want that for him.
He doesn't want that for himself, either.

"Mama," he whispers once again, moving his hand up to gently cup her cheek. She still doesn't move or respond to him. She's fairly warm – but not hot – to the touch and he can tell she's not struggling for breath, but she's so deeply tangled up in the grip of the drugs that he thinks it might be impossible to remove her from her slumber without hurting her. And really, there's no need to pull her out just so that they can have dinner together.

He leans down over his slumbering mother and presses his lips against her forehead. "I know you don't really believe me because you've always had trouble believing in anything or anyone – it took me so long to understand that – but I do love you," he tells her, wondering about the strange things that you hear when you're not supposed to be able to. He had been the one knocked out yesterday, and he's certain that he'd heard her speaking to him even through the pain and fear and cotton of it all. She'd been there for him, and he hopes that he can find a way to be there for her now as well.

He knows that both of his mothers will try to stop him; they'll try to keep him away from further danger because that's what they've always done, but he's equally adamant that he'll find a way to protect Regina. He'd hurt her inadvertently before when he'd recklessly dug into her past to find out what had been done to her by her kidnappers, but this isn't about that. The past no longer matters to him. All that does is ensuring that she is happy.

And that means being here at home.

With their family.

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No one ever bothered to clean away the bloodstains.

That's what Emma notices when they step inside the Cannery. It had been closed after what had happened years ago. Another one had been built down the beach, but for whatever reason, this one hadn't been demolished.

Maybe people felt like it needed to remain as a sign of their losses.

She still wishes someone had cleaned the blood away.

The gurney that Regina had been strapped to, well thankfully that's gone.

"What are we looking for?" Emma asks, though she knows that David doesn't have an answer for that anymore than she does. They are both uncomfortably aware that the likelihood of a eureka kind of moment is remote at best, but the bitter realization that failing to find an answer and even a clue to investigate means returning to Regina with an understanding that only her pain and suffering can save the town, well that weighs heavy.

On both of them.

David shakes his head, his lips set into a thin grim frown. "I'm not sure. Think back to that night if you can. Did anything seem strange to you?"

"Are you kidding me? Every part of it was strange. We were trying to rescue a woman that we were pretty much at war with and then we got into a gun fight with my ex-boyfriend's fiancée and her boyfriend." Emma shakes her head, her cheeks reddening with anger. "That night was awful and I've done everything in my power to not remember it because it was…"
"I know," he soothes, reaching out for her.

She shakes his offered comfort away, needing to get this frustration out. "It ended up with Regina missing, Neal dead and Hook running with his tail between his legs because he couldn't handle what he'd been part of."

"I know," David repeats. "But think beyond that."

"To what?"

"To the rest of the town, Emma. Think beyond Neal's death," he looks at the bloodstains on the ground. "Think beyond Regina being kidnapped and Henry grieving for her. Think about what was unusual about that night."

She shakes her head. "All I keep remembering is that Whale was missing."

"You really think he's involved in this somehow, don't you?"

"I do. And I know you think it's just about how much I'd like to kick him in the balls for what he did to Ruby, but it's more. I don't know. I just...it's a feeling about him. Whale has always been squirrely as hell, but after Regina disappeared, he seemed to get weirder and weirder. Rubes told me he was just working in his lab more, but here's the thing, where'd he get the tech?"

"We don't know he didn't have it already. There are a lot of strange things in Storybrooke that I'm not sure even Regina is completely aware of."

"I know."

"But I promised you I'd look into him, and I am," David assures her.

"Yeah, but you never told me how."

"I'm having Ruby hunt around and ask some questions."

Her eyes narrow. "Is that a good idea? He hurt her enough already."

"I know, but she wants to do this. But don't worry; she's being careful."

"Okay," Emma allows grudgingly.

"For the moment, though, think past Whale, too," her father urges, a hand settled lightly on her shoulder. "Because there would have to be more than just one person, wouldn't there? Even if he's one of the inside men, could he do all of this by himself? Wouldn't there have to be someone else?"

Emma groans loudly. "Jesus, David," she mutters. "Don't say that."

"I know. They are our friends and our neighbors, but someone isn't."

"No," she agrees. "But I think we know that the answers we're looking for aren't in this room anymore than they were in those files of ours. There are just words on those pages and blood on these floors, but all I can remember is screaming and fires and a whole lot of tombstones. I don't remember who was weird and off because everyone was wrong when that was happening."

"Which means we need Mendell to tell us who we're looking for."

"I'm not sure I can make her do this," Emma says with a deep frown.
"You're not going to. We're not going to. If she doesn't want to –"

"She'll do anything to protect Henry," Emma reminds him. "Which means we can pose this as a choice to her as much as we want but it isn't one."

"Yeah," he allows. "I'm sorry."

"So am I," Emma replies, her eyes on the bloodstains again.

"Do you wish you hadn't brought her home?"

"Quite the opposite," Emma answers with a chuckle. "I'm glad that I did. Henry is so much happier because she is home. And for me, she's become something of a…" she laughs. "I never would have believed it possible, but Regina Mills has actually become something of a friend to me. Even beyond that, though, her being back here, I think maybe it can help us find closure."

"Or more bloodshed."

"That's not going to happen. This is going to end and we're going to stop these sons of bitches, and make sure they never hurt any of us ever again."

"You really are my daughter, aren't you?" he chuckles. "So confident."

"I don't know if it's confidence or just being over this whole thing."

"Does it matter what it is?"

"No," she admits. "But what does matter is that we all want Henry to be thinking about girlfriends and grades and not worrying that someone might attack him again or worse, take his mother away from him. I want my kid to have a normal life, like the one he has been having for the last ten years only this time I want him to do it with a full heart instead of a heavy one."

"So how do we get there?" David asks with a slight smile as he meets her intense green eyes with his bright blue ones. He already knows the answer to his own question, but he'd learned long ago that the best way to get everyone on board with anything is to have Emma leading the charge.

"We stand behind Regina while she does what she has to do," Emma replies. "And then we stand beside her and we drive these bastards out."

"Sounds good to me," David nods. "Are we done here?"

Emma eyes go to the bloodstains on the ground one last time, and she thinks of holding Neal in her arms even though his life had already ended.

Never again, she tells herself as she nods her slowly, resolutely.

"I'd like to see this place burn," she admits.

"Me, too," David agrees. He puts his arm around her and leads them out.

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She's just below the surface of the painkillers – it's a little bit like being beneath a thin sheet of cloth and being able to see and feel everything, but not quite touch it – when she hears Emma's voice calling out to her.
She blinks and looks up, her tired eyes catching on the sight of the sheriff sitting next to her on Henry's bed. His colorful blanket is spread over her, and she feels like she's swimming through pudding, but at least she knows who the woman above her is which means her mind is working as it should.

"Hey," Emma says with a small uncertain smile on her pale lips.

"What time is it?" Regina asks, looking around the darkened room.

"About two in the morning. The kid is crashed out on my bed."

"Oh." She sits up slowly and runs a hand lightly past her eyes to clear the sleep away. Her hound is pounding like it always is after she's been knocked on her ass by painkillers, but at least this is a kind of discomfort that she's gotten used to enough to mostly ignore. She blinks a couple more times and then turns and looks at Emma, really focusing on the woman's face.

What she sees isn't good.

What she sees tells her everything.

"Nothing?" she asks, her voice low and quiet.

"We went through all the files, even went back to the Cannery."

Regina turns her head like she doesn't understand what the significance of that place is, but then her eyes narrow and the lines around them tighten, and Emma just knows that the older woman is remembering something that perhaps she hasn't really spent much time thinking about in many years.

After all, as Regina herself had said, the torment that she had suffered that day with Greg and Tamara in the Cannery had been child's play compared to what Wendy Darling had put her through for over three years.

Still, it seems that those memories had been hidden away in the recesses of her mind, and now they're back at the front and they hurt, and God if that doesn't just make all of this that much worse. Because if something like that is causing so much pain, Emma can only imagine what real torture will do.

She almost stands up and walks out of the room.

She almost lies and tells Regina that she and David have got a suspect that they're chasing down, and soon they'll have all the answers they need.

But Regina is looking at her, and her eyes say that she already knows the truth so Emma just sighs, dips her head, and says, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"I know you tried," Regina assures her. "And that means…everything."

"I don't want you to have to do this."

"That makes two of us."

"But –"

"But you need me to."
Emma swallows. "I think we all do, yeah."

"I know," Regina says softly. "And it's all right, dear; I can do this."

"I promised you that my mother and I would be there the whole time, and we will be. If you want us to be. Right behind you, next to you. Whatever."

Regina chuckles. "I'll be fine." She thinks for a moment, and then adds, "But I would welcome your…presence. That is if you think you can handle it."

Emma tilts her head to the side, frowning. "I've seen your file."

"You've read all of the technical details," Regina corrects with a strange little chuckle that sounds almost like a harsh cough. "I would imagine that reading about the scars on the insides of my thighs is far different than actually hearing me describe how they were put there. None of my stories are good, Emma. Some are just less awful, and some are well…I remember them entirely too well because I dream of them almost every single night."

"We are going to be there with you," Emma promises.

"Fine, but if you are, I need you to promise me something. I need you to promise me that you won't look at me like I'm broken. More than you do."

"No," the sheriff contests, sounding almost urgent in her need to convince the former queen of her words. "More than just about anyone beside my mother, I've seen the worst of you, and this isn't it. You're not broken."

"That's kind, Emma, but we both know that's not the truth."

"A broken woman would not be walking into that room, and facing the past so that she could fight back," Emma replies. "You are. I know you have this crazy thing going on where you think you owe the whole world, and you're not ever allowed to cut yourself some slack so I guess I get to do it for you."

"Fine," Regina sighs. "Since you're clearly planning to remain the stubborn foolish pain in the ass that you've always been, you may accompany me."

"Why thank you," Emma drawls.

"Mm. Go make me some coffee, Sheriff," Regina replies, her tone just shy of a crisply delivered order. "There's no chance of getting more sleep, and I'm not sure I'd want to try, anyway. It's probably best for me to use the time before we go to see Owen to collect my thoughts and try to center myself."

"Then I guess I'll make us both a cup."

"You don't have to. You should get some rest. I don't need to be coddled."

"Maybe think of it as me offering to be a friend, then."

"I'm working on it," Regina assures her.

"I know. Coffee will be downstairs when you're ready," Emma states as she stands up. She reaches for a moment for Regina's shoulder, and then stops her hand out of respect for the former queen's previously stated wishes to not be touched as much. Yes, she knows that that had been an
emotional reaction brought on by fear, but she also knows that Regina needs to feel in control right now. So she offers up a grin, and then departs the room.

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Regina uses her cane to slowly make her way down the stairs about twenty minutes later. Her dark hair is damp, and she looks tired, but her boldly colored clothes are neatly professional and her makeup is perfect. This is her battle armor and for once, Emma sees no reason to try to pull it apart.

She simply offers the former queen a cup of coffee (it smells like vanilla) and then drops into the seat opposite her at the kitchen table. There's a bowl of salted almonds in the middle of it because she needs something to touch and to put in her mouth, and she thinks Regina might need that as well.

"So," Emma starts between chews. "What would you like to talk about?"

"Who said I wanted to talk about anything? Maybe I just want to sit here."

"We can do that."

"Have you ever sat quietly anywhere for longer than three minutes?" Regina asks with an amused smirk. "Because we know you can't run in silence."

"Hilarious. And yes, I can. I just prefer not to."

"So I've noticed." She pops a couple of the almonds and then says, "Tell me about Henry. Tell me about all that I missed."

"Okay," Emma agrees. "But only if you do the same. Seems we've tag-teamed parenting him. You got ten years, we got two of kinda-sorta doing it together and then I got the next ten."

"I'd give up just about anything to have those ten years back."

"I know," the sheriff agrees with something of a wistful smile. "But this is where we are right now. So how about I tell you about his first date – which by the way occurred at his prom; I think you already saw the picture that he took for you up in his room - and you tell me about his first steps or his first time on his bike or his first anything. Deal?"

"He took that picture for me?"

"He always believed you'd be back, and he didn't want you to miss it."

Regina looks down at the coffee cup, her eyes for a moment getting lost in the swirling liquid and the steam rising up off of it. "I never have been worthy of him, have I?" Her voice cracks hard and painfully in the middle.

"He believes otherwise," Emma says simply. "So do I."

"We'll see if you still think the same thing later today."

"You think me hearing about what you went through will change my mind?"

"I went through it because she wanted to punish me for being what I was."

"You went through what you did because Wendy Darling is a sociopath. She can wrap it up all the
"Was no less than what I did to others," Regina interrupts. She blinks several times to force the tears that are pooling in her eyes back. "I want to hear about his first date now, please. Did he get his first kiss that night?"

"Yeah," Emma nods. "First date for first steps?"

"If I can remember them."

"You don't?"

"No, but I'll try to."

"Regina –"

"I'll try to. Now do what I seldom want you to do and talk, Sheriff. Please, give me some of your good memories."

*** ***

Emma and Snow flank the former queen as they come down the stairs together.

"Your Majesty," Lucia says, dropping her head down.

"Good morning," Regina nods.

"Is he awake yet?" Emma asks.

"For about the last three hours," Lucia confirms. "We may need to up the dosage again. It seems that he's adjusting again."

"Adjusting?" Regina asks.

"Like I said, only a few of us know about Mendell being alive, and -" Emma looks at the nurse, realizing that she's about to address her by her actual name for the first time (Snow has done most of the communicating with her) - "Lucia can't be here all the time so we usually give him a sedative with his dinner. He knows it's there, but he's never resisted it. I'm not sure he even really wants to escape."

"No," the former queen says quietly. "Because he knew I'd come to him eventually." She shakes her head, amazed by just how patient her enemies have been in getting her to pay for her many sins. Ten years of waiting would have undone her in the worst of her anger, but for them, it might as well have been minutes. Even Mendell who has used such crude measures had managed such patience.

It lets her know just how much they truly hate her.

How much they truly want her to pay.

And continue to want her to pay.

Well, today they're going to get their wish all over again.

"Shall we," Regina says thickly, before stepping away and continuing down the hall past Lucia who watches all this unfold with narrowed and keen eyes. Out of respect to her former queen, she
desperately tries not to notice the cane or the way that Regina's hand is shaking atop of it. She tries not to notice the grim looks that all three of the women are wearing – ones of fear and worry.

Whatever is about to happen with Greg Mendell isn't going to be good for the queen, Lucia thinks. She's heard the dark rumors that are currently going around town, and she knows that the Home Office is believed to be back. There's fear spreading rapidly through Storybrooke because everyone remembers how bloody things had gotten last time. They remember the losses.

She's heard people wondering if maybe they shouldn't just give Regina back to them. Sure, everyone has seen and heard about her injuries and they know that she was badly hurt by monsters even worse than her, but they simply don't care. It's an old refrain, Lucia knows; morality is an easy concept to claim and a difficult reality to practice. Fear will push rash decisions that compromise the soul.

Luckily for those pathetic simpering cowards, she muses, they'll never have the option to sell the Queen out because the two women standing beside her right now have no intention of allowing it. They will protect Regina. They will protect Storybrooke.

Or at least they will try to.

She turns away from the women when she hears the sound of Mendell's cell being opened, the door squeaking loudly and almost obscenely. Whatever they're about to do, it doesn't really involve her, and as much as she's glad to have Regina back, this isn't her cross to bear nor her pain to survive.

She flips the page of a magazine that she's reading, and pretends not to hear Mendell coldly laughing out his greeting.

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"I knew that you would come back to see me, Regina," Greg grins, his eyes large and wild. He's pressed up against the wall as usual, but leaning forward now. "I knew that you couldn't resist."

He's looking right at Regina, ignoring Snow and Emma.

"Before we get going here, there are rules you need to know."

"No, there's not," he challenges. "Because that's not how this works, Emma and we all know it, don't we? We all know that I have all of the power right now, and our dear queen here has none of it." He looks right at Regina. "I can ask any you question that I want to and you have to answer it because if you don't, I won't tell you what I know." He leans forward. "And I know everything."

"Why should we believe you?" Snow demands. "Why should we think that this isn't just some sick game to you and when it's over, you'll just laugh at us and tell us more lies?"

"Lies are really more her game than mine," he argues.

"Answer the goddamned question," Emma snaps, her hands in tight fists.

"All right, all right. Just so you know, I will laugh," he admits. "But I won't lie. If Regina answers all of my questions and tells me the complete truth about everything - and I mean everything - then I'll tell you the complete truth about who your traitors are." He shrugs his shoulders. "But as a sign of good faith – just so you know that I'm not bullshitting you – I'll give you something first."

"Something like what?" Regina queries, her voice deep and low. Her hand grips at the cane tighter, and she hates that she needs it to stay standing, but she figures that this is a point of pride that just isn't worth the battle. She figures that Owen is going to take a terrible lot from her before this is all
over, and only the smallest amount of it will be physical in nature.

He considers her question for a moment, and then says, "I'd be willing to bet that the man that you saw the most of inside the warehouse that they kept you at was a heavily muscled son of a bitch that stood about six and a half feet tall. He had massive red scars under both of his eyes and was missing a finger on his right hand. His name was John and he told you that because she wanted you to know how personal this was for everyone involved. The boss wanted you to know how invested everyone was in seeing you broken."

"Regina?" Emma asks, dreading the answer.

"His name was John," she confirms. Her eyes close for a moment, and she tries so very hard not to think of the feel of his cold hands on her skin. "And yes, he had red scars under both of his eyes. I left another there as well." She sneers when she says this.

Greg chuckles at that, but then pushes on with, "One of his favorite things to do to you while you were strapped down and unable to defend yourself or stop him from doing whatever he wanted to do to you was to speak to you with his mouth pressed up against your ear so that you could feel him on you and feel his breath inside of you. He wanted you to feel violated."

"He's not lying," Regina admits. She looks over at Emma and Snow, and there's something in her eyes that's begging both of them to not make her do this. It's enough that mother and daughter each take a step towards her, but then the stubborn and resilient strength that has always been inside of Regina surges forward. "All right," she tells Mendell. "Let's get this over with."

TBC…
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

A/N: Many deep apologies for the extreme delays on this. My gift to you, then, is this long long chapter.

Warnings: This chapter is super intense. It comes with warnings for sexual and physical violence (though neither is graphic, especially not the sexual content) and psychological trauma. This doesn't shy away from what Regina went through during her three years of torture, and while I tried not to exploit the events and the violence of them, details are provided so if you are susceptible, please stay clear.

For those of you who might want to skip the details but stay with the story, I would suggest scrolling down to the last section; if you do so, you'll be able to jump back into the story.

Your kind words and support are always appreciated. If you'd like to keep up, I can be found on tumblr at sgtmac7. Thank you.

Greg grins at her, his cold blue eyes dancing with a kind of sick glee that makes Regina's stomach roll. "So many places to begin," he muses. "So many questions that I want to ask you and so little time. I mean I kind of already know everything that they did to you in there, but it's different, you know? Because it's you, Regina. It's you." He nods his head at her, and his smile grows to something that reminds Emma of a brightly colored drawing of the Joker that she'd once seen on the cover of a trade paperback.

"You get five," Snow says suddenly, stepping out from behind Emma and Regina. Both women turn to look at her, regarding her curiously.

"Excuse me?" Greg replies, his amusement turning into something darker.

"You only get five questions. Five stories. We're not going to stay here all day and play your game," Snow snaps back, her green eyes icy in a way that Emma has rarely seen them; this is her mom side. "So if I were you, I'd stop screwing around and decide what it is that you want to know the most."

"Did you not hear me tell your daughter that I'm the one with all the power now? What makes you think that I would ever agree to these new terms?"

"Because you don't need ten stories to tell you what five will," Emma answers, glancing over at Regina and seeing a mixture of confusion, fear, relief on her face. Like maybe she doesn't know what to expect here.

She doesn't; none of them really do.

"You need the information that I have," Greg reminds them with a cocky half grin. "I can just say no deal and she'll have to talk until I decide she's done. That's the power that I have right now. You get it? I have the power."
"No, you don't," Regina says quietly, slowly stepping towards him, her cane clicking against the floor of the room. "You don't have any more power here than I do. You can hurt me, and you can make me remember all of the terrible things that I have spent the last seven years trying desperately not to remember, but when this is all over, Owen, you'll still be here in this room and all of the pain and suffering that I've experienced won't change that even a little bit."

His eyes blazing furiously, he snarls at her. "I want you to burn."

"I have burned and I have been burned, and I'm sure that I will again." She glances over at Snow and Emma, and then looks back at Greg. "Accept the terms offered, choose your questions, satisfy your desire to know that I was properly punished for my sins, and then let us be done with each other."

"There will never be enough punishment for you."

"Probably not," she concedes with a tired sigh. "Accept the deal."

He shakes his head. "No, that's not...that's not how this goes for us and you know it. We'll never be done with each other, Regina. You'll always haunt me as much as I haunt you. We will always be connected by your hatred."

"And by yours," she replies, her voice quiet and resigned.

"Five questions," he repeats. "Anything that I want to know?"

"Yes," she replies.

Greg's smile returns to his lips and Emma feels her breath catch just because of the perverse joy that she sees blazing in his eyes again. "Fine," he says with a short nod. "Then for my first story, I want you tell me about John."

"What about him?" she replies, thinking of the big man with cold hands. She had spent entirely too much time with him while she'd been a prisoner, and though she has tried quite hard to forget him, she knows that she never will.

"Tell me about the things he did to you."

"I spent three years there," Regina reminds him. "You're going to have to be a bit more specific if you want me to dig into my mind for something."

"Yeah, probably. So then tell me about the first time he touched you."

Regina can't stop herself from visibly flinching anymore than either woman is able to stop themselves from stepping slightly closer to her. "It's not what you think," the former queen replies after a moment. "He didn't...do that."

"No, not him, no. He got off in other ways. But I know from experience that he had a few old fun tricks in his bag. Things he just loved to do to horrible people like you. You know what my favorite part about him was? He never needed toys or accessories to destroy someone's mind. Did he, Regina?"

"No," she allows. "He didn't. But the first time I met him, she was there."

Greg laughs cruelly. "Of course she was. Tell me. Tell me...everything."
Beside her, Regina can feel Snow and Emma moving around again. They're flanking her, one on each side and she is struck by the strange realization that both of these women will fight for and with her should it come to that.

The former queen says softly, "The first time I met him was when I woke up inside of the place that would become my prison."

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Regina is near to delirious as she comes to, her body burning too hot with fever and her recently restarted heart pounding too fast. Everything aches and hurts in a frightening way that she is desperately unaccustomed to thanks to the electricity that had not long ago been pumped through her.

"So you're the great Evil Queen," a male voice says from above her. It's deep and throaty, but there's an amusement in the tone that unsettles her.

She rolls her head to the side and looks up at him. "Where am I?" she gasps.

"You're where it will all come to an end," he says simply. "Can you see me?"

"No," she replies, her irritation flaring.

"The lights are off," he tells her. "I'm going to turn them on. I warn you, they're quite bright so they're going to hurt. You're going to want to close your eyes to stop the pain, but if you do so, I'll be forced to open them."

"What?"

He chuckles in response, clearly amused. "In case you were hoping to delude yourself as to your reason for being with us, let me relieve you of that burden: you're not our guest here, Your Majesty; you are our prisoner."

He snaps his fingers then, and a moment later, blindingly bright white light fills the room – presumably an infirmary – and she cries out involuntarily as a sharp flash of pain sears its way through her already scrambled brain.

She remembers being tied down to a gurney and Owen being above her.

She remembers cold electricity and harsh screaming and praying for death.

There really is no God, she thinks, but then she's known this a long time.

Now, she's strapped down to a full-sized hospital bed, an IV attached to her arm pumping fluids of some type into her veins. Thick leather restraints like the kind used on common criminals are keeping her from being able to get up. Not that she would have the energy to even try to do so, anyway.

"Look at me," he says, directing her attention back to him. Out of pure stubbornness, she turns her head the opposite way, away from him. She knows that he's going to force this, but she's not going to give it to him.

Not without one devil of a fight.

He chuckles once again. "Look at me," he says again, so very patiently.
She grinds her teeth together, and thinks about how she's been reduced to pathetic stands like this one. Once a proud and majestic Queen, now she's trying to keep from being forced to look into the eyes of a man who clearly wants to do her harm. Well, she hadn't given Owen the satisfaction that he had so wanted, and she has no intention of giving this cretin it, either.

"So strong and stubborn," he muses. "I wonder how long that will last."

"Is she giving you troubling, darling?" another voice says from deeper in the room. It takes everything Regina has not to turn and look at the newcomer.

Not yet, she thinks. Be strong, she tells herself. Even if only for the moment.

"Of course not," the man answers. A second later, she feels his cold hand on her chin. His palms are big and calloused and his rough touch is hard and uncaring. When he wrenches her face to the side, there's an unmistakable edge of violence to the motion, like he doesn't care if he breaks her neck.

She looks up at him, then, and sees a large man with a deeply tanned face and bright red scars beneath his intense ice blue eyes. He has the haircut of a former soldier and it makes him look that much more severe and harsh.

"You may call me John," he tells her with a cruel smile playing across his thin lips. "We are going to become very familiar with each other, Regina."

"Take this cuff off of me and I'll show you just how familiar we can get," she growls out, her fingers twitching and her eyes locked onto a particular spot in the middle of his chest. She wiggles her hand around to draw attention to the leather band that Hook had – rather easily and absurdly - tricked her into putting on. It's also the one that prevents her from using her magic.

He laughs and then suddenly sweeps down towards her, his overly large body – he must be six and a half feet tall - looming over hers in a way that makes her breath catch in her throat. He presses his mouth up against her ear, the wetness of his lips leaving unwanted moisture against her skin.

"Get off of me," she hisses as he presses himself in towards her.

"Your days of hurting anyone are over," he whispers. She feels one of his hands settle on her hip, and a shockwave of panic surges through her when it occurs to her that he's practically holding her down. That there are leather straps actually restraining her is irrelevant because even if there weren't, she knows that she wouldn't be able to push this horrible man off of her.

It's this realization that causes her lungs to seize and her heart to start pounding loud enough for her blood to echo in her ears. Suddenly, she can't breathe and everything is spinning and shaking and she thinks of Leopold and she thinks of her mother and no, no, no she has to get control.

She has to, but she can't.

She can't, and she's gasping for air so frantically.

"Easy, John," the woman from before says with a cold laugh. "The Queen has had a difficult last few days in regards to her heart. We should probably not frighten her into another attack. At least not until she has recovered. I really would hate to lose her before we've had a chance to get acquainted."

"Of course," John replies, his mouth still next to Regina's ear. She can feel his breath ghosting against her cheek, and the cloyingly thick smell of tobacco that she can practically taste makes her
want to vomit. It reminds her of dirty old entitled nobles with free hands. "We'll do this again soon."

With a resigned sigh, he pulls himself off of her and then stands beside her bed, his head turned towards a strikingly attractive blonde woman as she steps towards Regina and into her field of vision. "Hello, Regina," she says as she brushes lightly at her extravagantly expensive designer red blazer.

"Is this your doing?" Regina demands, her head still spinning. She thinks she can taste blood in her mouth and wonders if she'd bitten her own tongue.

"It is. Welcome to the headquarters of the Home Office."

"The Home Office," Regina repeats, her mind whirling as she tries to remember what little she'd overheard from Owen and Tamara about this place. Not enough to help her, unfortunately. "Who are you?" she demands.

"My name, darling —" she laughs at some strange inside joke. "Is quite unimportant. Especially to you. But since I'm sure you need some way to address me, then you shall call me the Queen. Yes, now that seems fitting."

"You may present yourself as one, but you're no Queen," Regina sneers.

"Neither are you any longer. You're also not much of a person, though, are you? Really much more of a monster, yes? Well then, don't worry about such things for now. We will handle all of that later when you feel a bit better."

"You won't get away with this. They will come for me," Regina tells her. It's a woefully desperate bluff but the white walls and the leather restraints and the IV that keeps dripping unknown fluids into her are all coming together to impress upon her just how serious and dire her situation actually is.

These people – whomever they might be – they mean to hurt her badly.

"Who would ever want to come for you? Oh, you think maybe the ones that you were going to murder in cold blood? Well yes, perhaps they might have. Because the good ones such as Emma Swan and Snow White are always simpering idealistic fools, now aren't they? They may have tried to find you out of pure heroic stupidity but not now. They believe that you're dead, Regina. The entire world is celebrating your death. Even that precious little child that you ruined simply by existing. Can you even begin to imagine how light his heart is now that you're gone? Can you conceive of how very much happier he is now that the terrible burden of trying to love a monster like yourself has been lifted from his shoulders? His name is Henry, true?"

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, but I think you know I do. Love is a curious thing, but hate isn't. Now that you're gone, he's free to feel about you as he always should have."

"You don't know my son. He loves me."

"Cling to that if you must. It's all that you have left. And soon, when you realize that no one is going to come for you, you won't even have that."

"What do you want from me? What is this about?"
The woman laughs. "I want you to face who you really are, Regina. I want you to look in the mirror and see the demon that you are and have always have been. I want you to understand that everything that will happen to you within these walls has been earned."

"You're insane."

"Hardly, dear. I am quite aware of what I'm going to do to you. I am very much aware of how I'm going to make you suffer for every life that you touched with your evil magic. Magic doesn't belong in this world, and never did, and now I think you will have to pay for every ounce of it that does."

"I already heard this line of deluded gibberish from Owen," Regina sniffs.

"Ah yes, Owen. Another child that you ruined. He wasn't terribly happy about turning you over to us, but he understood. And he is very much appreciative of the path that you will walk for the rest of your living days."

"You won't win," the former queen promises her.

"Of course, I will. I already have. You're here now and you will likely die here." She steps away from Regina, then turns to John. "Ensure that our Queen is cared for. Once she's recovered sufficiently, our work will begin."

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"Did you wake up in your room or do they carry you there?" Greg asks her once she stops speaking. "Were you wearing clothes or were you –"

"Naked?" Regina asks, looking utterly unimpressed with him. She knows what this is – he's trying to unsettle her to the point of collapse. That's what all of this, and she can only feel the buzzing at the back of her mind, the little weird pinpricks of pain that signal a migraine coming towards her.

"Yes," he grins lasciviously. "Naked."

"Watch it," Emma growls, and it's a sudden and strange reminder for Regina that both the Savior and her mother are in this little awful room with her.

Providing her with emotional and moral support.

Greg seems to notice this as well; his eyebrow lifting and a bemused smile flickering across his pale lips. "Does it ever amaze you, Regina, that the Sheriff and Snow White are suddenly your best friends after all that you did to them?" he asks, not even bothering to look over at the women.

"Is that one of the stories that you would like to hear, Owen?" Regina replies coolly. "Because I'm certainly willing to tell you about how it all came to be that the three of us now eat cakes and drink tea at noon together."

She doesn't even have to look over at Emma to know that the blonde woman is currently wrinkling her nose at the very idea of a daily teatime.

"No," Greg replies with an angry snort of disgust. "You're not going to get out of this so easily. I want you to hurt, Regina. You deserve to hurt."

"So you keep saying."

"Do you actually deny it?"
"No," she says with a smile that's devastatingly sad. "But I also have no interest in doing this back and forth with you. I want this over with this."

"So you can go home and pretend none of this ever happened, right?"

She takes a slight step towards him, wincing as her body reacts to the movement, her hand tightening around the knob of her cane. "There's no chance of me ever really forgetting what happened to me, and I think it's quite clear that we both know it. Even the things I don't fully recall during my waking hours, I do vividly so in my dreams. I can't pretend because I look in the mirror every morning and see what your…friends did to me. So, no dear, this isn't about pretending or forgetting, but rather moving on."

"You have that luxury, but I don't." He gestures around the room. "You can walk free even with so much blood on your hands, but I never will."

She glances behind her at Emma and Snow, and there's a brief question of whether they should offer him more for more that silently passes between all three of them, but then Regina shakes her head in the negative because though hope is always there for Snow and even Emma, she understands the nature of revenge and vengeance all too well. She also knows what isolation can do to a mind, and Owen has been in this cold dark cell for ten years.

He's not just going to give up every bit of hatred in his heart for freedom.

Especially not when he's saying things like: "Now answer the actual question that I asked you, Regina because that's the story that I want to hear."

"You want to hear about how I woke up?"

"I want to hear about how they laid you bare."

Judging by the way Emma's body jerks half an inch forward before stalling, Regina thinks that it must be killing Emma not to jump in and stop this, but somehow, almost inexplicably, the sheriff manages to keep herself back.

For now, at least, she'll let Regina decide what she can and cannot handle.

Which is appreciated because this – these initial moments of humiliation and perhaps even fear and outrage at her situation – though they are undeniably horrific memories to recall, Regina believes that she can deal with them.

She nods her head, using the moment to collect her thoughts. "I was kept just barely conscious in the Infirmary for about the first month or so of my stay there. Apparently your stunt where you would kill me and then bring me back to life over and over again caused damage and they weren't willing to start fresh until they thought that I was strong enough." She shrugs. "I suppose that there's no fun to be found in breaking a broken person."

"No," he allows. "There really isn't."

"When I regained full consciousness, I found myself tied down to a bed."

"And my good friend John?"

She licks her dry lips and tries not to allow her mind to jump ahead in the story. She wills it to stay calm and not remember his hands on her. She tries so very hard not to think of the way that he'd settled atop her when he had wanted to remind her of her lack of ownership over herself. She tries
to push from her mind the way that her lungs had convulsed and seized as they had desperately tried to pull oxygen into her often frail and damaged body.

"He was there," she admits, wishing she could find a way to forget that man as she has forgotten so many other things. "They both were."

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When she finally comes to actual consciousness after several weeks of being in and out of it during her initial weeks of captivity, she's surprised to find that for the first time since this had all begun, she can actually think clearly.

She's equally surprised to find Henry next to her. It's the first time that she'll remember him doing this, and over the next three years, his presence will come to be her kind of normal, but for now at least, this is new to her.

He's dressed in perfectly pressed jeans and a green Henley that makes his eyes pop. His hair is messy, and if she could lift up her arm, she'd brush dark strands of it away from his forehead. She thinks that it's too long and needs a cut, and then she reminds herself that that's Emma's job these days.

Emma who had decided that she's Henry's mother and so haircuts are her –

"Mom, stop," he says gently. "Don't do this to yourself, please." That's when she notices that he's not just standing next to her, but rather he's actually sitting beside on her…on the hospital bed. She blinks and looks around the bright room, and that's when she notices that yes, she is in what appears to be an infirmary of some kind. The walls are white and cold and so many instruments are beeping. Wires are running every which way.

"Henry, where are we?" she asks, frowning in confusion. There's an odd nudging at the back of her foggy brain that tells her that she knows the response to this question, and doesn't actually need him to answer it.

"You don't remember?"

"No."

"You already asked this question," he reminds her with a slightly sad smile as he reaches over and – impossibly – pulls the blankets over her legs.

Regina shakes her head, and stares at the blankets. "I don't –"

"We're with her," he says ominously.

"Her? Henry –"

"Who's Henry, darling?" an unsettlingly calm voice says from the doorway, and then it's a whole lot like someone is pouring a bucket of cold water on her because suddenly she recalls exactly where she is and how she got here.

She also recalls the feeling of electricity pouring through her body.

And her heart sputtering to a slow stop before being jerked awake again.

She's alive, she realizes.
She's some kind of prisoner now, apparently.

Her prisoner.

She blinks her eyes and looks towards the end of the bed. Henry's still sitting there, watching her curiously, his brow furrowed in worry. "Don't antagonize her, mom," he urges frantically. "She will hurt you. So will he."

He, she recognizes immediately, is the towering sociopath that is walking just behind the woman who had addressed herself earlier as the Queen.

He had called himself John.

And he's grinning at her right now.

It makes her skin crawl.

She tries to lift her hand up to reach for the IV tube so that she can pull it out of her arm (that's what they do in the movies, right? That's how you get away, right?) and then hopefully try to figure a way out of this wretched place, but there are thick ropes – actual ropes – around both of her wrists, and one surprised and curious look down at them and she can tell that if she tries to pull against them, all she'll do it severely burn and wound herself.

Which, of course, is entirely the point of such an absurd form of binding.

This is to be more than just physical torture, she realizes. Rather, it's to be the psychological kind that's meant to break down her mind and spirit.

She sneers at them, and dares them to give it their best shot. It's going to take a lot more than ropes and bright lights to destroy her, she vows.

"Mom, no," Henry says again. "Please."

She looks away from the Henry that's sitting on her bed. He's just a figment of her imagination, she thinks. She has no idea why he's here or why she had chosen to imagine him, but it doesn't matter because she doesn't need him; she'll be home soon enough, anyway. She'll be back with her real son, then.

She'll be able to hold him and tell him how much she loves him, and that –

"How are you feeling, Regina?" the woman asks as she approaches. "You've been sleeping for the last four weeks, and we were starting to get anxious."

That gets her attention. "Weeks?"

"It's perhaps an overstatement to say that you slept the entire time," the woman admits with a soft chuckle. "It was more like you were in and out of consciousness. You were quite sick. You even ran a deliciously high fever."

"What do you want with me, you crazy bitch?" Regina demands, her patience with this whole absurd game and especially this intolerable woman snapping like a dry twig. "What exactly is it that you hope to get out of letting Owen almost kill me and then getting me healthy all over again?"

"Oh, you're not nearly ready for that," she replies. "When you are, we can have that discussion. For now, all you need to know is that it is your evil that has brought you here. It is your
wickedness that has condemned you."

"This again," Regina drawls, remembering a similar ramble of this nature before she'd passed out the last time. "Don't you have anything new?"

"Mom, she's going to hurt you," Henry protests. "Please, don't do this."

"I'm fine," she snaps out at him, her eyes darting back to him.

"Already seeing ghosts, are we?" the woman asks as she glances around the room. "That always happens, darling, but not usually this soon in the game."

"Let me out of this bed, and I'll make you into a ghost."

"She keeps making these threats," John muses from beside the woman. "I get the feeling that she actually believes that she's the one in control here."

"Oh, but I'm sure she does. Worry not, though, Regina I will be letting you out of the bed, but not so that you can attack me or...make me into a ghost as you have done to so very many souls. No, rather so that my dear sweet boy John here can get you ready for your new housing arrangements. I fear that the bed you'll be sleeping on won't be nearly as comfortable as this one, but I'm sure that you'll be back in this one soon enough." She smiles when she says this, her eyes dancing with malice and a kind of cold insanity.

It'd be almost a relief if this woman were the completely out of her mind insane type, but no, while she is still clearly crazy in the head, there's a kind of method to her madness that makes her frightening and formidable.

It makes her a lot like the woman who had once cast a terrible curse.

"John, if you will kindly get Regina cleaned and changed. It's about time that she sees the room that she'll be spending the rest of her days in, yes?"

"Of course," he says, and steps forward. He yanks the blanket that had been around her (had Henry actually pulled it up and over her legs or had she just imagined that; she knows the answer, of course, but it's a nice story to tell herself that her son would try to care for her) places a cold hand on one of Regina's wrists and she immediately tries to pull it away, getting nowhere at all, and drawing a low chuckle from between his thin lips. "Where do you think you're going to get to?" he asks. "You're as powerless as a kitten."

"Don't underestimate me," she growls.

"On the contrary, that's why you're still wearing the magic deprivation cuff, and why we've bound your wrists." He leans close, and she feels his hot breath burning against her cheek. "That's about to be all you're wearing."

There's a kind of sick perverse pleasure in the way that he says this, but it's not the words alone that make her skin crawl. It's not even the thought of what he might want to do to her. Disturbing as it is, she has had more than a few men openly lust after her and display their more carnal desires. She's even had her fair share of wretched souls try to have their way with her.

If she's honest with herself, what truly unnerves her is the almost clinical way that John is looking down at her. Like she's simply a science project and her clothes aren't what's standing between him and her naked body, but rather that they're wrapping paper that needs to be logically removed to enhance the experience of opening up a present. It's a terrifying thought, and try as she might; she
can't quite stop herself from involuntarily shuddering at it.

It frightens her that she would almost prefer that he would view her in a sexual manner as opposed to the cold calculating way that he currently is.

"It'll be okay, mom," Henry assures her, and she almost thinks she can feel him touching her foot with his hand, but of course that's as impossible and illogical as the silly idea of him pulling a blanket over her had been.

Because he's back in Storybrooke, thank God, and not here at all.

"Yes, it will," she assures her son who isn't actually there. It's a bit strange, then, because the fake Henry shifts around anxiously on the bed and frowning, he dips his head down like he's displeased with her answer. Still, curiously, he doesn't leave her, though, and that's a kind of relief. "I can handle this," she promises him and maybe she's saying it to John as well.

Because he needs to know she won't break so easily.

"We shall see," John answers, and then he reaches into his belt and removes a sharpened knife. It's large and gleaming and he makes sure that she sees the way the bright lights of the Infirmary catch off of it. It's all just for show, though, and she's far more annoyed than afraid. Or at least that's what she tells herself until he puts the blade against the front of her hospital gown.

That's when she notices that she's wearing one.

Which means that she's already been stripped down once.

So yes, this is definitely all about the show.

And the fear.

Her fear.

He wants her to be terrified of him.

She almost laughs at this because he really has no idea just how many terrible people have tried or succeeded in stealing her free will from her, she thinks. He won't be the first to do it, and she will not show him fear.

She simply will not.

She feels the coldness of air as he slides the knife down the front of the gown. There's no reason to do this as he could just pull it off of her, but this is about her realizing that he has all of the power, and she has none of it.

When the thin fabric has been cut away from her, and her bare front has been exposed to him, he allows his eyes to sweep her. Having been with many a lover during her days as the Queen, she knows the look of someone who wants her, and this isn't that. This is back to her being a test subject.

He's examining her in a way that is meant to make her uncomfortable.

"You're quite beautiful," he states, and then runs the flat of the knife across one of her breasts. She bites her lip to keep from reacting to him and as she's doing so, her eyes flick towards Henry, who is staring at her in horror.
"Mom," he says, his eyes as wide as saucers.

"Go away," she begs him. "I don't want you to watch. You don't want to."

"Why wouldn't I want to watch this?" John asks as she chases the blade across the swell of her breast with his thumb, making sure he pauses just long enough to let her know he's on control. "Actually, I'm more doing a lot more than watching, but really, why would I not want to?" He grins over his shoulder at the woman who is observing all this with curious but cold eyes.

It's a twisted kind of experiment for her as well.

She ignores both of them. "Please," she says to Henry. She knows that her captors will think that she's saying it to them, but she knows that she's not.

This is about her son, and even if he's not real, he can't be here for this.

"Fine, but I'll be back," he promises.

It's the feel of the cold metal blade on her naked left leg that draws her attention back to John. He slides it along the inside of her thigh and then dips the point in just enough to draw a thin line of blood. She winces as it bubbles up and then spills across her skin, bright crimson melting into olive.

"So beautiful," he repeats. "But I'm sure we can do something about that."

"Get on with it," she growls at him. "But don't think that you'll be the first."

He laughs. "Oh, is that what you think is going to happen here, Regina? Do you think that I'm going to f*ck you? Maybe make you scream in pain as I pleasure myself? Well, that might be fun to watch, but don't worry; I have absolutely no intention of doing that with you," he says with far too much mockery in his tone for her liking. "You're too far beneath me for that."

She bites her tongue and just barely does manage to stop herself from correcting him as acerbically as possible because it's not like she actually wants to encourage this little bastard to attempt to sexually assault her.

His lack of interest in doing so does confuse her, however. Because if rape isn't his intent, then what is this game? Why is he trailing the blade across her more sensitive regions? Why is he drawing blood and why is he touching her with his hands in a way that is clearly meant to suggest -

Humiliation; he's doing all of this to humiliate her.

The realization of this slides across her as coldly as the blade currently is.

Rape, in her experience has always been about power and control, but this is different. This isn't that at all. This is about using familiar methods to humiliate her, and letting her know that he can do so with relative ease.

"Time to get up," he says to her as he pulls the IV loose, taking special care not to damage anything that they don't want damaged before it's time for that to occur. "I'm going to untie you now, and you're surely going to try to hit me, but I warn you, you will fail and if you try and happen to draw blood, you will be punished for your misbehavior. Think smart, Regina. Try to."

She growls at him, and bares her perfectly white teeth.
He laughs, and then uses the blade to cut the ropes away.

The second that they're gone and she can move her hands, she starts to turn towards him, her fists clenching, but if she'd actually thought that he would give her the opportunity to actually strike him, she finds herself deeply and absurdly disappointed – and perhaps even a bit shocked – when the very moment that she reaches up towards him, he reacts by grabbing her wrist, turning it sharply enough for her to hear it snap, and then slamming her to the ground with enough force for her kneecaps to feel like they're cracking.

"Did you really think I was going to just let you?" he laughs.

She grinds her teeth against both her anger and the pain that's currently surging through her from the broken wrist and her likely bruised knees.

"I thought you were smarter," he scolds. He looks behind him. "All of it?"

"All of it. She is no Queen here. She is a prisoner. And she is dirty."

Instinctively, Regina struggles against him, but he's quite a bit bigger than her, and she's still weak from four weeks of recovery and now the new injuries. She looks for a place to connect with, to hurt him even a little bit, but the angle that he's got – with her bent forward and on her knees in front of him - gives him the upper hand and all of the leverage points.

She's completely at his mercy.

She finds herself thinking about the sport in this world known as wrestling. She'd read up on the rules of baseball and football and then rolled her eyes at them, and put the book away. She wishes she'd read up more on how to flip someone twice your size without the use of magic or modern weaponry.

"Such lovely hair," she hears John murmur as he presses her forward. His massive body is covering her from behind, and his mouth is pressed up against her left ear, his breath tickling her in a wholly unpleasant manner.

She's not the least bit surprised when she feels him bite her earlobe. Hard enough to draw blood.

She is surprised when he then pulls her head back, places the knife beneath the bottom of her hair and starts sawing away at it like it's made of rope.

Suddenly, "all of it" makes sense.

She struggles once again – harder - but then he's got the knife against her throat, and she wonders if she wants to die or doesn't, but it hardly matters because she knows that they won't let her go so easily which means that all her resistance right now is likely to do is end up with her getting badly hurt.

"I need clippers," John says casually. "To get the rest of it."

She hears the sound of the electrical clippers being turned on, and though she's fighting – because it's all she knows how to do – she doesn't stop herself from closing her eyes as her hair is cut away from her. She feels it soft and prickly against her face and shoulders as it falls to the ground.

"All of it," the woman behind her says once again, chuckling low.
When all of her hair is gone and in thick piles next to her knees, and Regina is trying not to shiver from the fact that she's naked and cold and more than a little scared, John snaps his fingers and two men step forward and lift her up. Instinctively, she shoves roughly at one, but then John is hovering over her again and his large hand settles around her broken wrist and squeezes.

"Enough," he tells her with what sounds like annoyed exasperation. He turns her wrist and pain streaks up through her, like fire across her nerves.

"I will kill you," she promises him, and it's neither the first or last time.

He smiles. "It's far more likely that I will kill you," he tells her. "But not when you want it or need it, but rather when you've stopped caring about dying."

He makes a mistake, then, and turns her slightly so that he can bind her wounded hands with cuffs, and though she's wearing nothing at all and has never looked smaller or more vulnerable, she is still the woman who once led a Kingdom and raged war upon the back of a massive black stallion.

She is still the Evil Queen and she is still Regina Mills.

They mean to take both of those things from her, and they will probably even succeed, she thinks as she catches sight of her dark hair on the ground.

But she won't go down without a fight.

Not today and not ever again.

She spins and her hand comes up and down and then there are deep and bloody scratch marks beneath John's eyes – new viciously red ones to join the old scars. She grins at him, frightened but furious, the Queen for now.

He hits her – the back of his hand colliding with her mouth, a cut forming there - and she falls but then she looks up at him and spits blood at him.

And says again in a voice so full of hate and defiant fury, "I will destroy you if it is the last thing that I do." It's familiar, but for once, so very warranted.

"We shall see," he snarls, and she thinks that though she is bleeding and her wrist is broken and her knees ache, perhaps she had won this small battle.

Perhaps.

But then he throws her into a cold, dark room that's damp and thick with the smell of mildew and says, "Welcome to your new home. Your Majesty."

And she knows – simply knows – that the small wins that she might get along the way of this hideous journey are all just expected defeats within the overall game, and before this is all over, she will have lost everything.

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Emma has to remind herself that she's been forced to sit through interviews – or conversations – like this one where victims for whatever reason had been pressed to recount the many and various tortures that had been done to them. She'd been in the room when a seventeen-year-old girl had told an investigator that she'd murdered her stepfather because he had raped her every day since her thirteenth birthday. She'd been standing just outside of another, watching through a two-way
window, while a tiny boy with a small sleepy smile had spoken about being whipped for daring to pee his pants.

Those had been the children.

The tortured and so very badly broken adults had been just as bad – if not worse - because they’d known the gruesome bitter truth about the world.

They'd understood the unrelenting evilness lurking within so many souls.

Regina has that shadowed look now, but it's curious on her because it looks like she's trying to figure something out for herself. It's like she's finally replaying all of these events and seeing them, as she'd never done before.

Emma's not sure if that's a good or a bad thing. Especially considering how prone Regina is these days to viewing herself as deserving of all of this.

"Regina," she says softly when almost five minutes have passed in silence.

Even Greg is just watching and waiting.

"Regina," Snow echoes, stepping forward and lightly touching her former stepmother's arm. Emma almost warns her – remembering the way Regina had snapped at her previously about being touched – but her voice catches when Regina turns and looks hard at Snow, her eyes flickering downwards.

"They touched me so often," she muses. "Every time they came to get me, they would put their hands on me. When he delivered me to her personally, he would make sure that his hands wandered. He touched my breasts and my buttocks and every part of me. He always let me know that he could."

A horrified and shocked looking Snow White couldn't possibly pull the hand that had been rested on Regina away any quicker than she actually does.

"I'm sorry," Snow murmurs, but if Regina hears, she doesn't let on.

"Have you actually let anyone touch you since you were in there?" Greg asks. "Have you even let someone so much as kiss you since you got out?"

Her turbulent and wet with tears eyes jump towards him, as if she's suddenly remembering that he's here, too. Without thinking about it, she reacts to his question by biting her lip. When she realizes it, she lets go.

"You wouldn't be the first person to not be able to be touched again after spending time with her," he tells her. "Destroying is what she does best."

"It's what I do as well."

"I know," he answers. "I know. But she won, didn't she?"

Regina stares at him for a long moment, looking like she just might answer that question, but then instead, "What do you want to know next?"

"Nice deflection, but okay. What was the worst thing that she did to you?"

The former queen opens her mouth to reply, and something like hot raw panic streaks through her
eyes as a memory clearly assaults her with all of the force of someone getting hit by a truck. She looks at Emma, and for a moment, the sheriff is certain that Regina is going to call and end to this.

But then Greg smiles like he knows he's somehow confirmed something for himself and elaborates, "I mean physically. What torture hurt the most?"

"Regina, you don't have to," Emma tells her, a hand hovering close to her elbow but not quite touching her. "We can figure this out by ourselves."

"We have a deal, Sheriff," Greg reminds her, smug as he can be.

"Shut the fuck up or I will shoot you in the face," Emma snaps back.

She expects her mother to try to calm her, to say something meant to suggest reason and rational thinking, but Snow stays completely silent.

"No," Regina replies. "It was just pain. It is just pain."

"Regina –"

"It's fine, Emma," the former queen cuts in. She rubs her hand over her temple, and her eyes narrow and squint for a moment as she tries to will back the hurt she's feeling from the brewing migraine. When it finally breaks over her, she'll be lucky if she'll be able to see through the agony of it all, but until that time comes, she's going to hold her head and be strong.

She's going to do what must be done for Henry.

"There were bad days that I don't remember and worse ones that I do. They had me for three years, and there were weeks when every moment was spent in one of their torture rooms. And then there were other weeks when I don't believe that I ever left the cell they had me in." She frowns. "After awhile, it all started blurring together and I forgot what they were doing and what they'd done until they did it all over again. The electrocution was normal and even the asphyxiation whether by drowning or by -" she swallows hard before she says the next words, "- hanging were as well."

"Hanging?" he presses, his head tilting slightly.

"I imagine that they derived a rather large amount of pleasure in knowing that they could make a woman who had watched many an enemy of the kingdom die by hanging be then forced to struggle at the end of a noose."

"Regina," Snow whispers.

"I'm alive, Snow," Regina reminds her former stepdaughter. She just barely does manage to stop herself from touching her throat, however. She just does manage to remind herself that the marks that had once been there – bright and vivid burns and bruises – are long faded away now.

"For now. Go on," Greg urges. "Tell me more."

"She had them burn my legs and my feet with cigarette lighters and cattle prods and Tasers. They broke bones and they let me starve and get sick from the cold and infection. They kept me from sleeping and they drugged me with something that enhanced ever feel, every touch and every sound."

"But that still wasn't the worst, was it?"
"No. The whippings were," she answers, unable to hide a slight shudder as she thinks about the whistling snap of the whip just before it'd struck her.

He nods his head like he understands.

"How often?"

"Often enough," she hedges, and her hand rises up to her chest making Emma think about a brief note in the medical file about a particular scar.

One that had been stretched across one of Regina's breasts.

"They left marks?"

He knows the answer to his question, of course, but all of this is about hurting Regina with the past, and these memories are doing exactly that.

"They did."

"Always on the back?"

She pauses for a long moment as she hears the sound of her screams echoing in her mind, and then says quietly, "At first, but then…no." Her hand touches the front of her chest, balls into a fist and then drops to her side.

*** ***

She's dragged from her cell before she's barely even awake, her bare feet slapping against the hard pavement as she's pulled towards the biggest of the torture rooms. She forgets it some days – her mind is slipping, she thinks, and there are times when she forgets where she is and how she got here – but she always remembers everything once she's back in the room.

Once she sees the wall and the chains and the maroon stains that are hers.

She's thrown to the ground and she can't stop herself from crying out because it'd been just yesterday (she thinks) when she'd been subjected to a brutal beating at the hands of the guards. Her broken ribs ache and breathing is difficult, but she forces herself to look up and into the eyes of the woman who has as of late become more than just obsessed with her.

As of late, the woman who had called herself the Queen of this nightmare has become almost enraged that her captor refuses to bend and just give in.

Whatever that means.

"Good morning, darling," she says, her voice sickly sweet and her cold eyes full of a kind of curious madness that speaks to her furious impatience.

It takes Regina a long breathy moment to understand what was just said to her – that's been happening a lot more as of late and she wonders just how badly the constant electrocutions and suffocations have damaged her mind – but then she realizes that the words themselves weren't the threat.

No, the threat is the way she is looking at Regina.

Like a defiant mutt of dog that stubbornly refuses to be trained.
Only she's no mutt.

She pushes herself up and doesn't even bother to hide her pain. "What shall it be tonight?" she demands. "Waterboarding? Hanging? Or will you just –"

"John, dear, how long would you say it's been since our lovely Queen's last whipping?" the woman asks as she steps towards Regina, her accented voice sounding deceptively casually. "At least a few weeks, I believe, yes?"

Regina's jaw clenches. Not to say that any of the other tortures are better, but this is one that she's had the hardest time dealing with. This – and the sheer violence of it - is the one that she finds herself the most fearful of.

"At least," John murmurs as he enters, a leather strap over his shoulder. It's the kind that her guards would have used on thieves and petty criminals back in the old world, and she finds herself tensing at even the sight of it.

"Very good," her captor nods. "I think that our dear Regina here has been allowing herself to believe that she's still in control of all of this. I think that she believes that we're no threat to her anymore. Do you believe that?"

"I believe you talk too much," Regina retorts, looking away from the whip.

"Mm. To the wall, then."

The two men that had brought her from her cell grab her. She swings at one, but she's weak and tired and her broken ribs howl at her when she moves too fast, and before she knows it, she's down on her knees again with one of the guards' knee shoved roughly into the curve of her spine.

"Well that worked," John states before roughly hauling her upwards. To the men he says, "Try it again. Don't let a little broken woman beat you, hmm?"

"Oh, she's not broken yet," the woman murmurs. "She's so resilient."

"Something new you'd like to try perhaps?" John asks, his eyebrow lifted.

"Yes, I think so. Have her facing us."

"Her back to the wall instead?"

"She's remarkably unmarked on her front side, wouldn't you say? Might allow her to believe that she can pretend that this has never happened."

Regina lifts her eyes up to her. "They're just scars," she states.

"We shall see, darling." She nods to the men, and they dutifully – with looks of something like surprised horror because even for them, this is more than they're accustomed to – tie Regina to the wall, her back flat against it.

"On your say," John tells her.

"Make her bleed, my love," the woman replies. "Make her break."

The first lash cuts deeply into her belly and hip, and bright red blood spills down her legs. The second slaps against her thigh, and digs deep into her nerves and suddenly she's twitching and whimpering as pain explodes up and down her as though waves of water are dragging her down
and under.

The third strike slices down from her left shoulder to across her breast.

Several more blows – each of them harder and deeper – fall against her broken body before the woman finally holds up her hand and says, "Stop."

When they finally pull her from the wall and press her bloodied and broken front against the relative softness of a gurney, that's when she sees him.

Henry, his eyes so big and worried and afraid.

"Today is almost over," he assures her, a slight tremor to his voice as he looks at her with such sadness. "You're going to be okay, mom."

Tears flood her vision, and she tries to reach for him.

They don't let her, though. Rough hands grab at her and pull her in, and then she feels straps wind around her naked torso, binding her to the bed.

That's when she feels the heat near the back of her shoulder.

That's when the woman who is their Queen says, "You're dirty, Regina, and you always will be. Whatever roads you travel, you will always be dirty."

She smells the burning of her flesh almost before she feels it, but when she does, it's like every nerve in her begins to pop and explode simultaneously.

She screams and she screams and she screams until she simply can't.

*** ***

"The whippings that you suffered, were they what crippled you?" Greg asks as he gazes at her, his eyes settling on her shaking hand atop the cane.

She flinches at the question, but then replies with, "It started the process."

"I'm sure that the doctors told her what would happen if he kept doing that to you," Greg informs her. "They always knew where someone stood when I was there. When they would put someone through sessions like the ones that you went through, she would always ask afterwards how much more someone could handle before there was permanent damage. That you have so much of it, that you're like this, that means she wanted you to be."

"You think I don't know that?"

"I know you deserve it."

"I'm still not denying that, Owen."

"But when did you start realizing that? That you earned of all of this?"

"Why does it matter?"

"It matters, Regina. I want to know when everything broke inside of you."

"I was alone. She wasn't hurting me."
"I want to know," he demands again, leaning forward.

"It's a story that won't make sense to you. It was..." she glances over at Emma and Snow and then has to look away. "It was my demons speaking."

"You owe me," he reminds her. "And this is number four. Now talk."

She scratches at her temple again as another brightly hot burst of pain makes itself known, and then sighs, "I must have been delusional after one of the beatings or perhaps they drugged me up or...well, I don't actually know what was going on in my head, but I was seeing and hearing people."

*** ***

Naked and settled uncomfortably on her relatively uninjured side, she's trying to remind herself to try to breathe through the pain, but she can't figure out where it's coming from besides everywhere all at once. She feels sticky and wet and she's not sure if it's blood or water or something else.

All she knows is that she wishes that they would just let her die.

Perhaps tonight, they finally will, she thinks; they're not keeping her in the Infirmary for once so maybe they mean for her to expire while being alone in this cold damp room. Perhaps they mean for this to end and she can just –

"Do you really think that you can get out of this so easy?" a cold voice says.

She snaps her head around and looks for Henry – he's always nearby these days, and really, he's the only thing that's keeping her grounded – but what she sees instead is Snow White. Dressed like the princess that she had once been instead of the schoolteacher that the curse had turned her into.

"Snow? How? How are you...am I –"

"Are you imagining me? Of course you are, Regina. I wouldn't be here otherwise, and we both know it. I think you're dead. We all do." She shrugs her shoulders. "Even if we didn't, we wouldn't be here, and you know that."

"Then why are you here? Why would I ever imagine you?"

"Because it's time for you to face the truth about all of this."

Regina laughs as much as she's physically able to. "And what truth is that?"

"That all of this is happening because of what you did to us."

"What I did to you? What about –"

"I was just a young child, Regina. Your mother was the evil and not me. You let her twist and manipulate you and then because you were too much of a coward to fight back against her, you took your rage out on me instead."

"She wasn't exactly around to fight back against," Regina snaps back.

"You didn't fight back even when she was around; when she came back for you in Storybrooke, you fell to her. You let her manipulate you all over again, and then you chose to follow her just as you chose to hate me."
"And you chose to take my life away from me," Regina snarls in response.

"I made a mistake; I saw what I believed to be a beautiful woman with what I thought was kind heart and I wanted to be part of her world. I wanted her to be part of mine. I made one mistake that cost us both dearly; you made hundreds of them that cost others just as much. You murdered my father."

"Did it ever occur to you, Snow, that I never wanted to be part of your world? I never wanted to be the Queen and I sure as hell never wanted to be your mother, I wanted to have my own life. But since we're talking about murder, need I remind you that you manipulated me into killing my mother."

"She deserved to die. Just as you deserve this."

"Still so righteous. Even now. You don't know what it was like to grow up the way that I did. You don't know what it was like to be married to a man who saw me as only a warm body and a nanny for his...you don't know."

"No, I don't," Snow admits. "But even when he was dead, even when you could have just started all over again and maybe allowed yourself to find peace and love, you refused to give up your hatred. Even when he was no longer your husband, you still let the evil in your heart own you instead."

"Says the spoiled princess who was given everything in her life on a silver platter. You have no idea what it was like to every choice ripped away."

"I would think she does," David notes from somewhere behind her. She spins her weakened body to look at him, and cries out as a cut on her back splits open and fresh blood spills hot and wet down her sweat-slicked skin.

"You brought the imposter," she notes, taking in his princely clothing.

"Not sure you have the right to talk," David states. "You stole a crown."

"So did you. Snow may have had a right to mine, but neither one of you had a right to George's and both of you helped yourself to it so please, spare me the pompous indignation over me doing what I had to do for myself."

"Was murdering helpless villagers just to teach me a lesson one of those things that you had to do for yourself?" Snow demands as she moves towards Regina. "Do you know how many women and children died there, Regina? Innocent people who did nothing wrong besides defy you."

"They protected you," the former queen replies, wondering just what kind of delusion this is. Had they drugged her up with hallucinogenics again?

"And they lost their life for that."

"I was their Queen."

"Is that how you justify it?" Emma demands as she just seems to appear out of thin air. She's standing over Regina now, dressed in her trademark dark skinny jeans and cheap red jacket, her hands settled heavily on her hips.

"I'm not justifying anything," Regina snaps out. "Especially not to you."

"Because I might be the one person that you've hurt the most?"
Regina tries to sit up to glare at the blonde. "How do you figure that?"

"I did nothing to you," Emma states.

"You broke my curse."

"I never intended to do that."

"You took my son away from me. You made him hate me."

"You made him hate you," Emma retorts.

"You helped."

"You almost killed me," Henry puts in, and she gasps because he's been her one rock during all of this, and if he too is turning, then she's truly lost.

"I'm sorry," she says. "It was for her. I never...I never would have hurt you."

"Her dying would have hurt me."

"Yeah, great plan there, Regina," Emma notes dryly. "Win the kid over by murdering me. Then again, your curse did make it so that my parents had to toss me through a goddamned tree, which resulted in me getting jumped from foster home to foster home and abused as badly as your mom abused you. Oh don't look so shocked, Regina, I know full well that you did a complete background rundown on me, and you I bet you even read all the little notes made on me while I was in the system. You probably even know about the one or two times I actually bothered speaking up for myself."

"That's not my fault."

"Isn't it? If you had just stayed away, I would have grown up happy."

"If your mother —"

"You did this, Regina," Snow cuts in. "You made the choices to torture and to maim and to destroy and to kill. Whatever else may have brought you to those choices, you still made them and all of that blood is on your hands."

"No. No!"

"Yes," a quiet voice says from behind Emma.

She doesn't even need to see him to know whom it is speaking to her now.

"Daniel," she whispers as he slowly steps from the shadows, still wearing the clothes that he'd been wearing on the day that he'd been murdered.

"You did all of this for me," he says as he steps closer.

She nods her head frantically. "Yes. To avenge you. To honor you."

"Do you really believe that all of the blood that you let stain your hands honored me? Regina, you were so beautiful...I loved you so much. I loved the girl with the sweet smile and the kind eyes. I loved the girl who risked her own life to save another. I don't know this woman that understands all of the things that these monsters have done to her because she did it to others. I don't know the
woman that you became. You became them."

"Daniel…"

"Look around you, Regina," he whispers as he kneels down beside her, his soft hand somehow managing to stroke her feverish cheek. "Everyone in this room was hurt by you in some way or another. Everyone in Storybrooke and everyone back in our world, they were all hurt by you. And for what?"

"For you," she says desperately. "Always for you."

"I never would have wanted this to happen, and deep down, you know it, too. And you know that I never would have fallen in love with this person."

"Don't say that," she pleads.

"It's the truth." He stands up, then, and backs away.

"Don't leave me."

"I won't. Not yet. I'll stay for this. You'll be better afterwards."

"After what?"

Emma steps forward suddenly. "You're a witch, Regina."

"And witches have to be burned to be purified," Snow notes.

Regina blinks and then does it again. Her captor has said these same words to her more than a few times – often before she'd instructed John or one of the other degenerates that work for her to burn her with something or other – but there's something darker about the hatred in Snow's eyes.

"Purified?" she repeats.

"You've been infected, Regina," Daniel tells her as he moves behind her and puts his arms around her like he's going to hold her in place. "You let hatred and evil into your heart and soul and it's corrupted you. The only way for you to have a chance to start again is for that evil to be purged from you."

"With fire," Emma shrugs. "You deserve nothing less." She tilts her head to the side. "After all, I had a stepfather who tried to do that to me. But then you already know about that, don't you? You know about my own scars."

"Emma –" she whispers, looking up at the furious blonde woman who had been her enemy in so many ways, but her ally in so very many others.

"Enough," David says and then he has a match in his hand. "Maybe after you've walked through the fire, maybe then you'll understand that you're the one who brought yourself to this place. Maybe then you'll accept it."

"You're a delusion," she insists weakly.

"Are we?" Emma asks. "And does it matter if we are? Everything that we're saying here, Regina, you know it to be the truth. You know what you are."

She looks over at Henry. "Please?" she pleads, but only to him.
"You erased my memory," he reminds her, looking so very betrayed.

"I..." she falls silent, unable to defend herself against the hurt in his eyes.

She has no idea where they get the gasoline from, but suddenly she's drenched in it and Snow and David and Emma and even Henry are standing above her – Daniel is still behind her, holding her - and they all just look so very disappointed and angry with her. Like she's let all of them down.

"You're a monster, Regina," Snow says.

"I never wanted to be."

"But you became one," Daniel notes. "In my name. You lost the girl that you were and you let yourself be twisted into a monster. You are a monster."

"No..."

"Yes," David replies calmly, and then the match is lit.

She swallows past the bile in her throat, her eyes on the little flame.

"Are you ready to take responsibility?" Snow asks. "Are you ready to finally face all the evil that you've done? Are you ready to finally atone?"

"Will...atoning change any of this? Will it get me out of...out of here?"

"No," Henry says quietly. "But it will cleanse you."

"Henry –"

"Grandma's right: it's time to face yourself, mom," Henry tells her as he steps back and away from her. "Accept that you are the Evil Queen."

Hot tears spill down her cheeks. "She's not me."

"She is," Snow insists. "Look at yourself. All of the marks on you, they're there because your kind of evil is infectious. They're there because people like you exist. No one hurts someone like that unless they've earned it."

"I'm not...I'm not..." she closes her eyes, and tries to will this all away. It's doesn't work like that, though. They're still above her, still condemning her.

"You may think that this horrible woman that has you is the evil one, but we all know better, don't we, Regina? She's just doing to you what you did to others," Emma points out. "She's just everything that you've ever been."

"She's right, Regina," Daniel says, and he holds her tighter. "You're evil."

A sob breaks through from Regina's throat, and her head falls.

When the match drops, and the flames circle her, it never occurs to her that they're not actually burning her. She never notices that she's screaming into an empty room without light. A dark and empty room that she's alone in.

*** ***
She can feel the horror and tension rolling off of Snow and Emma, and though she has always been brave and refused to look away from anyone, right now she is unable to meet either of their eyes, and so she simply doesn't. Instead, she glares over at Greg who is grinning wildly at her.

"They lit you on fire," he says, and he looks happy enough that it takes everything Emma has not to shoot him in the kneecap; as this conversation has gone on and on, it's been getting harder and harder not to attack him.

Because she's become more and more aware of the fact that he's not been surprised by a single thing he's heard, which means that he's either heard it all before or been there to watch it being done to someone else.

"I believe that either I was delirious from my injuries or drugged up with one of their 'how crazy can we make the Queen go' concoctions," Regina answers sharply. "Because no, obviously they did not ever light me on fire."

"But she did? My boss, I mean."

"Once."

"And yet, I see no burns on your arms or face."

"She lit me on fire and then removed the magic cuff which allowed me to – at the last moment - save myself from being burnt to death. I suffered minor burns only. It was meant for me to believe that I was about to die that way."

"She removed the cuff," Emma notes thoughtfully, like the former queen's words might mean something to her that it doesn't mean to anyone else.

Regina throws a look of annoyance over her shoulder – all the while still refusing to meet Emma's eyes – and then says to Greg, "One left."

"Tell me, who was this Daniel guy? Why did he matter so much?"

"That is none of your business," Regina snaps back immediately, her dark eyes suddenly blazing with something like rage mixed with a lot of hurt.

"Maybe not, but you have to admit that there's a sick kind of poetry to the fact that what made you look in the mirror was a whole lot of delusion from the people you care about the most." He smiles over at the two women.

Regina just glares at him.

"Fine, let's move on, then. What shall I ask for, Regina? What story don't you want to tell me? Which one is worth me telling you who your traitor is? I already know that you were stripped, sheared, electrocuted, drowned, beaten, whipped, and branded as the monster that you are. What else is there to know? Oh...yeah." He leans in towards the former queen, showing her his no longer white teeth. "Tell me, how many times did they take you?"

Regina suddenly goes deathly pale, her eyes widening in panic and pain as the memories that have been nudging at the surface of her mind suddenly spring forward, and then they're all right there again. All so vivid again.

"No," Emma says immediately, aggressively moving forward.
"You can try to pretend otherwise as much as you'd like to, but it did happen to you, didn't it, Regina? Not John, but someone else. At some point during the time you were there, I'm sure that my boss got desperate enough to give a few of the boys a crack or two at breaking the Queen. I'm sure she even watched and enjoyed hearing you scream and beg for –"

This time, Emma really does pull her gun from her holster. "Shut up," she growls out as she releases the safety and then points the pistol in Greg's direction. "Or you spend the right of your days without kneecaps."

"Wait," Regina says softly, offering Emma a smile that the sheriff thinks is meant to show her some kind of appreciation for the attempt at defending her. She looks over at Greg, and steel herself. "I never begged." She holds up her chin and looks right at him, full of defiance. "They wanted me to, and they tried to make me, but I never begged. They didn't win that one."

"But they did win, didn't they? Because they took everything from you."

"You already know that they did."

"And now I want you to tell me about it. That's the final story that I want to hear from you, Regina. I want to know what it felt like when you lost the last shred of your dignity and your sense of self and your worth. I want you to tell me when you lost the last thing that mattered to you. Your body."

"You think I hadn't lost that a long time ago?" Regina asks in disbelief. "I was forced to marry a man that I never wanted to marry." As she says this, she deliberately refuses to look over at Snow and see her wide-eyes horror.

"It's not the same," Greg insists. "I want to hear about how they –"

"No," Snow says suddenly and she moves in front of Regina. "We're done."

"Oh, no, you're not. You need my answers if you want to protect your precious town from her and the rest of the Home Office," Greg replies smugly. "And I want hers. I want her to tell me what it felt like to have –"

"We'll get them a different way," Snow answers. "We always should have."

"We made a deal," hereminds them once again, his eyes widening as it occurs to him that they might refuse him this vengeance. "She owes me."

"You keep saying that," Emma replies. "But I just don't care anymore."

"If she doesn't tell me, I won't tell you who it was who took her to them."

Regina tilts her head. "Took me to them?" For a moment, her brow furrows, and it's like several different thoughts are connecting in her mind, but then she winces and mentally steps back and away from the painful memories.

"Yeah. Your traitor is the one who hand delivered you to my boss. I know who that person is, and I'll tell you who they are, but I want your story."

Emma and Snow look at each other and then over at Regina. They can both tell that she is fighting desperately to find the strength inside of her to give Greg this last story, this last bit that he wants, but her dark pained eyes are growing glassy and her hands are shaking, and it's clear she's hitting the wall with what she's capable of. This tale – this horror – is one step too far.
"You don't have to do this," Snow whispers.

"I…" she blinks and the haunted look that's on her face is one that Emma has seen a time too many; it's the one that the girl who she had pushed to get up on the witness stand and face her tormentor had been wearing just before the son of a bitch had destroyed her with a simple smug look.

Regina is stronger than that girl had ever been, but she's also gone through considerably far more pain, and even former queens have breaking points.

"She's not doing this; No deal," Emma says then. "We're leaving."

Greg stands up a bit, but halts when he sees the gun. "No, no, no…"

"Regina," Snow says gently, enough so that she worries that her tone will be taken as patronizing or condescending. "How about we go home?"

Thankfully, even Regina seems to know that she's reached the end of all of this. Without a single word of protest, and with her hand clutching her cane tight enough to shatter it, she steps from the room, Snow right behind her.

"We're not done," Greg says to Emma when he realizes that she hasn't yet left, his face contorted with rage. "You can't break our deal like this."

"That's where you're wrong," Emma replies as she shuts the door behind Snow and Regina, ensuring that she's alone with Greg. "We're very done."

"What are you going to do?" he asks, his eyes wide.

"We're going to have a talk, you and me. About choices. About yours."

"You want to talk about my choices? What about hers?"

"We knew what she did. Everyone knows what she did."

"Yeah," he agrees. "So why are you defending her? She's the Evil Queen."

"She was the Evil Queen, Greg, and even if she still were that woman, it wouldn't justify the choices that you've made anymore than my mother breaking a promise justified hers. You knew what those Home Office goons were doing to their prisoners. You knew they were torturing them, and you allowed it to happen and you gave her over to them. No matter what you want to tell yourself to help you sleep, you're every bit as bad as she was."

"And yet, you'll forgive her, but not me. Right?"

"Would your father forgive you?" Emma asks. It's a tremendously low blow, but considering the fact that she's fairly sure that Greg had figured out just how important Daniel had been to Regina thanks to her story, it seems fair to her that he now face the same understanding of having surrendered to the darkness against the wishes of the person that they had done it for.

"You don't get to speak about him," he screams, jumping towards Emma.

She stops him with the tip of the pistol, aimed right at him. "Sit down."

"You're defending a monster," he tells her. "You know that, right?"

"Maybe, but maybe I'm looking at one, too." She holsters her gun, and looks right at him. "Tell me,
if I let you go today, what would you do?"

"I'd cut her throat. That's my right."

"No, she's paid her price. She's done her penance."

"She hasn't paid me."

"And you haven't paid me," Emma snaps, her eyes growing wild. Almost immediately, she forces herself to gain control again, taking a deep breath before she continues with, "Or my son who you took not one, but two parents away from." She levels him with a steely gaze, the kind that's meant to make him squirm uncomfortably. "But maybe it's time that you do."

"What?"

"Your employers are in town now, right? I'm sure they'll be happy to have you back. As soon as we see them, maybe I'll just hand you over to them."

His face drains of all color. "If you do –"

"They'll do what, Greg? Punish you? Torture you? Kill you?"

He swallows. "You wouldn't. Because you know what they'd do, and you just said that knowing made me a monster. It'd make you one as well."

Emma shrugs her shoulder. "You didn't care; why should I?"

"Because…"

"Because I'm one of the good guys, right? So were you at one point."

"It's different."

"Is it? You killed my son's father and handed his mother over to maniacs who brutalized her in every single way humanly possible. One of your friends then burned a mark into my son's back that called him dirty simply so that your bosses could get Regina to use her magic again. Don't for a minute think that I won't do whatever I have to do to protect Henry."

"But you wouldn't do this."

"Dare me, Greg. Find out what I'm willing to do to protect my family."

"Is she your family now? Is the Evil Queen part of your family?"

"Yes, she is. She's my family, and I will protect her. You understand?"

"So this is it? She breaks her deal with me, and now you blackmail me?"

"It's not really blackmail so much as a straight threat."

"I won't tell you. No matter what you do to me, I won't ever tell you."

Emma shrugs her shoulders. "Then I guess you'll learn how far I'll go."

She meets his blue eyes with her bright green ones, and she stares at him until he looks away from her. And then she turns and exits the cell that has been his home for ten years, slamming the heavy
door loudly behind her.

"Emma," Snow says, from her position leaning against the wall. Regina is standing next to her, her posture unnaturally and painfully straight, just staring straight ahead, her eyes on a random spot in the distance.

"All good," Emma says as she looks at Regina, taking in the queen's almost slack expression, and yet the way she's trembling. "Let's get out of here."

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Regina doesn't crumble until she gets back to the townhouse; she doesn't say so much as a single word the entire trip home, she just keeps staring straight ahead as if she's watching something that only she can see.

"You okay?" Emma asks as she parks the Bug.

"I'm fine," Regina replies, sounding almost monotone. "I'd like to lie down."

Snow and Emma exchange a worried look, and what bothers them the most is how Regina doesn't snap at them for doing so; she doesn't react at all.

"Okay," Snow says gently. "But if you need us –"

"I know where you'll be," she replies, her tone clipped. She stands up, her face contorting into an agonized wince for just a moment before she puts her familiar old mask – not as good a fit as it had once been – back in place.

"Go ahead and ask what you want to ask," Emma says, watching Regina.

"Fine. What happened in there?" Snow asks as Regina stiffly walks towards the door, the former queen's hand gripping the cane as her body tries to betray her. The pain she's in is clear, but she's doing her best not to show it.

"While we were in there or after you left?" Emma clarifies.

"After we left," Snow answers as they follow Regina up the step and into the house; thankfully, Henry is out somewhere with David, which means that he isn't home to see how shaky and unsteady his adoptive mother is at the moment. Hopefully by the time he gets home, Regina will have regained her composure; it's not that they need it, it's that Regina needs it with Henry.

She needs to be able to convince herself that she can still be his strong and able mother even if he doesn't actually need that from her anymore.

Thing is, Emma thinks as she shuts the door behind them, he still does.

Even if he doesn't realize it.

"I made him an offer," Emma replies as she shuts the door behind them.

"Emma –"

"Don't worry," Emma assures her. "As much as I might want to be, and sometimes I really want to be, I'm not him. He declined my offer and I left. We can worry about how to get him out of town – alive – when this is over."
Snow allows a small breath of relief. "And while we were in the room?"

Before Emma can reply, there's a loud crash from upstairs. It's followed by another crash, and then something that sounds a lot like glass shattering.

"He made her go back into hell," Emma says. "And I think she's still there."

"You want me to –"

"No, I got this," Emma tells her. "She might need to yell at someone."

"She's yelled at me plenty in my life," Snow reminds her.

"I know, but she and I have always had…"

"A kind of language all your own," Snow sighs. "Go. Take care of her."

"You ever think we'd be at this place?" Emma asks, her hand on the railing.

"You ever think you'd care for Regina as much as you do?" Snow volleys.

"No," the sheriff allows, and then rushes up the stairs.

*** ***

The good news is that the only thing that Regina has actually broken in the bedroom is the oval shaped mirror above the dresser. The bad news is that because it's Regina who had done the breaking, she's done it with a degree of dramatic flair; the once beautiful mirror has now been shattered into a thousand jagged little pieces by the now cracked head of her cane.

Regina, who is standing in front of the mirror, thankfully appears to be uninjured. Just a bit bewildered and surprised, and slightly dazed even.

"Breaking a mirror is bad luck, right?" Emma asks as she enters. She glances around, and is desperately relieved to find that everything else is in order.

Between Regina and Henry and mirrors and laptops, she muses, it's been a fairly bad last couple of days in regards to things of hers getting broken.

"Seven years," Regina replies as she thoughtfully stares back at what is left of the mirror, the cracked reflection badly distorting her image. "It kind of fits if you really think about it. I spent three years as her prisoner, and then another seven as a prisoner of my own mind. But I'm still there, aren't I?"

"No, you're not; you're home, Regina."

"I keep trying to be, but sometimes I'm not even sure what that means."

"You are home," Emma says as she steps further into the room, closer to Regina. "With your family…and us. And if you need me to prove it, well then I can do that, Regina, because I'm right here if you need someone to –"

Regina turns. "Someone to what? Hit? Hurt? Make suffer so I don't hurt as much? Don't you think I've played that game enough? It's why we're here."

"I was going to say I'm here to talk if that's what you need from me. Or if you think you can handle
it, we can try to go for a run and get some air."

"Emma, don't treat me like I'm any more broken than I am. Please?"

"I'm not trying to. I'm just –"

"Trying to be kind. Because you don't know how not to be."

"I wish that were true, but yeah, that's kind of the angle I was going for."

"You're succeeding, but that's not what I need from you right now."

"All right then, what do you need?" Emma asks as she steps over the glass.

"Someone to be honest."

"You know I can do that."

"I know. It's why…I know. So be honest with me now, Emma," Regina says. "Tell me the truth about how you felt about what you heard today."

"Are you really asking me if I think you deserved what happened to you in there? Because if you are, then no, I don't. No matter what anyone does, I don't believe they deserve that. I certainly don't believe that you ever did."

Regina nods her head and then sits down on Emma's bed. "Sit," she says.

Emma drops down beside her. "What's going on in your head?"

"A terrible headache that's trying to turn in an explosive migraine."

"It's been a suck of a day."

Regina chuckles. "Yes, it has." She looks down at her hands, her eyes on the thick scars across her palms. "Owen asked me if I've let someone kiss me."

There's a moment of pause as Emma turns the words over in her mind before finally nodding as she recalls Mendell asking about that. It'd clearly been his way to unnerve Regina. "You don't have to tell me if you don't –"

"I know, but –" Regina taps her temple. "It's here now, and it might not be here later so…I tried to date briefly," she states. "When I thought that maybe I could handle the idea of someone touching me again. It's only really humorous, I suppose, because even when I wasn't recovering from being tortured, even when I was just the Mayor of Storybrooke, I had no idea how to go on a date with someone. I'd never really been on one. But I did try."

"What happened?"

"He kissed me goodnight. He was a complete gentlemen, but…"

"But you panicked?"

"Badly. The moment he touched me." She runs her thumb over one of the scars on her palm, drawing Emma's eyes to it and the way that Regina seems to almost be worrying it, like someone with a nervous tic. "You know what the strangest part of all was? When I was panicking, it wasn't because I was remembering those men on top of me and I wasn't remembering when they
would…" she trails off, takes a deep breath and then continues, "I was remembering what she would say to me while she was watching. How she would tell me that no one would ever want me again, and how dirty I was."

"She's a sociopath."

"One might claim that I am, too. You have."

"I know," Emma confesses. "But you're not that woman, anymore."

"It's so easy to say that, but in a heartbeat, I could be her again."

"Maybe you can and maybe you can't. I'm never going to claim that I have all of the answers, Regina. What I do know is that right at this moment in time, I'm not the same person that I was ten years ago, and neither are you. If you really want me to continue holding that woman against who you are now, well..." she shrugs. "I think you're shit out of luck, Your Majesty."

"Only you could manage to be disturbingly profane and oddly respectful at the same time," Regina comments dryly, an eyebrow lifted slightly.

"It's an art."

"Indeed," Regina replies, still running her thumb over the scars. "I was the Queen, Emma; everyone wanted me. Even the men and women who hated me wanted to bed me. When we got here to Storybrooke, everyone was too numb and fogged over to want much of anything, but in my kingdom, there was never a day that passed without some royal trying to seduce me."

"Okay?"

"My point is, even with my questionable recall issues, I still had a decade worth of memories as the Queen to buoy my confidence, and yet when that man kissed me, all I could think about were Wendy Darling’s words. It wasn't vanity; I didn't actually want him touching me, but I needed to be…"

She looks right at Emma, then, frowning in frustration because the word she needs is buried somewhere deep in her exhausted and damaged mind. It's a simple word, and she knows exactly what it is but it's just not coming.

"Wanted?" Emma offers up, her tone gentle and without judgment.

"Yes! I've always…it's not…I didn't want just to be desired, Emma. I needed to be wanted by someone," Regina admits. "It sounds so pathetic even to my own ears and…my mother, she would be so disappointed in me."

"But maybe he wouldn't be." She looks right at Regina when she says this, making it clear that she's speaking of Daniel now. "And maybe the guy who actually wanted you – the one who loved and wanted you to be happy above everything else - should matter more than the woman who didn't."

"Some days I miss him so much. And it's been so long."

"I know," Emma says gently. "I miss him, too."

Regina blinks, confused for a moment, but then as she remembers the rest of the story about what Home Office had taken from this town, "Neal?"
"Yeah."

"I'm sorry," Regina tells her, tears in her eyes. "I am sorry."

"Hey, I know," she assures her, turning her body slightly. She lifts a hand up to touch Regina's face, and then stops and waits for Regina to react. When the woman finally inclines her head slightly to allow the contact, the sheriff gently cups her palm against the right side of the Queen's cheek.

"Look at me, okay? Please?" When she finally does, Emma says, "You are wanted."

"Why?"

"Because you are." With her other hand, she reaches out and takes the one that Regina's been rubbing away at. After one more glance up at the former queen to confirm that she has permission to do this, Emma runs her own thumb over the scars, the touch so light and kind and even loving in a way that's deeply confusing. "Do they hurt?" she asks, her head cocked slightly.

"No," Regina admits. "Not...physically, anyway. Not anymore."

"Good," Emma replies, trailing her thumb across one of the deeper marks.

And Regina just watches, as if awed; it occurs to her somewhere in the back of her mind that this makes little sense, but then again, her life never has, anyway. She's been the prey and the predator, the victim and the monster.

She's been both the good guy on a white steed and the bad one on a black stallion, and neither outfit quite fits the way that it had once upon a time.

"Henry wants you here," the sheriff assures her after a few moments where all she does is trace the man-made lines on Regina's palm, her eyes never leaving Regina's. "My mother wants you here."

She punctuates her words with another gentle swipe over her thumb over a ridge of thick white scars.

"Emma," it's almost a sigh, something like a prayer of gratitude.

"And I want you here, too." She folds their hands together, their fingers intertwining and then gripping tight. She looks up at Regina, her bright eyes intense and glittering with a kind of hypnotic confidence. "And you and me, Regina, whether as friends, family or whatever we are to each other these days, we are going to push these sons of bitches out of our town and away from our kid and all of us are going to live happily ever fucking after."

It's an incredibly intense moment, and Regina's entire body hurts terribly, but Emma is so close and comfortable and this isn't scary in the way that people being near to her usually is, and the sheriff is being absurd and it's all just enough to make Regina laugh and smile and think that she's going completely insane because this has been a suck day and yet she has hope.

For the first time in ten years, she finally has hope of her own.

TBC..
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Warnings: A few non-graphic flashbacks to Regina's time with the Home Office, one which is suggestive of sexual assault (it's one line) as well as a very very brief discussion of it between the two ladies. Some mild language.

Henry opens the door slowly, quietly and looks inside. What he sees both surprises him and doesn't considering the events of the last few weeks; his mothers are curled up on the bed together, their hands joined loosely. The bedspread is slung over both of their legs and they almost look cozy and peaceful in a way that makes him want to smile, but what really catches his eye is the slight movement he sees – the way Emma's free hand is lightly and repeatedly running up and down Regina's cloth covered shoulder.

"Hey," she says softly, her green eyes flickering up to meet his.

"Hey, I just wanted to check on you guys. Grams said –"

"We had a rough day," Emma admits. "But we're better now."

His eyes narrow slightly. "Is she?"

"I said 'we', didn't I?"

"She's letting you be close to her," he observes.

Emma shifts slightly, releasing Regina's hand, and then ever so slightly adjusting herself away from the sleeping woman. She probably should have done that at least an hour ago, but Regina had seemed to derive some kind of comfort from their connection and perhaps, Emma realizes, so had she. "Is that a problem for you?" she asks, her eyebrow lifted.

He gives her a pointed look like he knows that she's spoiling for some kind of confrontation about this – though he's not sure why - so instead he simply shrugs, "Nope. Just tells me today was rougher than you're letting on is all."

"It sucked," Emma says. "But we both got through it. She got through it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Emma assures him. "She's good, kid."

He nods slowly, not bothering to disguise his relief at her words of reassurance. Yes, she still hides things from him entirely too often in order to "protect" him from the things she's still not ready for him to see (his moms really are a lot alike), but she wouldn't tell him that Regina was okay if it she weren't. He has to believe that she wouldn't lie to him about this.

"Is she about to scold both of us for talking about her?" he asks as he steps deeper into the room, frowning as he steps over shards of glass that are sprinkled all over the carpet, his boots crunching them into smaller pieces that will surely get stuck in his feet later. Emma had meant to clean up the
rest of the mess from the shattered mirror, but doing so hadn't seemed to matter as much once Regina had started opening up to her about her past.

"Nah. I don't think she's waking up anytime soon; today took a lot out of her," Emma notes, and then right on cue, Regina lets out a soft whimper, her eyelids twitching beneath the weight of whatever dream she's stuck in.

"Should we wake her up?" Henry asks as he sits on the bed.

"Not yet. If we pull her out of every dream she has, she'll never manage more than an hour or two ever again." Her tone is light, but she's frowning when she says this, though, and it makes Henry wonders just how many times over the last few hours Emma has almost woken Regina up anyway.

"Right. So, any chance since I already know as much as I do that you'll tell me what happened this afternoon? And yesterday? Will you finally tell me who you went to see and what it was that… what it was that that hurt her?"

Emma looks up at him and he thinks that she looks suddenly so terribly sad.

"Mom," he urges and he might be saying it's okay to say what she's thinking or he might be saying that he doesn't want her to; he truly doesn't know.

"The past hurt her, Henry," Emma answers, her frown deepening as she remembers the stories of the previous day. Dark stories about the past – ones that had brought on so much pain and hurt and carried with them so much heartbreak. She sighs. "And like you said, you know all of that."

"I know most of that, but I think we both know the file didn't say it all."

"You know more than either one of us ever wanted you to know. And really, you may think you want to know more, but trust me on this, you don't."

"You're never going to accept that I'm an adult, are you?"

"No," she confesses, her frown melting away into something that looks like a wistful smile. "Not at least until you learn to grow a proper beard."

He rolls his eyes at her. "Don't change the subjects. How many times is she going to have to keep reliving the past? There's got to be a point where she gets to start over, right? A point where she can start living again, right?"

"I hope so," Emma nods, sitting up fully now. She pulls the bedspread up and over Regina's sleeping body and then slowly gets off the mattress. "But before we can do that – before I can let go of what happened that day to your dad and before she can let go of what was done to her in that place and maybe even before she can even try to forgive herself - we have got to get these maniacs out of Storybrooke. They want to take something from her; they've been after it for a very long time. It's our job to stop them."

He probably should be focusing on what they're after – maybe even asking Emma what she thinks they're after – but instead, he catches, "Our?"

She grunts in annoyance. "You know I meant Regina and -"

"Maybe, but you said 'our' as in you and me."

"Henry."
"I'm your kid, mom. I'm her kid. I'm the son of two badasses. I shouldn't be chilling on the sidelines while you're both in danger. I should be with you."

"No," Emma says simply. "That's just not going to happen."

"Are you serious?"

"Never been more serious."

"She needs us. You said 'us'. She needs us."

"She does need us. She needs you to be her rock and her reason why she fought so hard to survive. She needs me to help her kick some serious bad guy ass so that we're both there to see you shave that hideous thing off."

"You know what? It is not that bad. She liked it."

"She saw you with nasty diaper rash. Pretty sure that skews perspective."

"You're terrible," he grunts.

"Yeah, I am," she shrugs. "But I love the hell out of you, kid."

In spite of his irritation at her refusal to allow him to be part of the fight against these punks that are coming after his adoptive mother, he finds himself smiling warmly at that. "Yeah, yeah," he chuckles before reaching out and lightly touching Regina's cheek when she makes yet another soft whimpering noise. "She's not running as hot as she was a couple nights ago," he observes, his knuckles on her skin. "Is she on her painkillers?"

"No. She passed out before she could take one."

"You think she'll ever be able to not be on them?"

"Don't know. Maybe when this is over. I'm sure she would like nothing better than to need not them, but I really just don't know. Does it matter?"

"Not to me, no, but it does to her. You see the way she looks at her cane."

"That one?" she gestures across the room, to where the broken cane now rests, the once quite beautiful head of it cracked rather spectacularly.

"My point exactly," he notes with a slight smirk.

"Actually, I think it was the mirror that pissed her off this time."

Henry chuckles at that. "So some things never change, then?"

"Your mom and mirrors."

"Yeah." Then, "Can I stay with her?"

"Of course," Emma replies with an understanding chuckle. "I need to get up and stretch out my legs, anyway. Hey, are your grandparents still around?"

"They were a few minutes ago," Henry says, sliding behind Regina on the bed, and then looping an arm so very gently around her. Knowing what he knows – even if he doesn't know it all and
truthfully, Emma's right and a very large part of him never wants to know all of what she endured – he wouldn't dare to do this if she hadn't allowed him to do it before. But she had, and she seems to recognize his closeness even in sleep because she immediately drops her head against his shoulder. He looks up. "I got this."

"I know you do. I'll be downstairs if you need anything."

"Okay. Hey, just so you know, I'm good with this."

"With what?" Emma asks, frowning slightly, her head tilted.

He looks down at Regina and then back up at Emma and when he smiles, it's so very young. "The two of you being close. You caring about each other."

She opens her mouth to protest the implication of his words, but then stops herself from lying to a young man whom she had promised that she would never tell pointless lies to ever again. The simple trust is that she does care about Regina. That it feels like something curious the middle of her stomach and deep in her chest is something else entirely, but it is still something.

And so she just sighs dramatically and grunts out, "Sleep well, kid."

As he watches his mother sleep, he can practically see her moving between nightmares, sliding out of one and into the next. He holds her close to him, and whispers gently into her ear that she's safe and that they won't let her go again. He promises her that she's home and that she has family now.

He's said these words to her on other nights, but the way she shakes against him as she fights against the many demons in her minds – demons that he knows continue to plague her - makes him say them again and again.

He'll keep saying these words until every part of her believes him.

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They've blinded her again, Regina realizes after several attempts to clear her darkened vision fail. Fortunately – or more accurately unfortunately as this particular torture is quite terrifying to her - this isn't the first or even the fifth time that they've done this to her so she knows that it's not permanent situation. It'd been done to her through some kind of weird brain chemistry adjustment that she doesn't even try to understand. Thankfully it's not painful. It is, however, deeply frightening because that old bit about how other senses compensate when another one is lost turns out to be true; everything else inside and outside of her is screaming at her.

Telling her that the people who plan to hurt her are so very close to her.

"Regina," she hears the woman say, and then a hand is sliding over her naked body. Of course she would be naked for this. Because they want her to be afraid of what's about to happen, unable to even brace herself.

It could be anything.

It's been everything.

She shudders violently at the thought at this, at the memories of searing fire and tearing skin and the rough feel of hands holding her down and –

"Regina," her captor says again. "Stay with me, darling."

...
"Go to hell," Regina whispers, and then feels like a fool because that's exactly what they'd been expecting her to say. She doesn't know what to do anymore, though. They both want her to fight and to not fight. They want her to do what they anticipate and then they want her to surrender.

Surrender to what, though?

To them?

Do they want her to confess all of her sins?

Hasn't she already done that to her visitors in the night? Hasn't she already given in to the shadowy versions of Emma, Snow, Daniel, and the others?

Hasn't she already admitted that she's the evil that they think her to be, and that because of this admission and this bitter truth, she deserves everything that's happening to her? What more could they possibly want from her?

She hears a man comment about how terribly erratic her vital signs are. He's standing somewhere above her, and his accented voice is oddly familiar to her, but she thinks that she must be imagining things because it sounds like Victor and yet it can't possibly be him. Why would it be? She thinks maybe this is yet another case of her mind trying to find familiarity in the darkness.

Though why she'd have a delusion about Victor, she can only imagine. He's one of the rare people that she refuses to feel guilt about bringing over to this new land; he'd legitimately hurt her first. He'd been the one to partake in the manipulation that had assisted in her tumble into darkness, and while she's finally come to see herself as the demon that her captors have been insisting that she is, she still recognizes Victor for the same kind of evil.

It hardly matters, though, because it couldn't possibly be him above her.

Because if it were him, he wouldn't be telling the woman who has been her captor that they need to slow up on what they're doing. Victor wouldn't be warning them that if they keep this up, they'll end up killing their prisoner.

Victor would want her dead.

So this can't be him.

But then he laughs (she thinks it sounds a bit odd – too high and forced like he's trying to convince her tormentor of something, but the fear that she's feeling cancels out these thoughts) and says, "It's not that I care. I'd far prefer you just kill the Queen and be done with it, but if you're still trying to get what you want out of her, you're going to need her alive for it."

"Yes, I suppose that's true. And it would be a pity to have wasted so much time on this only to have her die before she's actually given up. Very well then. You hear that, Regina?" the woman says, her hand moving to touch Regina's cheek, fingernails digging in. "We need you alive at least for a little while longer so you're going to have to behave for a time. But then again, there are so many other ways to break you besides making you bleed, aren't there?" Her sharp fingers trace along eyelids housing sightless eyes.

"You keep trying," Regina says. "But even fear isn't enough to break me."

"But it sure does make for a tremendous show, now doesn't it," the woman chuckles. A moment later, Regina feels something cold – like ice water running through her veins – and knows she's been injected with something.
Some kind of mind-altering drug, most likely.

She's right, and an hour later when she's still blind and every one of her nerves is on fire and she feels like she's being tortured by that sack-wearing villain from Henry's Batman comics, she realizes that she'd been quite wrong; fear is quite enough to break even the strongest soul.

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When Regina comes awake up with a somewhat violent start – somewhere around two or so in the morning, the first thing that she tries to do is ensure that she still has her vision (she sees moonlight streaming in through the open window) and then, once she allows herself a breath of relief, she feels arms around her, and though her first thought is that it's Emma (which frightens her for not nearly as long as it probably should), but what she smells – something slightly spicy and woody – tells her that it's actually her son holding her. His chin is rested lightly against the top of her head.

So much of her feels weak for needing him so close, and she thinks about waking him up and ensuring him that she's fine, but then she looks up and sees Emma standing in the doorway, a cup in her hand, just watching them.

"You okay?" Emma asks, the lines around her eyes deep and worried.

It's late in the morning, and the sheriff looks exhausted and like she's just about dead on her feet, but Regina knows that she's doing the only thing she knows how to do; she's protecting the people that she considers to be family however she can. For now, that just means watching over them.

"It was just a dream," Regina replies shakily, licking her lips and then swallowing almost convulsively against her dry throat. She blinks several times and allows the room to come into focus. Already, the nightmare is fading and she's struggling to remember what really occurred and what was just delusion brought on by the severe fear-inducing psychedelic drugs.

"Do you remember what it was about?"

"Did I say anything in my sleep?" Regina hedges.

"Just now or before? You've had a couple nightmares tonight, I think."

"Before," Regina says thoughtfully. She'd prefer not to think about that night spent in her dark cell, her vision gone and her skin crawling as she'd imagined every hideous creature that she could – all of them coming for her.

She tries not to think about her Henry had held her that night as well. He'd been just her imagination then, but he'd been the only good part of it. He'd been her anchor, and try as she might to understand that he would probably have wanted to be there for her, the shame of needing him is still so thick.

"You kept saying 'please no' over and over. When Henry tried to wake you up, you stopped talking, but you didn't really come around, either."

"Oh. Is that why he's here?" she asks, gesturing down towards Henry, who still hasn't stirred. "Because of my nightmares?" she looks more than a little embarrassed when she says this. "He shouldn't have to know about that."

"About what? Were you dreaming about –"

"No! I…no, it's not what you think," she insists, and then looks up at Henry and allows herself a
sigh when she notices that his eyes are still closed. "Or at least it's not when you think. I wasn't lying when I said I never begged them to stop when they…I wouldn't give them the pleasure…not of that."

"I didn't think you would, but for what it's worth, even if you had, Regina, you wouldn't be less for it," Emma responds, taking another step closer.

Regina just looks back at her, her eyes tired, but resolute. She knows that Emma understands why she needs the strength she'd derived from refuses to let them break her in that way, but perhaps Emma wouldn't be who she was if she weren't to try to reassure Regina that she's strong, anyway.

Emma nods her head. "Do you remember whom you were speaking to?"

"Both times, it was her," Regina admits. "The one I was just having, I don't remember well enough for it to matter." There's a lie to her words, Emma thinks, but it's not a malicious one so much as the kind that someone offers up because there's still fear there. "The first one, though, it was about the night that she told me that if I didn't start cooperating, they'd bring the real Henry to me and kill him in front of me as slowly as possible. She told me what she'd do to him, and I pleaded with her to leave him out of it. I would have given almost anything that night, but I couldn't because I didn't know what it was that she wanted. All she kept saying was 'let go, Regina.'"

Emma considers this for a moment, and she's about to ask more – a follow up question to try to clarify something that's been swimming around in her mind for a few days – but then Henry grunts and his right leg jerks out.

"I think our son just kicked me," Regina groans, rubbing at her hip. The contact had clearly hurt – Regina can't really absorb those kinds of blows like she once had – but she'll never admit to such; she'll never admit to anything that could upset Henry or make him feel bad about anything. Especially not hurting her.

So Emma lets it slide and shrugs. "I warned you that he kicks like a mule."

"I almost prefer your cuddling."

"Whatever," Emma grunts, but she's smiling, and it's nice and she sees the way the tension bleeds away from Regina's shoulders; it's enough for now.

"I'd like to try to sleep again," Regina says softly. "Hopefully without any further nightmares. Will you be sleeping in here with us or…elsewhere?"

If Emma didn't know better, she'd almost think that Regina looks vaguely upset about the idea of her sleeping elsewhere besides with them. Emma figures it for the need Regina has to have safety around her right now.

It's about not wanting to be alone, and for once, not having to be.

Which Emma understands completely, and if things weren't the crazy upside down way that they are and if she didn't feel the almost obsessive need to be doing something – anything - to stop these sons of bitches before they hurt her family again, she 'd probably curl up beside mother and son.

But she does feel that need. Deep in her heart, soul and even in her bones.

Which means that until her family is safe, rest is going to come hard for her.
"I'm not quite ready to crash yet; I'll let you guys have the bed. Just as a heads up, though, if you angle your body just slightly to the side, he can't catch you quite as flush when he decides to be a jerk-face and kick you."

"I'll keep that in mind," Regina says, then drops her head back and closes her eyes, not bothering to move even an inch away from her beautiful son.

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"You have no right," she hears him say, and it takes her a moment to recognize Owen's voice because every part of her body is on fire thanks to his torture by electrocution. Her chest hurts, and she wonders vaguely how it is that her heart is still functioning after what he'd put her through.

She thinks that it was probably a mistake to let her live – whatever his reasons might have been to do so – because once she gets up and off of this gurney (she wonders why she's on one and no longer on the table), she's going to kill him for this. As painfully as possible. She'll make him pay.

"Yeah, well, take it up with the boss; orders are orders."

"She's mine."

"And you had your fun, Greg; now it's time for the boss to have hers."

There's a long pause and then quietly, "She'll suffer?"

"She will. More than you could even begin to imagine."

"I…I'm okay with that."

"That's the spirit. Now where's the Doc…oh, there you are. Was starting to think maybe you'd decided to break our deal. But you know better, yeah?"

"I keep my deals," an accented voice says. "As long as you keep yours."

"You needn't worry. Now tend to the Queen; she's not looking so hot."

She feels a hand touch her face, and if she had any strength, she'd flinch away from it, but as it is, it's a wonder that she's even slightly conscious.

She's not, though. Not really.

Everything is slipping away from her, and then…then it's all gone.

She feels a surge of heat, then cold and then her heart just stops.

She feels herself die.

Again.

And then he brings her back.

Again.

*** ***
"Is there coffee?" Regina asks as she steps downstairs, her body stiff and aching in a way that's entirely too familiar. Still, she reminds herself as her hip screeches at her, she's alive and though the dreams that she'd had last night had been awful, she feels as though she's stronger today than she'd been yesterday.

If for no other reason, really, than because she had survived Owen. Her hand settles lightly against her chest, and she feels her heart beating there.

One of these days maybe she'll even convince herself that it always will be.

"Good morning, and yes there is," Snow greets and then holds up a cup of coffee. Her eyes are narrowed and her concern is clear, but thankfully she doesn't voice it.

"Thank you. Did Emma already go out to run?" Regina asks after a sip. She can hear the shower upstairs; Henry's been in it for the last ten minutes.

"I don't think so," Snow replies as she refills her own cup and then sits down opposite Regina. "She had police business that she wanted check into."

"Police business or Home Office business?"

"She didn't say."

"And you didn't ask?"

Snow smiles at that. "Of course I did, but she said she'd explain later."

"Ah."

"You have any idea what she's up to?" Snow presses.

"Not a clue. Why are you here? Checking up on me? And where's David?"

"He's at the station, and as for me, I guess I could lie," Snow admits.

"I'd prefer you didn't."

Snow smiles at that. "Yes, I'm checking up on you. I was worried last night. I know it's still easier to talk to Emma, and I'm okay with that, but I do care."

"I know you do," Regina replies. "But I am okay. I do need your help with something, though. If Emma is searching for answers, and we both know that she is, I think it's best that we – or at least I – do the same. I've been letting all of you take care of me since I got back here to Storybrooke."

"We're happy to."

"Perhaps, but my intent in coming back was never to endanger you. These sons of bitches are after me for some reason or another. I can stand around and wait for them to tell me why – to stumble across who it was who turned me over to them – or I can go take matters into my own hands. I want to do that, Snow. I need to feel like I'm me again, and I need your help for that."

Snow immediately nods her head, and unless Regina's mistaken – and in this case she doesn't believe that she is – she thinks she sees a spark of pride and relief in her former stepdaughter's eyes.

"What'd you have in mind?"

"I want to speak to Ruby."
Snow frowns; that's not what she'd been expecting. "Ruby? Why?"

"I have a terrible feeling that she and I might have something in common."

Snow starts to ask what but the odd look Regina is wearing is enough to make her nod her head. "What do we tell Henry? He'll want to come with?"

"He'll be in the shower for another ten minutes if the last few weeks have been any kind of indication," Regina notes. "We'll leave a note for him."

"You gone, me gone and Emma gone; he's going to be pissed."

"You're his grandmother, Snow; try to remember that he's just a child."

"Try to remember that he's David grandson and Emma's son; he doesn't stay well and just like his mom – you - he doesn't take orders very well."

Regina chuckles at that, and though she's about to follow up a hideous lead – a dangling thread from the nightmare that she'd just woken up from, one that refuses to leave her alone – she finds some kind of joy in her heart because beneath everything that's happening right now, beneath the fear and the pain and all of the hurt, she has these people standing beside her.

Beneath ten years of violent debris and three decades of hatred and betrayal, she finally has people who are worth fighting with and for.

*** ***

"What brings you in this morning, Sheriff Swan," he asks as fake politely as he can as she steps into his shop right after eight-thirty in the morning. He's always opened it up this early, but he can't recall the last time that anyone had chosen to stop by at this time. But then again, Emma isn't exactly the kind of woman who cares about norms. He both likes and detests her for that. "What can I help you out with on this fine morning?"

She rolls her eyes at him, her eyes flickering around and taking in his many weird treasures before returning to his calm face. There's something about how disinterested he looks that causes her to snarl, "I need answers, Gold."

"Well, of course you do. What kind of answers?"

"The kind you give me without first annoying me." She steps over to the counter. "The kind that might actually be able to help me figure this out."

"Figure out what the Home Office wants with Regina, I presume?"

"Yeah. Her magic, right?"

"As previously stated," he replies. He studies her closely, trying to read her, but it's always been something of a struggle. She's not as unpredictable as Regina had been, but her nature – and that she does things so against his own – tends to throw him off from time to time. Yes, she's more heroic than not but there's that bit of gray in her that can sometimes complicate things.

It's honestly the one part of her that he's always appreciated.

"How is magic removed from someone who was born with it?"

"Curse. Containment," he replies. He sounds like he's almost bored with this conversation, but she
knows better; he's simply waiting for her to give him something that he can sink his keen mind into. "There are other methods."

"Would any of those methods take all of her magic away?"

"They would not. Because her magic is elemental to her – because she was born with it even though she didn't use it until she was older - all of those methods might turn off her ability to touch her magic or perhaps take the majority of her magic for themselves, but they would not completely and permanently remove it from her." He tilts his head. "You have a thought?"

"Maybe. It's probably really stupid, but Regina one of things that Regina remembers the most is that Wendy Darling kept saying over and over again that she just needed to give up and let go. Is it possible…" she trails off and frowning deeply, Emma shakes her head because now that she's trying to say her thoughts aloud, they sound rather absurd and even ridiculous.

"Magic is emotion," Rumple inserts thoughtfully, his finger tapping against the counter in front of him. "It's possible that she believed that if Regina completely surrendered, that would allow her full access to her magic all the way down to the molecular and spiritual levels. Possible but not certain."

"Is there a way to make it certain?"

"I'll need some time to check into a few things."

"Be quick about it," Emma orders, and it's only because of the serious nature of what they're dealing with that Rumple doesn't remind her that he doesn't take orders from her. Just the same, Emma elaborates, her voice just as urgent but slightly softer, "Because if I'm right about this and this is what they're aiming at, then their goal will likely be to drive Regina towards a suicidal state. They tried to do that by torturing her and that didn't work."

"Hard to break someone who's had a death wish for most of her life."

Emma tilts her head and looks hard at him. "She's not dying."

"You've said that before," he notes calmly, and she thinks it slightly strange simply because he hadn't been there when she had, and yet he still knows.

"I'm saying it again."

"Indeed," he murmurs. "I will contact you shortly."

Emma sighs in relief, then says, "Just one more question. Why would they want her magic? This lady seems to hate it and consider it an abomination and yet they're running a long game to steal Regina's away from her. It's not just about ridding the world of magic because killing her would have done that, right? Her magic would have died with her if she had, right?"

"Her magic – or rather her magical energy - would have gone back into the air," he counters somewhat cryptically; the theory related to the sheriff's question is something that even longtime practitioners of the arts struggle to understand and he knows her well enough to know that she's not overly interested in all of the mechanics of it. "But yes, it would have been lost."

"Then why?"

"That's a very good question," he admits.
"I'd like a few answers," she says, suddenly sounding so very tired.

He nods his head, but doesn't offer her more than that; he's not a man to make promises that he can't guarantee that he can keep. So instead, he says, "You'll want to keep both Regina and your son close to you. If they're trying to drive Regina to a state of suicide, then they'll need to break her down completely once again. They've learned that she can endure massive amounts of physical and even mental torture, but now they have those she loves close by. They confirmed her magic by attacking your boy once. Don't delude yourself into believing that they won't do so again. And again."

"I know," Emma says softly. "And that's not what's going to happen here."

"They're not to be underestimated, dearie."

Emma steps back towards him. "Oh trust me, I'm not underestimating them anymore than you are. We both know the sons of bitches that they are. We both know what they're capable of. But they're not going to win this."

"Because you're the Savior?" he asks, and she wonders if he's taunting her just to see just how strong her faith is or if he's just playing with her because he doesn't know how not to. She's never be a fan of his, but he has changed at least a little thanks to his relationship with Belle; he's still mostly out for himself but because Belle is a part of the community, he'll fight for it for her.

That, and he still desperately wants someone to pay for Neal's murder.

She tries not to think about the promise that he'd extracted from Regina.

"Because it's my family," she says finally. "How many more people do I need to tell that to? I'm not going to let my family get hurt again. Not by them."

"They will try."

"And they will fail," Emma says, and then turns her back on him and walks out of the shop, the bell on the door jingling as it slams shut.

"See that they do," he answers to an empty store, and he thinks about Neal who would have wanted his former lover and his son to be safe and happy.

He would have wanted his father to ensure that they were.

So he will.

*** ***

"Regina," Ruby says warily as the older woman sits down next to her on the bench in the middle of the park. Just a few days ago, she'd met Henry here.

This is strange, but there's something curious in Regina's eyes that keeps her from getting up and leaving. There's something that seems familiar.

So she looks up at Snow and she nods that this is okay and Snow doesn't need to stay if she doesn't want to. And really, she'd prefer she didn't.

Because Snow knows a few of the details but she doesn't know everything.

Snow thinks she knows that it was bad what Ruby had gone through during her brief captivity, but
she doesn't know that it was far worse than that.

She doesn't need to know.

No one does.

And yet she has the feeling that she's about to tell all of her secrets to the woman who had once been her enemy because she'd been Snow's. She has a feeling that Regina already knows and everything is about to come out.

"Red," Regina replies, her tone even but somehow still oddly gentle. She's calling Ruby not by the name that she'd given her, but the ones that the waitress had owned during the days that she'd been the strongest. "I was hoping that you could help me fill in a few…blank spots in my mind."

"I'm not sure how I can; I wasn't anywhere near you the day you were kidnapped," she answers. "And surely you don't think I was involved."

"Of course not," Regina replies firmly. She looks up at Snow and this time she's the one giving the woman a look meant to tell her that it's all right for her to leave. Snow clearly doesn't want to – she hates that she's on the edges of all of this and so much of her family is involved – but she chooses to respect both Ruby and Regina's desire to have this conversation alone.

"If you need me –"

"We won't be long," Regina assures her, offering her a politician's smile.

Snow gives them both one more look, nods her head and then wanders away, making her way across the park and towards the pond in the middle.

"She still hovers," Regina notes.

"Sometimes it's nice to be cared about," Ruby replies, glancing over her shoulder at Snow for a brief moment before looking at Regina again.

"Indeed," Regina allows, smiling ever so slightly. After a moment, she says, "You're probably wondering what I'd like to talk to you about, yes?"

"I figure I already know; you either want to talk to me about whatever my relationship with Henry might be or you want to talk about Victor."

Regina's eyebrow lifts. "I am interested in the first one, I'll admit."

"We're just friends, Regina. I think he...cares? Maybe he even thinks that he likes me more than he should, but nothing has happened between us and I don't think anything ever will. He's just a kid and I've been around too many blocks for that to make sense. He's sweet and well, I'm not." She shrugs her shoulders as she says this, a look of soul-deep sadness overtaking her face.

Regina understands the look entirely too well.

Enough that she doesn't even bother to offer up platitudes that would mean nothing to Ruby. Instead, she says, "Then let's talk about Victor."

"What do you want to know? What he did to me?"

"Yes. The truth."
Ruby turns her head. "I don't understand."

"Yes, you do," Regina replies with a slight chuckle. "You and I may never have been anything besides enemies, dear, but we understand each other pretty well. And we both understand Snow fairly well, too. You believe that she couldn't handle knowing the actual truth about what he did to you."

"What makes you think that you know the truth?"

"I don't. Not yet, anyway. I just know when I'm hearing a lie."

"So now you're Emma?"

Regina smiles at and then replies in an almost sad voice, "Hardly."

Ruby turns her head; shocked by the flash of hurt she believes that she'd seen rush through the former queen's desperately dark eyes. "Regina –"

"No offense was taken," Regina cuts in, waving her hand impatiently. But perhaps we can stop this roundabout and get down to it; I believe that you can help me unlock things in my own memory that can confirm...I've been having dreams...and feelings...that lead me to believe that Victor may have been the one who assisted in my kidnapping ten years ago, but our time is running out and before I go after him, I want to be damned sure it's him because if I'm wrong, the real culprit may have a chance to get away."

"It wouldn't surprise me," Ruby admits quietly. "He hated you."

"I know. I hated him, too."

"Why? I mean, I know what his thing with you was, but what did he do?"

"Many years ago, when I still thought that I had something of a chance, he assisted Jefferson and Rumple into leading me into a very dark place, and he did it for no other reason than himself. I didn't even know him before he came into my life and intentionally hurt me for his own selfish reasons. There are sins you can forgive over time, but for that, I will never forgive him."

"Yeah," Ruby says, looking down at her hands and the scars on her palms.

"You have them, too," Regina notes, and then holds her own hands out, palms up to show the scars. They're shaking slightly because Ruby isn't Emma who has accepted her, and it would be so easy for this girl to laugh at her and tell her that these are as deserved as Regina believes them to be.

She's pretty much waiting for Ruby to do exactly that.

But Ruby just tilts her head and looks and then says, "Okay."

"Okay?"

"I'll tell you my story, but I want a promise from you."

"You want me to kill him?" Regina asks, sounding so resigned because that appears to be role that so many still see her capable of. Rumple wants her to make Wendy Darling pay in blood for what she'd done and now Ruby.

"No," Ruby replies. "I want you not to."
"Because you still love him?"

"I hate him, but the last thing I heard him say to me before I passed out from what he put me through, the last thing I remember before I woke up in the middle of the woods all by myself was him telling me that I was every bit the monster he was and always would be. Regina, I don't want to be that."

Their eyes meet, and there is an understanding between these two women who both have so much blood on their hands. True, much of Ruby's killing was done before she could control the beast inside of her, but that doesn't change the red that she sees on her fingers when she looks down at them.

"If he is the one responsible for all of this, Victor will pay for this in ways that he can't even begin to imagine. Not for what he did to me or even for what he did to you, but for what he did to Henry. He attacked and maimed my son merely to prove a point about my magic," Regina says finally, her dark eyes practically glowing with a ferocious kind of rage that reminds Ruby of just how much Regina has always loved Henry. Years ago, that protective streak had terrified everyone, but now Ruby finds comfort in it.

"I know," Ruby says. "And part of me wants you to rip him limb from limb for that...if he is the one who hurt Henry. I'd like to do it myself. But -"

"But perhaps he should suffer instead. As we have," Regina suggests.

"Yeah, perhaps he should," Ruby allows, and they're both wondering if the desire to make him hurt as they have makes them the monsters of the story.

"Then you have my word; if my instinct is right about this, then he will live. He may wish that he hadn't, but then I suppose he'll finally understand."

"Yeah. Okay, where do you want me to begin?"

"Where all stories must begin, dear; at the beginning."

"The beginning. Right. The beginning is that I should have seen who he was," Ruby replies. "I should have read the signs because he started asking me more and more about what I was like when I was in human form but able to control my werewolf side. He wanted to know about my healing abilities. I should have known."

"And I should have known that bringing Daniel back was always just a dream, but I kept dreaming it until it was able to be used against me," Regina confesses, and thinks it interesting how easily the words had come.

Years ago, even speaking of Daniel would have sent her into a violent rage.

But he's gone for good now, resting peacefully where kind and gentle men like him are meant to be.

He's gone, and there are monsters to fight.

She's one, too, she thinks, but she's not the monster of this story at least.

Ruby takes a breath. "The official story - the one that I told Snow and David and Emma; though I don't think Emma believed me - was that Victor didn't do all that much to me," she says, "I told them that all he did was take a few blood samples and keep me restrained while he ran some weird
tests on me and watched my vitals. He did more, and I covered myself up until most of the scars healed well enough, but I didn't want everyone to look at me like…"

"Like they look at me," Regina inserts. "Like I'm broken."

"But I was. He broke me."

Regina smiles kindly and wonders when she became this woman who could even try to offer comfort to someone else and do it with sincerity. "I know so I think perhaps it's time that both of us put ourselves back together."

Ruby nods her head and then says softly, "He invited me over for dinner, and told me that I should plan to spend the night. I did. But it wasn't quite the night I had in mind."

-TBC…
Chapter Notes

A/N: Deep apologies for the crazy long wait between chapters. A nice 11K one as an apology. We're entering the final arc now.

Warnings: Non-graphic descriptions of torture, discussion of depression, allusions to sexual assault and some coarse language.

Tumblr: sgtmac7

Her instincts are telling her that something is off about tonight, but it's Victor, she reminds herself. It's Victor, and she's been dating him for a good long while now. Sure, it's been somewhat on and off because they're two entirely different people, but she trusts him. She's stayed the night with him before and she's been quite intimate with him so really, what is there to worry about?

"Ruby," he greets, leaning in to kiss her. His hand settles over her wrist and he pulls her close, and this is entirely normal, and yet she's never felt more on edge than she does right now. She tells herself that it was just the argument that she'd had with Granny before she'd left the Diner ("you can do better than that man; even in your worst moments, you can do better") but it's more.

It's more than that and she knows it, but there's this bitter voice in the middle of her badly broken soul that is screaming her that Granny is wrong and Peter is dead, and Victor is a good man. He might not be a great man or even a nice one most of the time, but he likes and perhaps even loves her, and isn't that enough? True Love only comes around once in a lifetime, and she's pretty sure that even if there is a second chance for some people, there isn't one for someone who'd murdered their own love.

Perhaps, she thinks with an almost unbearably heavy heart, there shouldn't be.

So when Victor pulls her close to him and kisses her in a way that's both too much and yet not nearly enough for the relationship that they've had over the last several years and he promises her in a low silky voice that's meant to be seductive that tonight will be one that neither one of them will ever forget, she chooses to ignore the instincts that make her eyes go yellow under a full moon.

And when he closes and locks the door behind her, she smiles at him as wide as she can and ignores the way the hair on the back of her neck not only stands up, it just about curls in reaction to the tone of his voice. Because this is Victor and he's a monster just like she is, and they get each other; they're kindred.

"So," she says, that beaming smile still in place even as the voices in the back of her head are telling her that she needs to run and get away. "What do you have planned for this night that I'm never going to forget?" She's teasing and hoping that he'll answer in kind, and make her nerves settle and calm. She's hoping he'll throw out one of his terrible pick-up lines because she understands those even if they do make everyone in town wonder why she's with them.

They don't understand, she thinks as he steps close to her again; they don't understand because they can't. They don't understand that this might not ever be true or real love for them, but it is
companionship, and that's enough.

He kisses her again, and it's just as cold as the first one, but she thinks nothing of it. Not anymore. "I was thinking we'd have dinner and a drink," he says once he breaks away from her. She notices this his hand is on her wrist, and thinks that strange, but tells herself that she's overreacting; she's letting Granny in.

Granny understands why she'd choose Victor and doesn't and right now that's just too much conflict and she doesn't want to think about all of that tonight.

"A drink sounds nice," Ruby replies, and rolls her shoulders. Because that's all this is: just the tension of the argument with Granny and the frustration of an empty and purposeless life in Storybrooke. No end or hope anywhere in sight.

Just this moment right here and now.

So yeah, it's more than enough because it has to be.

"Good," Victor says. And then, "You know I love you, don't you?"

Her instincts are screaming, and God she knows that something is very wrong here, but she thinks of Granny and Peter and Snow who is such a patient and good friend and who has never stopped believing that there is a second chance for her out there. She thinks of all of this and replies, "I love you, too."

It's a lie.

And not even a very good one.

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Regina says nothing for the longest moment, just stares out at the water, her eyes dark and turbulent. When she finally does speak, her tone is flat, like she's trying to carefully pick out her words, "You wouldn't be the first person that he's tricked into ignoring their instincts," she says. "When I first met him, every part of me was screaming that something was wrong with what he was saying he could do, but I refused to listen because I wanted the possibility so much."

"What did he offer you?" Ruby asks, and then almost flinches like she thinks that maybe she shouldn't have. There's a strange anxiety to her, Regina notes.

A familiar anxiety, even.

Like someone who doesn't trust anything around her.

It's why they're here having this conversation now. Because she has a pretty good idea of what Ruby had gone through and she understands the flinching.

She rubs lightly at her temple, feeling the fluttering just beneath the skin. This is a memory that she doesn't have to dig too deep for, doesn't even really have to push past most of the blocks to get to, and yet it hurts in a way that's almost indescribable. This memory houses the last moments of her innocence.

The last moments before she surrendered herself willingly to the darkness.

The fluttering increases and her heart begins to pound.
Guilt and remorse and the horror of what she'd become does that to her. She tries to think of Snow and Emma and Henry, and the forgiveness they offer.

She thinks of being told that she didn't deserve what had happened to her; she still doesn't believe it herself, but that Emma does allows air into her lungs.

She lets out a breath. "You remember how I said he used Daniel against me?" she asks. Off Ruby's nod, she continues with. "What I meant was that he used my love for Daniel and my heartbreak over losing him against me. What Victor did was offer me hope that I could be happy. And then he snatched it away."

"For his own selfish reasons," Ruby repeats dully, echoing their earlier conversation. Her eyes track over towards Snow, and a deep sadness fills them as she thinks of all the ways that she's become distant from her best friend.

Not that Snow hasn't tried to breach the gap with her persistent smile, bright eyes and soft hands, but it takes two to tango, and Ruby hasn't been willing to dance. The reality is that ever step of the way, she's been blocking her best friend and pushing her back and away, and true, the rational part of her says that doing so makes no sense (after all, Snow had accepted the wolf) but the little girl that had been exposed thanks to what Victor had done to her is terrified enough to keep pulling away.

Because what if Snow looks at her like the monster that Victor had seen her as?

What if Snow's lips speak of sympathy but her eyes talk of things like disgust?

Better not to know, then. Even if it's meant so many years of loneliness and distance from the one person that her heart tells her would understand.

"Yes," Regina replies, her deep voice pulling Ruby out of her melancholy thoughts. "Because he wanted something for himself, and he didn't care who needed to be hurt for that to occur. Back then, it was a heart from my mother's vault so that he could try to bring his brother back to life; I didn't know it at the time, of course. He made the deal with Rumple and Jefferson, and I was just the silly naïve girl left to pick up the pieces. Make no mistake, dear, I take responsibility for what choices I've made in my life – now, anyway – but Victor played his part." Regina follows her gaze towards Snow. "We all played ours."

"We all did," Ruby agrees. "Some of us just may not have realized it."

"I take it there was something in the drink that he gave you?"

"You take it right." She shakes her head in disgust. "I knew better."

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"You drugged me," Ruby whispers as she falls backwards, her limbs heavy and her mind quickly clouding. It's not just that he'd put something in her drink that startles her, it's that he would have had to put enough in it for it do this to her.

"I'm sorry," he tells her and brushes hair out of her eyes. "But I didn't think you would cooperate, and it's important that you don't fight back and cause me to have to do something else to ensure the fidelity of the test results. I don't want to hurt you anymore than is strictly necessary. Drugging you, I did it for you."

His smile is oily and empty and she wonders how she'd ever fallen for him.
Still, she knows she has to try to talk him down from this. "Victor, please..."

"Shh. You're going to do wonderfully, my love. You are going to open up so many doors for me, and if I'm right about the things inside of you, you're going to help me heal his heart. You want that, don't you? You want to be a healer."

She has no idea what Victor is talking about right now, but it hardly matters, anyway because she's pretty sure that it's grade A craziness, anyhow.

She tries to struggle against the drugs, but they're too much and everything is becoming that much heavier by the moment. And Victor, he's just watching her and studying her like she's nothing more to him than a curious test subject.

Ruby desperately tries to think back on their relationship – she tries to thinks of whispered assurances of love and feverish promises of tomorrow and even the day after tomorrow and she frantically tries to find the string that she can pull on to remind Victor of what she means to him. She tries to find something that will force this suddenly cruel man (is it really sudden, she wonders) to realize that she's more important to him than whatever this madness is. The problem is, she has no clue what he wants with her and no idea what he's planning for her, and it's impossible to fight back with everything so badly slowed down.

She says his name and there are tears flowing down her cheeks.

She thinks of Granny and Snow and David and Henry and Emma and so many other friends that she's grown away from and wonders if she will ever see any of them ever again. She wonders if she will be missed, and hopes that she will.

At the very least, she knows that Snow will miss her. Snow already does.

Not that Snow would ever say anything, but there's been growing a curious distance between them, and it's been there since the Evil Queen had vanished and Ruby had started wondering – out loud and entirely too much for the comfort of everyone – if Regina's mysterious fate would end up being hers.

She thinks now that maybe – horribly, terribly – that she'd been right.

Ruby looks up at Victor and thinks about a man who had slipped into the cracks of her soul while she'd been staring at the bottom of entirely too many glasses of whiskey and wondering about the differences between certain kinds of monsters and if in the end, there actually is one that's worth talking about.

The time spent thinking about Peter and Snow and Regina and her own mother had turned everything inside of her cold and hard, and that's where Victor had come in. He'd made the reality of there being nothing for her besides whatever might be left just a little less awful. He'd been some kind of hope of at least a little bit of love. But now, she realizes, perhaps it had always been just a lie.

A well told lie, but a lie all the same.

She feels the strain and pull of restraints as they lock down around her wrists and hands, and then there's an odd not quite anything sensation as he applies sensor pads all over his body and then attaches leads to each of them.

"Please," Ruby whispers.
He brushes his lips over her forehead, the touch that had once calmed her now making her want to scream. "You're going to be okay," he says as he pushes a needle into the vein on the top of her right hand. "Everything is going to be."

She knows that's as much of a lie as everything else was.

Even if she survives this, she knows that she'll never be okay ever again.

"Don't do this," she pleads and hates herself for doing it. She can feel an odd thickness starting to run through at the same time that there's a coldness and she knows that he's pumping some kind of drug into her body. Something more than just what he'd put in her drink; she wonders what this one is for.

Unfortunately, she has a good idea that she's going to find out soon enough.

"I have to," he replies. "You have to do what you have to do for love." He runs the back of his palm across her cheek and smiles sadly because he really could not be more clear in telling her that she's not the one that he's talking about.

She's cold and numb, but she thinks that she still feels her heart break.

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"Can you ever change back?" Ruby asks suddenly, her eyes wide and dark and afraid, and Regina finds herself thinking about the sarcastic distrustful woman who had always looked at her with so much derision. She understands the why of that a little bit better now; it'd been about Ruby not wanting to look into the mirror and see a reflection of what it would be so easy to become. It'd been easier to view Regina as the worst-case scenario instead of a likely outcome.

Now, here they are, sitting next to each other on a bench seeing each other.

"To who you were before everything happened?" the former queen shrugs and then looks over her shoulder again, back towards where Snow is hovering and pacing. Her eyebrow lifts as she takes in the sudden appearance of the Sheriff, and she wonders when Emma had gotten there. Her eyes meet Emma's and the blonde woman smiles at her.

"Yeah," the waitress answers, her eyes on her hands as they twist in her lap.

"No."

Ruby chuckles, the sound oddly brittle. Like she's so very close to shattering.

"Would you rather I lie to you?"

"Probably not, but it'd be nice to believe that I have a different fate than this."

"You do," Regina assures her. "If I can survive what I did and who I have been and make it back to this town and have my son still love me as he does, then you, my dear, who have the undying love of Snow White most certainly can."

"Me?" Ruby contests. "She broke when she thought that you were dead."

Regina smiles thinly at that. "Our relationship is complicated. Even when we have finally forgiven each other as we have, it will always have some darkness in it that will shade it unique ways. Snow is my family. It took me a very long time to understand that and perhaps even accept that, but I
finally have."
"Good."
"I wasn't finished. Snow is my family, but she's even more than that to you."
"Was."
"Is." Regina chuckles. "I believe that this would fall under things that I never thought I'd do, but I'm going to do, anyway because well, dear, sometimes we do get to choose our own paths." She turns again towards Snow and Emma and then with the two fingers on her right hand, starts to motion them over.
"Wait, no. What are you doing?"
"You told me that one of the reasons you were open to Victor coming into your life was because you and Snow grew apart after I disappeared. You said that it was because you feared what your fate would be and that fear created walls between you and her. That's very well, but those walls need to fall now."
"Regina –"
"She needs to hear the story that you're about to tell me. She needs to know what you've been through so that she can be there for you as you need her to be."
"I don't think…I can't see that look in her eyes." She closes her eyes for a moment. "I…I can't have someone else hurt like Granny was because of me."
"Did you tell her what happened?"
"I got weak. I got weak and…she…she…” It doesn't take a lot for Regina to put the ugly pieces together, pieces that probably only she has thus far.
"Your grandmother was an extraordinarily tough woman, Ruby. She was made of nails and vinegar and enough derision and sarcasm to put me to shame. She was softened by her love for you. She may have succumbed to a heart attack, but it was a lifetime that brought her there and not what he did to you."
"She died the night I told her what Victor had done to me. If you could have seen the look in her eyes. She was so horrified and so disappointed in me."
"I sincerely doubt that she was ever disappointed in you. As for Snow, that look there is love," Regina says softly. "And I spent three years in a terrible room being touched by horrible people all the while praying that I would get to see it again from anyone. I got a second chance that I'm not sure I deserve, but I got it all the same. That you are alive now means that you have it, too."
Ruby lets out a breath, and Regina notices that her hands are still shaking.
She thinks of Emma and the way that the sheriff had touched her hands – had rubbed the thick scars on her palms – after the tell-all session with Owen. She doesn't have the connection with Ruby that she has with Emma, but she has a feeling that a human bond – perhaps a simple touch – might just be enough.
She places her hands over Ruby's and almost laughs again because she thinks that they're both shaking together now and it's so absurd, but then Ruby is looking up at her with so much gratitude
and understanding because yes, whatever they've been through and the differences of it, there's this similarity.

"I have my own demons to fight," Regina says softly as she feels thin scars on Ruby's palms that remind her darkly of the thicker ones on her own torn and tattered hands. "I will always have my own demons and most of the time, they will defeat me, but I will keep fighting them because even when it would be easier not to, fighting is all that I have even known to do. You're like me in that, but I can't help fight your demons as well as my own, Ruby. Snow can."

Ruby's only answer is a harsh intake of breath and a short nod of her head.

It's more than enough.

Regina turns once more and this time she completes the motion meant to call Emma and Snow over. There's a moment of pause as the two women look back at her, both of them – especially Snow – appearing more than a little confused.

But then Ruby looks up and there are tears in her eyes and on her face and Snow's own eyes widen, as understanding of what Ruby wants and even needs from her – and what she wants to give in return - just seems to crash over her.

Suddenly, after so many years of waiting and pushing – just a little but not too much because of Ruby's clear anxiety – her friend is opening up the door.

Regina just barely manages to get out of the way before Snow is tearing over and in a move that makes the cynical side of Regina cringe, pulls Ruby into her arms and hugs her as tight as she can. Regina stops herself from commenting on the fact that just seconds earlier; her hands had been attached to Ruby's.

Instead, she sighs and rubs her thumb across one of the scars near her wrist.

And then looks over at Emma.

Who is smirking at her.

"Oh, what?" she says dramatically, a small smile flickering at the corner of her mouth; she's starting to hate how easily this woman can read her these days.

"Nothing," Emma replies with a shake of her head and glittering knowing eyes.

So Regina rolls her eyes because Emma really does know how to annoy her.

Truly, it's obnoxious.

But then Snow is slipping backwards and the hug is over and Ruby is gulping for air and looking up at Regina like she knows that it's time to get back to it.

"You ready?" Regina asks Ruby, her voice kind but still direct. Her hip is starting to ache and yeah, all of the usual pains are coming on. They always do whenever she starts to push into the past. That's not going to stop her today.

"Ready for what?" Snow queries, her head tilted and her eyes narrowed.

"You weren't just brought back over here for hugs, Snow," Regina scolds. It's light, though, and it's impossible for Snow to miss the gentle teasing there.
"Oh,\," Snow answers slightly sheepishly. Then her eyes flicker back over to Ruby. "Are you going to finally tell me the truth about what he did to you?"

"I'm…I'm going to try?" It sounds more like a question than a statement, but it's enough for Snow because she's been waiting for this for so long. Not wanting it, of course, but waiting because she's always seen the lie for what it was: an attempt to try and pretend that the terrible things hadn't happened.

"We're here, Rubes," Emma says from her position next to Regina (when had that happened, Regina wonders). "Whatever you need to tell us, we're here."

"I know. I…I know." She looks up at Regina. "This helps, right? Helps you."

"It helps me," Regina concurs and then tilts her head. "It'll help you as well."

"And Granny?"

"Would want you to scream this from the heavens so that it could be used to stop the man who had hurt you. If she could do it herself, she would," Regina replies, thinking of the many times that Eugenia Lucas had stood up to her.

Granny would never have been scared of Victor.

She would never have let him get away with doing this to her granddaughter.

He won't.

Ruby exhales and then looks right at Snow. "I woke up to bright lights and pain. So much pain."

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Her heart is pounding, beating almost out of her chest, and that seems strange to her because she's returning to consciousness when she notices this. The next thing she's aware of are the lights above her head, and then scorching pain in every muscle in her body. It's fire racing through every one of her nerve endings and if there wasn't something in her mouth, she would scream, but there is. She blinks and blinks and tries to understand.

This isn't something that she will ever be understand but she doesn't know this yet; right now, all that Ruby Lucas is aware of is that she's hurting terribly.

"Hello, love," Victor says softly, almost even gently, his eyes so very bright.

It occurs to her that she'd gotten used to a kind of disinterested coldness from him over the years, and even considered it normal, but right now, Victor looks excited.

She tries to speak through the gag, tries to mumble out for him to stop this.

He just smiles again and then runs his knuckles (it occurs to her how common of a gesture this is between them and it hurts when she realizes that he's corrupted even this now) across the strangely over-sensitive skin of her cheek.

"I know it hurts," Victor says. "Because of the timeline that we're on – people will know if you're missing for too long - I had to give you something to try to up the sensations that you're going to feel. I need your body to respond with as much force as possible. That's the only way that I can confirm the tests. You have to understand, sweetheart; there's a reason for all of this. There truly
Tears slip down Ruby's ashen cheeks and she hates herself for this weakness. She tries to remember the days spent running from her pack, from herself and from the Evil Queen in the Enchanted Forest. She tries to remember all that she has survived. She tells herself that whatever this is, she'll survive it, too.

Problem is, she doesn't actually believe her own thoughts because Victor is again running his hand along her flesh – this time he's almost casually trailing his fingers up her arm – and it feels like someone is splicing into her nerves.

"You want to know why I would do this," he notes as he turns to glare at a few of the odd instruments behind him. She thinks that one is a lot like the machine that had been found in the warehouse that Regina had been tortured in before her mysterious disappearance. She remembers Emma saying that it had likely been used to electrocute the former queen and that's all it takes for her panic to spike dangerously again. She sees Victor's eyebrows lift. "You're scared."

It's a softly murmured statement to himself, a weird bemused curiosity.

If she could get out of these restraints, if she could change herself into the wolf that's always lurking within her, she knows that she would rip his throat out.

But she can't do either of those things; all she can do is stare at the machine.

"I know," he nods. "She was, too." His voice is so low and Ruby wonders if she's meant to hear or understand his musings. But then he's turning to look at her and his eyes are hardening. "I have done so much, so many things to make right what I let go wrong. I owe him this, you understand that, right? Yes?"

Her eyes meet his and she sees his back stiffen; perhaps he sees the rawness of her emotions. Perhaps he understands her fear and it bothers him even just a little bit. Perhaps there's still a human lurking there deep below the surface.

There isn't.

There never was.

He flips a switch and she screams until she can't.

Until she doesn't have tears left to shed.

"Interesting," he says. "You're not nearly as tolerant as she is, but it seems clear that magical blood really does make a difference when it comes to pain endurance." He's shaking his head in wonder and scribbling as fast as he can.

She barely hears what he's saying, certainly doesn't understand it at all.

He's standing over her a few seconds later with what looks like a thin blade in his hand. "This is kind of an odd test, but there are so many nerves near the top and it's always been the little things that I've gotten wrong. I got his heart beating again – well, someone's heart – but I couldn't make him feel cold or hot and he didn't understand pain like we do. But he can't. Not like normal people because he's not normal. I need him to understand pain like you do."

She swallows convulsively and tries to speak through the gag. He notices and smiles slightly and then leans forward and removes her. "Victor," she gasps.
"Tell me how you feel."

She spits at him.

It takes every bit of energy she has, but she does it.

He slaps her hard enough to cut her lip.

And she thinks that well, at least there’s his true face. There’s his evil.

How she’d never seen it before, she doesn’t know.

"I wasn’t going to hurt you –"

"You are hurting me," she cries out.

"But it didn’t have to be like this." He shakes his head.

"No, because you didn’t have to do this to me."

"I did. Because this is who you are and whom you will always be. A monster."

"If I’m one, so are you."

"She said that, too. And we agree. We’re both wicked and evil and damaged."

"Who?"

He blinks like he’s just realized what he’d said and like he hadn’t meant to.

He doesn’t respond, just turns around and slams his hand against the button that’s meant to send electricity tearing through her again. It does and she screams and he watches with something far darker than just mere curiosity.

Something like a disturbing amount of true almost sexual pleasure.

She gets the strange feeling that he’s not seeing her at this moment.

Not exactly, anyway.

And then he says, "It doesn’t matter because I made her pay. I didn’t want to make you pay because I thought you were better than all of us but you’re not."

When the sparks stop flying through her body and she’s just convulsing, she feels him cutting him palms and then he’s back to writing on his notepad as machines beep and his printer spits out reports. He tells her that this is just the beginning of things and then he says he’s sorry in the quietest voice possible.

Like this is just some kind of simple fight between them and not brutal torture.

But it is and this terrible night is just starting for the girl who had once been known as Little Red Riding Hood.

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"God," Snow whispers, her arms clutched tightly around Ruby, her hand on the back of her best friend’s head as the girl weeps into her shoulder. "God."
Regina's eyes close for a moment as there's a distinctly pained look on her face, perhaps even a sickly one. When they open again, she turns to Emma. "I believe that this would be a good time for us to make an exit, Miss Swan."

"What? Do you...you remember something?" Emma asks immediately.

"They need each other now," Regina answers cryptically. "Not us hovering."

"Okay. But -"

"We can talk elsewhere," Regina replies quietly, a slight hitch to her voice.

Emma's eyes flicker down and that's when she notices the way that Regina's hands are shaking. And how her stance has suddenly tightened up.

Which pretty much answers the question about her remembering things.

"Okay," Emma nods. She drops down onto the bench next to Ruby and Snow, then, and places a hand on his mother's shoulder and then reaches out and takes Ruby's hand with her other one. "You're safe, Rubes," she whispers.

The girl looks up at her, wide-eyed and exposed. "I'm sorry," she says.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," Snow insists. "Nothing."

"I thought you'd..." she sniffs and her words are lost in the sound of it. "I didn't want you to see me as broken but I've been that anyway, haven't I?"


"Which he will pay for," Regina says from above them. She moves closer, her dark eyes glittering in a dangerous and almost malicious way that Emma hadn't realized that she'd missed until right now. "I promised you that I'd let him live through this, and I will keep my promise. So that he can see that we survived."

"Did we?"

"Oh, yes." Firm and uncompromising, even with pain lines around her eyes.

Ruby lets out a shaky breath and then nods and offers back a watery smile.

"Where are you two going?" Snow asks, her arm still around Ruby.

"To find Victor," Regina replies coolly. "It's time for this to end. I didn't come back to this town to leave in fear again and I won't let him or those goons from the Home Office endanger me or my loved ones – my child – ever again."

"You really think he's their inside man?" Snow queries, her brow furrowing.

"I know that he is," Regina answers, a strange dullness to her tone as her eyes seem to get glassy for just a moment before she snaps herself out of it again.

"Then, I should -"

"No, you should stay where you're needed. Which is right here."
"Don't worry; I'll be with her the whole time," Emma assures her mother.

Regina smirks and lifts an eyebrow. It's not that she hadn't been planning on taking Emma with her – she'd even told the sheriff as much just a few moments earlier – but the idea that Snow thinks that she needs such is fairly laughable.

It was one thing to need emotional support while she'd been spilling all of her dark secrets about what she'd been through to Owen, but this isn't about that.

What she'd like to do to the man that she now knows was responsible for her three years of torment and hurt isn't something that will make her vulnerable.

She wonders if it'll make her strong, though, and thinks of a promise that she'd made to Rumple. He'd asked her to make Wendy Darling pay for Baelfire.

So much vengeance.

So much darkness and unimaginable pain.

Her hands clench and then unclench and she thinks of a bright room with a cold table and Victor standing above her, his bright eyes so full of hatred.

She thinks about his knuckles trailing across her cheek and how it had taken every bit of strength within her to not let him see her shiver in reaction.

"Hey," she hears Emma say and it pulls her out of her pain-streaked past.

At least for now.

"Regina," Snow says. "Are you sure about this? If he is the inside man and he's let them back into Storybrooke, then he probably has some help with him and he probably knows that you're coming. You don't have your magic fully yet."

"I can feel my magic in my blood again. It's not like it once was, but it's there, and if they want to see it, then I think maybe it's time to let them."

"Please, just don't lose yourself again. Don't let them win."

"She won't," Emma insists and the look she throws at Regina is hard and determined.

Regina smiles savagely. "We're going to all be fine, Snow. We always are."

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The moment they're out of the park and away from Snow's eyes, two things immediately happen. First: Emma spins around like she's about to light into her former enemy and remind her of how far they've come and why they can't fall backwards and second: Regina immediately staggers and sags, her face falling.

It's the second thing that causes the first not to happen.

"What did you remember?" Emma asks, her hand reaching out and folding into Regina's in a way that still amazes even her. Once upon a time, such a touch between the two of them – such an offer of comfort – simply wouldn't have been possible. It would have been rejected outright and even laughed at.
But Regina is a dramatically altered woman now and so is she so when Regina's fingers tighten around hers, hands are fiercely shaking again, she accepts it.

Emma moves closer to her, puts a hand on Regina shoulder and pushes her towards a few thick trees that will safely block them from the view of anyone who might suddenly wander by. "I'm here," she promises. "Right here."

"I don't want these memories." Regina replies and dips her head forward towards Emma. They're almost hugging each other, but this is somehow even more than that, Emma realizes, because Regina is easily accepting comfort.

She's allowing herself to be almost held by another person in a place that's off to the side, but not completely hidden. Which means that this is about trust.

"But you've been fighting for them," Emma reminds her as she steps even closer to Regina and tightens her hold. "Because the truth we need is in them."

"The truth has been in front of us the whole time," Regina replies. "I knew it was him from the moment I saw him above me at the house. I knew it the moment he touched me and I heard his voice. I've always known it was him, but I couldn't accept it because that meant accepting that it was personal."

"Does that make a difference?"

"It does. Wendy Darling despises me for what I am, but it was never really about me so much as what I could do for her and what she could to me. Victor hates me because I pulled him away from a redemption he could never have. I forced him to account for his own sins and he will never forgive me for that."

"So you remember what he did to you," Emma states, her voice heavy.

Because this is an answer – a story that she doesn't want anymore than Regina wants the new memories that she now has. But just as Regina had needed those in order to help unlock this horrible mystery, so does Emma need to understand what they're dealing with and what they should be expecting.

Besides a cruel sociopath without a soul.

She almost wants to throw up when she remembers that she'd once thought Regina to be exactly that and now the woman is practically fully in her arms.

"Yes," Regina replies. "He got revenge on me from taking him away from his family." She nods her head slowly. "He made me pay for looking in the mirror."

"I don't understand."

Regina smiles sadly. "Whenever he looked at me, he saw his own darkness reflected back at him. He saw what he'd helped to create and he hated himself for it because I am every bit an abomination. It's the same thing I see when I look at Owen. But the difference is, I see who I am now and who I have always been and will always be. Victor has never come to the true understanding that he, too, is a monster and he's the one who should pay. So he made me pay."

"You're not an abomination," Emma says roughly, her voice grated.

Their eyes meet and Regina finds herself smiling at the ferocity in Emma's.
"This isn't about me."

"Yes, it is."

"No, it's about ensuring that Henry is safe. And that he won't be hurt again."

"Yeah, it's about that. But it's also about you accepting that you've changed from who you were, Regina. You think that you were owed all of this torture because of what you did? I don't, but you won't let me convince you otherwise. Fine, you believe that bullshit. Okay. But you are done paying penance for the past and you get to start living again. That's what this is about. Us going after Whale and stopping the Home Office? That's about Henry and that's about us and it's about our future and making sure that no one can take it away again."

"Our future?" Regina asks with a lifted eyebrow.

"Uh…I mean…you know what I mean."

"I don't," Regina teases.

"I…mean ensuring that…that we all get to start living again. In the…moving forward and not always just stuck in the past and wondering what happened."

"That's what you mean."

"Yes. Yeah."

"All right, then," Regina nods and then slowly steps away from her.

"Regina, I…I feel like we just…like something weird just happened there."

"No, dear. Nothing…I'm just…no. Nothing. But I think we should have this conversation now – about what Victor did, I mean – before I no longer can."

"Headache?" Emma asks, frowning deeply enough for thick lines to form.

"Yes," Regina admits, her hand straying up to touch her temple. "It seems the pain always knows the most inappropriate time to return to me. Like now."

"Is it remembering that's doing this?"

"I think so."

"Okay; let's go get this memory out so we can go pick Whale's slimy ass up."

*** ***

They're sitting across from each other at the otherwise empty Sheriff's Station (they'd found David waiting for them when they'd arrived, and Emma had sent him off to find Snow and Ruby) each of them with a cup of coffee in their hands. They'd considered returning to the townhouse, but the certainty of Henry being there (and likely already pissed at being left behind) had made them decide to use this place as the one for Regina's new story.

Which she's having a devil of a time getting started.

"Regina," Emma says gently. "What is it about this one that's making it so much harder to pull forward than the others?"
"It's been buried a long time," Regina admits. "Just...give me a moment."

"Yeah, of course." She takes a sip from her coffee. "So, in case you were wondering why I was gone when you woke up -" 

"I was curious," Regina allows carefully, like she's worried that showing how much she's come to depend on and enjoy Emma's presence is dangerous.

"I went to see Gold. I asked him about all this give up stuff in relation to your magic. He was going to do some research on it, but he's worried - well, as much as he ever worried about anyone besides either himself or Belle - that they might try to come after you or Henry again. He thinks they're trying to make you suicidal."

"Suicidal," she mumbles. "They've been trying to do that for a while now."

"Yeah. Anyway, he said he'd contact me once he finished his research."

"Good. Okay. I think...I think I'm ready now."

"You're sure. We can -"

"I'm sure." She clears her throat. "I've kept this memory buried a long time but I imagine he thinks about what occurred that day quite often. I think he realized right after what happened that it was a bad risk to have taken; I think they all did. I didn't know it at the time because I didn't really think I was ever going to see the light of day again, but perhaps by then, they knew that letting me pretend to escape was a possibility, and me recognizing Victor would be a bad thing." She brings her hand down to the front of her shirt and starts to unbutton it, her eyes locked on Emma's and her face neutral in a way that tells Emma just how truly scared she is right now.

"What are you doing?" Emma asks quietly, her eyes on Regina's hands.

"I think I told you that all of my sessions were done nearly in the nude. My one with Victor was no exception, and disgusting piece of garbage that he is, I know that he rather enjoyed that. But it wasn't about sex for him. It was about control and power and what he had over me. He wasn't as refined as John was in his torture and he didn't know how to frighten me with just a simple touch."

She pushes her shirt off of her shoulders and then places her hand above where her heart is. "He is a man of science who understands how to take and replace hearts in a magical manner. The day they brought him in to try to force me to give up again – or whatever – he took mine, but even that he did badly."

Emma's eyes track to a swirl of bizarre scars (they're curiously light and thin enough that Emma thinks someone might not have noticed them at all if they hadn't been pointed out to the person) on her chest, ones that look like five little marks – like what would happen if fingerprints could scar.

Apparently, Emma thinks darkly as Regina brings Emma's hand to touch the scars – how strange this sudden familiarity, she muses – fingerprints can scar.

She can feel the magic whistling through the air. Her cuff has been removed and so it's surging through her bloodstream. It's weak and maimed and it's even a bit frightened and unwilling to expose itself out of fear that it will be damaged once again, but it is there, and she wonders what this is about.
She's on the table in the lab and the lights are bright above her as always.

She's trying not to feel the shallow lacerations on her bare back and buttocks that are burning and sting against the cold metal of the table. She's been through this too many times now to react and to give them what they want – at least not without being forced to do so. The way John is looking at her, a small smirk on his lips and entirely too much understanding in his eyes, she has an idea that this is probably not going to be a good day for her. As if any are.

"Good morning, darling," the woman says as she enters, her heels clicking loudly against the floor. "I understand you had a rough sleep again."

Regina says nothing in response to this statement, but if she were to say something, she'd have reminded the woman that leaving lacerations on a person's stomach and back tends to make it impossible to find a good resting place. She says nothing, though; because of course her captor knows this.

As the Evil Queen, she'd known it, too.

"Ah, yes, silence," the woman chuckles. "Well, then, I do have a present for you today that ought to perk you up. An old friend brought in to help you."

"Help me," Regina laughs, the sound hysterical in a way she's now used to.

"You have been quite stubborn about all of our other attempts," the woman scolds, sounding like she's little more than a frustrated schoolteacher.

"Just kill me," Regina sighs, trying to sound as bored as she can manage.

"Not yet. We're not done," she replies. She steps close and runs a hand across Regina's belly and then dances a fingernail just under the swell of her left breast, where one of the cuts is. It's been cleaned out, but it's still quite sensitive to the touch and her captor knows this and is enjoying the sudden tension she sees in Regina's face; this still isn't about sexual power and it never has been, but that isn't to say that this woman doesn't seem to enjoy knowing how far down she's broken the once Evil Queen of the Enchanted Forest.

"He's here," John says from the doorway. "Finally." Then, to whomever it was who had just shown up, in a coldly unimpressed voice he says, "You're late."

"Traffic. And believe it or not, it is difficult to leave Storybrooke unnoticed."

"Don't care," John says. "You carrying any weapons with you?"

"No," the man says and it's then that Regina recognizes who he is.

"Victor," she gasps as he steps through the door. "You're in this with them."

"All along, Your Majesty," Victor spits the words at her, his eyes blazing acrid hatred. "Did you really believe that just because the Savior willed it, there'd be no consequences for what you did to all of us? For casting the curse?"

"So that's what this is? Payback?"

"Oh, yes," he chuckles as he steps towards the metal bed. "It's a way to make you pay for taking me away from him. A way to make you pay for everything."
"She has paid, darling," the woman chuckles. "But really, we should be getting on with this. My patience wanes. You said you had an idea of what else we might try in order to convince the Queen that her stubbornness is futile?"

Regina doesn't even bother to stop herself from rolling her eyes at this; at this point, she resists simply to resist because they want her to do otherwise.

"I do," Victor allows with a nod and then a thoughtful glance at Regina. He looks behind her, towards all of the machines. "Is she hooked up to all of these? Will they read her vitals and show me how she's reacting to stimuli?"

"They will," the woman replies with a disinterested wave. "Your plan?"

"I plan to do something I believe that only a few people such as our Queen here, Rumplestiltskin and myself can actually do. Remove her heart."

"You know how to do that?" John asks, sounding doubtful. "You?"

"Me. It might not be as artful as the way that either Regina or Rumplestiltskin did it but it will still be...effective." He looks at the woman. "I require some time alone with the Queen." His eyes flicker back to Regina and she has to suppress the desire to react when his eyes slide across her exposed body.

"Very well," she replies. "But we will be just outside in case you have rather foolishly decided to find your soul, Doctor. It would be a mistake to have."

He laughs coldly. "Even if I had, I wouldn't be doing it for her."

"John," the woman says softly, her hand on his arm. "It's all right."

He nods obediently and then holds the door open for them to exit.

"What lies have you been telling them that they think anyone would save you, Regina?" Victor asks as she approaches and looks right down at her body.

"Maybe they just see you for the duplicitous piece of garbage that you are."

"Still bitter about your stable boy, are we?" he asks as he reaches down to touch her, his fingers gliding across her face and then moving her to shoulder.

"Still bitter about your pathetic monster of a brother, are we?"

His fingers squeeze and she gasps as one of the cuts from the previous day's whipping breaks open and suddenly there's bright red gushing down her skin.

"How does it feel?" he hisses. "How does it feel to know that I can see every single part of you right now. Regina? Your broken naked body and your filthy soul." His fingers dig into her skin, surely hard enough to leave bruises behind.

"I'd say you're projecting, dear, and if you're planning on torturing me, you're a little bit late to the party because they really have covered most of the classics already. If you're planning on boring me, you're doing that already."

His thumb pushes into the open wound and her teeth grit.

"You heard what I told them," he says. "I'm going to take your heart out of your chest, and then
we’ll see how strong and defiant you think you are."

"Always more so than you, you worthless disgusting little worm," she fires back, her eyes wide with pain and anger. She can feel the blood running down her skin, but this is hardly the first time for such and so she barely reacts to it.

"We'll see," he says. He reaches out and places his hand right above where her heart is, delighting in the shudder of revulsion that goes through her at his mere touch. He dances his fingers across the skin between her breasts as he speaks "It's always amazed me, this process. Putting a heart back in is quite easy for anyone who knows where to position things, but removing it from someone is quite mentally complicated and it's taken me so long to understand how to correctly do it without the use of magic. But well, figure it out, I have."

His fingers slam inwards and she cries out involuntarily.

She remembers Rumple telling her that this didn't have to be a painful process, but clearly Victor either doesn't know that or doesn't care. She suspects both.

"It's supposed to be much more delicate than this," he murmurs as his fingers close around her heart. "People gasp and cry out because it's assaulting and even surprising, but it doesn't especially hurt, does it?" He shakes his head.

She can hear him speaking but she's trying to focus on controlling the way her body is quivering and shaking; he's squeezing her heart while his hand is still inside her chest and the pain she feels is enormous. And considering what she's been through for the last however long she's been in this torture asylum, that's saying something terrible indeed. She can see darkness swirling at the corners of her vision as he continues to apply pressure to the precious organ.

"But the thing is, if you don't really know what you're doing with someone's heart or how to get to it the right way, it's a bit like operating on a patient with a chainsaw instead of a surgical scalpel. You might get to the same end – or you might not – but either way, you're probably going to make a bigger mess."

He rips her heart out and she screams as his hand bursts back through her skin.

She has a pretty damned good idea that she'll have yet another scar there.

Not that it matters, anymore; these days, her scars are all that she is.

He holds her heart – darkened and broken and so very beaten down – in his hand and shows it to her with his eyes glistening with triumphant fury.

"Now," he says as he glances at the machines behind them and how they're all going a little bit crazy right now. "Perhaps we should talk about this."

"Your brother is dead," she responds instead.

It's spiteful and likely inaccurate (she has no idea one way or another) but the look of hatred and hurt that streaks through him is enough to make it worth it.

Because he's hurting her so she's damn well going to hurt him back.

He squeezes her heart and she grits her teeth to try to stop herself from screaming. She prays for him to go too far and accidentally turn it to ash, but such hopes are pointless because he knows how much pressure he can apply before he's in danger of crushing it and he knows how to make it
agonizing.

And it is.

When she finally screams, her head rolling back, she hears him laughing.

"How does it feel?" he asks. "I've been studying up on the pain tolerance of magical beings and I've been trying to understand what I need to give my brother to be able to exist as he is. It's all so complicated and all of those read-outs that are coming, they'll help, but... tell me, Regina, how does this feel?"

She spits at him.

He comes very damned close to crushing her heart.

It's only her malicious smile goading him to do exactly that, which stops him.

"Not so fast," he says as his fingers loosen around her damaged heart, allowing her to breathe again. "You're going to die, but by your hand not mine."

"Is this more of that give up nonsense that your bosses keep spewing?"

"Yes," he says and then squeezes again. And then he brings her heart to his mouth and says, "And that's what you're going to do. Give up. Surrender."

"You incomprehensible moron, that's not how this works," she says to him and she thinks that she must sound and look like she's gone completely insane.

"Mom," she hears, and oh God, there's Henry again. Not now, she thinks. Not while her heart is out of her and she's so very exposed to everything.

"That's a pretty good word considering everything, Regina," Emma says from his side. She's got her arm around Henry, but it's more like she, too, is trying to protect their son from seeing this as opposed to keeping him away from Regina. That's enough to tell Regina that this is one of her friendly delusions.

"It's control," Victor snaps at her. "I have control over you."

"You can't make me commit suicide," she replies in a tone that leaves no doubt into just how much she hates this man. "You can't make me give up."

"I have once before," he reminds her. "When I let Rumplestiltskin have you."

She surges against her binds and then cries out when he over-squeezes her heart in panicked reaction; she's seiizes and her body rolls and jumps as the organ practically squeals in protest. Just a little more force and it will all be –

"You have to fight, Mom," Henry insists. "You have to get home to me."

"I can't," she says, tears and blood running down her cheeks.

She feels Victor's hand on her face, wrenching it to the side. "Can't what?"

She meets his eyes and instinctively, she snarls at him. "Can't wait to kill you."
With his free hand, he strikes her and the almost immediately, turns his hand around and runs his knuckles across the flared skin. She winces in reaction and then tries to stop herself from gasping as his hand falls lower on her body.

She knows what this is.

He couldn't win with her heart so he's going to try to break her another way.

"You're a monster," he tells her. "A wicked evil monster." His hand slides over her breast and he holds it there for a long heavy moment before squeezing.

"So are you," she whispers. "And you can crush my heart and you can touch me as much as you want to, but it won't change you into being an actual man."

"No," he says. "I suppose it won't." His other hand jerks forward and then he's slamming her heart back into her chest with enough force to make the entire world fade away from her in a burst of black and white. She screams for her son, pleading to see him one last time if this really is the end of things for her.

She thinks she hears both Emma and Henry calling out for her.

"You're never going to see Henry again, Regina," Victor says suddenly, his face so close to hers and his hands clumsily roaming all over her body in a way that should horrify her (though, he's not really doing much beyond actively trying to make her feel uncomfortable) but doesn't after all this time spent with these sadistic lunatics. "I hope you know that. You're never leaving this place."

"We'll see," she echoes as everything continues to darken. "But you'd better hope that I don't ever escape, Victor, because if I do, I'm coming for you."

Her eyes open for just a moment before she loses consciousness, and that's just long enough to see Henry and Emma looking back at her with worry.

She smiles at them and then – for just this one moment – stops fighting.

"So you didn't always hallucinate me as an asshole," Emma notes, her hands gripped tight around the flimsy paper of the now empty coffee cup. She's trying to break the tension and trying to stop herself from getting and finding a baseball bat that she can use to break Whale's skull in with.

Regina chuckles slightly and Emma exhales in relief. "No, dear. More often than not, I did not."

"That's…that's good to know. What was it that helped you remember?"

"Ruby saying he called her a wicked evil monster. That's what he sees himself as. That's what he know he is." She chuckles. "And we both spit at him."

Emma smiles and then her eyes flicker back up to Regina's chest.

"I'm all right," Regina says softly, frowning as uncertainty overtakes her. Her fingers jump up towards the open sides of the shirt and she starts to button it.

"Wait," Emma says. "I'm not…you don't have to hide your scars from me."

"I couldn't if I wanted to. I'm covered in my scars."
"All of which prove that you survived."

Emma leans forward and places her hand over Regina's. "No more hiding."

"I don't hide."

"Seven years away from your family says otherwise."

"You weren't my family until I came back."

"My mother would argue that she's always been your family, and I don't think it's even worth an argument to say Henry has always been that," Emma states.

"No."

"So, you think you're ready to go grab us a dirtbag that I've been wanting to beat the shit out of for many years now?" Emma asks as she slowly backs away. She had considered helping Regina button her shirt back up, but that had both seen too presumptuous and too forward. Also, rather confusing.

"Why didn't you? It's not like you to –"

"To not protect my friends better? I tried; Ruby insisted that he was necessary and I think none of us wanted to put her through talking before she was ready to do so. And then Granny died and he kind of slipped back into the shadows and it became more about trying to keep her afloat than making him pay."

"And what is it about now?"

"You tell me. I know you have Gold making you promise to kill Wendy in the name of vengeance for Neal and you have Ruby begging you to let Whale survive because she doesn't want that. What do you want, Regina?"

"I want to see Henry graduate from college and get married. I want to see him with a little girl in his arms and I want to have a morning without painkillers. I want this new beginning that I've somehow been gifted with to be the actual beginning of something. I want to be happy, Emma. That's what I want."

"Then that's what going to happen. Starting right now."

To Be Continued...
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

A/N: Deep apologies for the delays. I bring to you 9000 words of apology.

Warnings: Language, violence, a bit of non-graphic discussion of rape, implications about miscarriage and a lot of psychological pain. But also some ass-kicking. And the begging of Whale getting what's coming to him. Oh and flashbacks.

I can be found on tumblr at sgtmac7

She opens her eyes and the first thing she's aware of is that everything is bright to the point of blinding. She hears low soft voices over and around her and they're saying things that should make sense, but the words are gibberish to her. When she moves even slightly, she feels intense pain radiating through her, but she can't even begin to define what hurts and what doesn't. All she knows – the only thing she knows (because even her name is a mystery to her) is that she's in agony.

"Hi, there," a man says from above her. He's smiling kindly down at her, but she feels fear when she looks back at him, and she has no real understanding as to why. He seems docile enough, harmless even, but his white coat terrifies her.

When he extends his hand out towards her (she's not sure if he's planning to actually touch her or one of the wires that's attached to her, but even the movement in her direction is more than enough to send flashes of panic through her), she flinches away from him. As she does so, she catches her reflection in a strip of reflective metal along the wall and she sees a woman with incredibly short dark hair and entirely too many deep scars and ugly wounds staring back at her.

She doesn't know who this woman is, but knows that it can't possibly be her. She lifts her hand up to touch her face and catches sight of her forearm – the letters H and E scarred deeply into skin. It's one of many scars, she notes with revulsion.

The doctor tries to reassure her that she's "safe" now (the word is like acid on her tongue and in her mind and though she can't remember who she is or what she's been through or why she's afraid, she knows enough to understand a lie when she hears it. When she shows no sign of responding to him or calming down, he turns and speaks to one of the nurses next to him, and she thinks she hears him say something about how it's probably for the best if one of the female doctors takes over this case from him because this "woman" is clearly having a bad reaction to his gender.

That might be true, she thinks. Or it might not be.

She simply doesn't remember what it is that she's so afraid of.

She just knows that she doesn't want this man touching her in any way.

Her fear grows and though everything inside and out hurts in indescribable ways, she tries to get out of the bed and get away. She feels something cold in her veins and it's familiar in a haunting
way, but then there's nothing besides swirls of colors in her mind and thickly suffocating dark curtains behind her eyelids.

Then, there's nothing. Just...nothing.

Which she thinks should be a relief, but it's not. It's just cold and empty.

A different doctor comes in much later that afternoon (she thinks it's the same day but time is strange to her and not entirely relevant and she's not sure why that it is), well after they submit her to countless tests so that they can check her mind and her body and to see how much damage (too much) was done to her.

The one in the metal tube – the one that makes her feel like everything is closing in on her – is the last one they do because it's the last one than she can handle.

The new doctor is a woman and she's quite kind and has lovely eyes, but when she speaks, she has a British accent and Regina – she doesn't know this is her name yet, won't know for awhile – feels her heart begin to pound like a drum.

She feels so much fear and it just keeps coming and she doesn't know why.

When the British doctor tries to calm her (apparently it's her turn to try this dance, but she's no more successful than her male counterpart had been – perhaps even less so for inexplicable reasons) by telling Regina that she just needs to take a breath and relax because she's safe here and everything is okay now, Regina actually tries to. She really does. She tries to breath and will herself to calm, but then she sees strange images behind her eyelids for a moment.

She sees horrific bloody pictures that make no sense and simply can't be true.

She hears a terrible screaming sound and thinks that it can't be coming from her anymore than the woman in the reflective metal can be her, but then she hears – and feels - a wailing sound ripping forth from her own throat and she knows.

She knows that she's the woman in the reflection and she knows that she's the one who keeps screaming in a way that's almost inhumane. She wonders why and who has hurt her so terribly. When they try to touch her again - maybe to hurt or help, she doesn't know - she curls away from them and finds herself scratching at the H and E on her forearm.

They give her a sedative again and as she fades she hears them talking about how she must have gone through something awful. Considering the scars and the deep wounds on her and the clearly fractured nature of her mind, such thoughts seem apt, but for reasons that she can't even begin to understand, this sympathy – this pity – it grates on her terribly.

She whispers that she's not a victim just before she loses consciousness.

If they hear her, they show no sign of it.

*** ***

"So how do we do this?" Regina asks softly as she stares back at Emma from the uncomfortable chair that she's sitting in. She's slowly turning her hands over and over, winding them together and then pulling them apart in a show of anxiety.

"Go after Whale?" Emma queries as she checks her service pistol to ensure that it's loaded. She'd prefer not to need to fire it, but she's not delusional enough to think that the doctor won't try to get
away from them once he realizes why they've come for him. He knows well that he'd escaped judgment for his deeds against Ruby simply because she had refused to reveal what he had done to her – now they know that it was out of fear and shame – but he won't escape this.

He won't escape the fact that he has so much blood and pain on his hands.

"Yes. I imagine he's been waiting for us – for me – to come after him ever since I returned to town. Perhaps even looking forward to it. I imagine he feels fairly justified in what he did to me."

"I don't care if he thinks he should be knighted for what he did; he's about to get a really rude wake-up call." Emma says. "You know, you said that you told him after he put your heart back in your chest that he better hope you never escaped because you'd come for him; I hope he realizes that we both are coming for him."

"Emma –"

"He helped the bastards who killed Neal, he kidnapped and tortured you, he experimented on Ruby, and at the very least, he assisted them in going after our son. Most likely, though, he was the one who attacked Henry. He's going to pay."

"Yes," Regina agrees, standing up and jamming her hands into her pockets before she thinks better of it and removes them so that she can reach out and take the one of Emma's that has the gun in it into hers. Her hand is shaking fiercely but her gaze is even and intense. "But, Emma, I didn't return home to Storybrooke to cause more hurt and pain. Especially to you. I didn't come back to watch you become what I am. Snow begged me to not lose myself again and we both assured her that I wouldn't, but I need you to remember the same thing."

Emma places her free hand over Regina's, and then lightly squeezes down. "Hey, I'm okay. Really. You don't need to worry about me here. We have a right to defend our family. But that doesn't mean we have to cross lines."

"Promise me that you'll remember that."

"Promise me that you will," Emma counters. "You've been through a lot and if anyone deserves the emotional catharsis of a bit of revenge, it would be you."

"I've had enough revenge for a lifetime," Regina replies. "I want this over so that I can focus on… on not hurting." She winces slightly when she says this, but then quickly adjusts her posture away from her wounded hip. "I want to live, Emma."

"Okay." She frees her hand from Regina, slides her gun into her holster and then smiles brightly – perhaps too brightly for the confrontation that they're about to walk into with Whale. "Do you want to take the lead or do you want me to?"

"I suppose this is my fight."

"It's yours, but it's ours, too. I'm with you every step of the way."

Regina nods her head slowly, thoughtfully and then steps towards the door that will lead them out of the station and towards the streets of Storybrooke.

Towards a confrontation that they both know will change everything.

*** ***
"So you’ve remembered your name,” he notes, his voice calm and quiet.

"I have," she allows. And then scratches her hand against her forehead, her eyes once again catching on the H and the E dug into her flesh (the cops speculated that maybe she was writing HELP into her own skin for some reason). She sees the medical bracelet there, the one she's been wearing for months now. It's a reminder of something that she doesn't remember and doesn't really want to.

"That's a good start."

She wants to counter the easy confidence that she hears in, but doesn't bother. Instead, she shifts anxiously in her seat, and bites her lip to stop from crying out.

They tell her that things are going better, that she is healing, but she can see the worry in their eyes when they speak to her and though she doesn't remember enough to know who she was, she understands lies when she hears them.

They think her mangled and broken, damaged beyond any chance of repair.

They might be right.

She fears that the reluctance she has to remembering who she used to be and what she's been through is enough to understand that there's nothing worth returning to and if that's the truth, then what is there worth going forward for?

"You don't think so," he states, his eyebrow slightly lifted.

"What's your name?" she asks suddenly.

"Todd," he answers. Then, his voice softening even further, "You forgot again."

"Did I?"

"We've known each other a few months now, Regina," he says kindly. "I've told you my names a couple of times. A few times during each of our sessions."

"Oh."

"You're still forgetting things both in the far and recent past?" he says, reaching down to his lap to look at a file there, and then make a notation on the paper.

"Yes, I suppose I am. But you already know that, didn't you?"

"Like I said, this isn't our first meeting. Do you remember our other ones?"

"Yes. I just…I just didn't remember your name. Or what you looked like."

"Probably a coping method you utilized while you were in captivity. Something to help you not have nightmares about the people who hurt you," Todd tells her.

"Right. You make it sound so logical."

"I can't say that I think anything you've been through is logical."

"No," she agrees. She looks down at her hands for a moment and then says, "The other doctors think the same thing that you do; they think that my short term memory issues are trauma related
and that through mental exercises and intense therapy with you, I'll stop putting up blocks and be able to remember better."

He smiles slightly. "If you'll pardon me saying so, Regina, you sound skeptical."

"That's not the word that I was going to use."

"Then what word would you use?"

"Something more profane."

"Really. I wouldn't have guessed you for someone who would curse freely."

She startles a bit at that, the word "curse" sticking hard in her mind like it means something special. Which is ridiculous because he's right and no she doesn't think that she was ever someone who used profanity easily and simply. Rather, it seems to her that such would be the mark of a commoner or a peasant or –

A peasant?

She reaches for the water bottle near her shaking hand and after a moment of struggling to get the cap off of it, brings it to her lips and drinks heavily from it.

"No," she finally agrees. "I…I just don't think it will be that simple for me."

"Why not?"

"Because things are never simple…or easy for me."

"You think but you don't know."

"I don't remember, but I…I do know."

"Okay. So tell me what you do remember, Regina."


"Is it comforting to hear your mothers' voice?"

"No," she says immediately, almost sadly. "It's terrifying."

"But you don't know why?"

"I don't want to know why."

"I presume you understand that you need to, yes?"

"Do I? Someone hurt me badly. Someone left scars all over my body and they touched me and they…" she nearly gags on the words that she can't say.

"Do you think it was your mother who was responsible for your captivity?"

Regina shakes her head. "My mother...when I hear her in my head, she's telling me that I need to be a proper lady and that I have to be strong and ruthless and I have to stop cowering like a child. I don't think I had a good relationship with my mother, but she's not the one...she wouldn't have ever let them do this to me."
"Okay," Todd nods after writing something on his notepad. "But here's the thing; we both know that you have to remember what happened to you if you're going to face and brings these people to justice. But just because that has to happen doesn't mean that it has to happen today or tomorrow. You have a lot of healing to do; you're going to be in this recovery center for a while more. We have time."

"And what if I don't ever remember? What if my body heals before my mind and all I am is this blank slate full of fear that can't even remember faces or names?"

There's a flash of something through his eyes and she thinks that it's the same look that the doctors have gotten every time she's asked how long it will be until everything is right again; he doesn't believe that her body will ever fully heal.

To his credit, Todd doesn't lie to her. "That's not something I'm focused on," he tells her. "Jonah and Louise, it's their job to heal your body. It's mine to help you deal with the trauma of what you've been through. That's what I'm here for."

"I'm not fixable," Regina tells him, and it nearly breaks her in half to realize that she actually believes her shaky words to be the absolute inarguable truth.

"Fixing you isn't what I'm trying to do," he responds honestly. "Help you is."

"Are you sure that I deserve that?"

"Why would you think you don't?"

"Someone thought I deserved what I got," she says, her face contorting into something raw and hurt for a moment. "Has it occurred to you that maybe I did?"

"No, I can honestly say, Regina, that such a thing has never occurred to me."

"Oh," she says softly, tears in her eyes.

He tilts his head, his brow furrowing like it's simply beyond him to think that anyone could imagine that they deserved such pain. "You believe otherwise."

"I believe that I might not have been a very good person before what happened."

"But you don't know."

She smiles sadly and repeats words from earlier, "I don't remember, but I know."

He nods his head. "Well, Regina, why don't we cross the bridge of who you used to be and what kind of person you were when we get to it. For now, as far as I'm concerned, you're someone who needs an ear and that's what I'm here for."

She blinks away the tears. "Okay."

"Great," he says and then leans back in his chair. "Now, how about we start by talking a bit more about the images that you've been seeing, all right?"

*** ***

By the time they reach the parking lot of the hospital, the former queen is having second thoughts about this confrontation with Victor. Wondering if it's a bad idea.
Seeing Owen had been bad enough, but what will facing Victor do to her?

What will it do to this town?

"Hey," Emma says gently. "You okay?"

"No, but don't tell me that we don't have to do this because we both know we do."

"Yeah."

"Victor's office has two ways in or out. One is just behind his desk and then there's the obvious one. If we both come in through the front, he'll try to escape out the back way. That one leads down to his lab down beneath the hospital."

"Your design?"

"Keep in mind when I cast the first curse, I had only a few minutes to figure out where everyone and everything should be. I laid out general guidelines and I think other thoughts in my head got in the way. I probably requested an area where I could work on my potions and such - at that point I wasn't sure what magic I would or wouldn't have access to - and maybe I was thinking of Victor at the same time for whatever reason and the two thoughts merged together."

"Which created him a secret lab."

"Before the curse broke, I think he used that area as storage," Regina chuckles.

"Right. But now –"

"That's most likely where Ruby was tortured."

"Really? I figured it was somewhere at his house."

"Doubtful. Ruby was electrocuted much as I was. The cannery has its own power source that Owen was able to draw from, but Victor's house wouldn't have. Not without blowing out power for the neighborhood. The hospital, however…"

"Which means he transported her across town and then back to the woods where he left her without any of us noticing." Emma shakes her head in disgust.

"What's done is done," Regina says softly. "We can't change the past no matter how much we might want to. And believe me, I very much want to."

"I though you said you had no regrets."

"No, I said that I don't regret having Henry in my life. That doesn't mean that I haven't come to find regret in many of my actions along the way. I know better than most people the useless nature of regrets, but every time I wake up from a nightmare, I remember why that is and what I did to deserve the pain that I'm in."

"Because a lunatic with a grind for a totally different villain took it out on you?" Emma queries, her head tilted in a way that makes her look vaguely puppy-like.

"It may not have been her vengeance to have, Emma, but it doesn't change the fact that she was right every step of the way about what I deserved."

"Bullshit. And if it kills me, I'm going to get you past thinking that."
"I would say that you have your work cut out for you," Regina replies dryly as they reach the doors of the hospital. It's gotten late in the afternoon and the sun is rather lazily making it's way overhead, warming them up as much as it can.

"I'm a stubborn ass," Emma replies with a smirk.

"That you are. All right, let's get this over with; I can feel a headache coming on, and if it's all the same to you, I'd prefer to be near a couch and a cup of tea when it finally hits. So how about you take the back and I'll take the front. He knows that I'm aware of his hidden exit and if you come at him first, he'll be expecting me there, but I doubt that he'll be thinking about you when he sees me in front of him; he's far too cocky a son of a bitch to see his downfall coming from behind."

"Works for me. You going to be all right with this part?"

"It doesn't matter what he did to me," Regina replies. "He hurt our son."

"He can lead us to Wendy Darling. To the end of this," Emma reminds her.

"Yes." She looks up at Emma. "And then what?"

"I don't understand."

"When this is all over, what becomes of this alliance of ours?"

"You mean this friendship?" Emma counters with an impish grin.

Regina chuckles. "Yes."

"Well, I figured once we deal with Whale and the Home Office, we send our kid back to college and then you and I get back on the work-out train and see if we can't change the opinions of a few doctors about your range of mobility."

"As you said, you are a stubborn idiot."

"I actually said 'ass', but I'll take that as a compliment."

"You would. Are you ready, dear?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Then head to the left from here and walk down the long path next to the benches. You'll see a door behind the moss. Enter it and go immediately to the right and up. When you see the back of an oak door, you're right behind his office. I assume you'll know the right time to announce your presence."

"Got it. Catch you in a few." She takes a step towards the path and then stops and turns back. "You said what you want is to be happy, Regina, and I told you that that's what we're going to make happen. I hope you know that I mean that."

Regina meets Emma's eyes bright green eyes with her dark ones and there's a long moment there where she's searching the blonde's eyes for any sign of a lie, any sign of something less than the blunt honesty that has always been Emma's way. All she sees, though, is a warm kind of conviction. It'd frustrated her, this kind of confidence, so many years ago, and yet now she takes comfort from it.

Now, she takes comfort from Emma Swan.
Amazing how the world turns and changes.

"I do," Regina says softly.

"Good. Because tomorrow morning, when all of this is over and we're back to simple boring small-town life again, we're getting up and we're going for a jog and then we're going to get some breakfast and let whatever happens happen."

Regina opens her mouth to reply, to ask if she's misunderstanding what Emma's suggesting – because it's absurd, really – but then fear and uncertainty stills her tongue and she simply nods her head and then turns away and heads through the doors of the hospital, before she says something that will destroy everything.

Before she opens her heart hope to a kind of hope she hasn't had in many years.

A kind of hope that surely doesn't exist, anyway.

No, enough of this; she needs to focus.

She needs to get her head on straight.

Because what matters now - what matters most - is protecting the people she loves.

The family she is unwilling to ever lose - ever forget - ever again.

*** ***

"I heard you had a rough night," Todd notes, his voice typically kind. He's sitting in his usual chair, his legs crossed, gazing at her over the edges of his glasses. She's had dozens and dozens of sessions with him by now, but she always finds herself looking him over and trying to remember who he reminds her of.

Weirdly enough, she always thinks of a bug of some kind and that confuses her terribly because how can a man possibly remind her of a cricket?

Whoever it is, it's someone that doesn't frighten her, and so it bothers her tremendously that she can't easily get to the memory of the person or what he or she might have meant to her. All the ugly ones seem to come to easily, but the ones that don't hurt feel like they're playing Hide and Seek with her mind.

"I had dreams," Regina hedges, her hands balled inside the sweatshirt that she's wearing. She's remembered enough to know that clothes these are not ones that she prefers, but around this place, they're logical and functional and it simply makes no sense to be walking around in tailored skirts and fashionable heels.

"Would you like to talk about them?" Todd prompts, and it's in the way he just puts that out there that reminds her of how many times they've done this dance.

"No," she answers, because that's what she always says, and it's the truth. She really doesn't want to speak of the dreams because there are memories behind the images and it hurts terribly to try to pull the memories forward. It's even worse than that, though, because more often than not, the strange reflections that she surfaces are senseless and seem to indicate a terrible person.

They seem to indicate that she might truly have been something of a monster.
"They told me you woke up screaming," he notes.

"I wake up screaming most nights," she retorts. "I was tortured. Remember?"

He smiles thinly at that. After working with this frustrating woman for as long as he has, he's come to understand when she's buying herself time to figure out how much she's willing to share and what she refuses to let him see. It's odd, he thinks, because her memories are fractured and maimed and yet she seems to always be consciously trying to keep something from him. The only thing that they know about her is her name and that she was apparently an orphan born in Bangor, Maine in 1982 (her birth certificate is sparse, absent detail beyond date of birth and measurements). She was able to locate bank accounts in her name with a generous amount of money (the detectives assigned her case searched for any indication of mafia influence or any other criminal activity but have thus far been unable to find any), but the rest of her life has remained a mystery.

"This was different," he answers. "You wake up some nights responding to what happened while you were... wherever you were. Last night, though, they heard you screaming out for someone named Henry and telling him that you love him."

"Henry," she repeats, frowning. She glances down at her arm and scratches.

"A lover, perhaps?"

"No," she says immediately, almost fiercely.

"You're certain?"

"Yes."

"A sibling?"

"No."

"A parent?"

She frowns at that.

"Maybe?"

"I...I don't think so?"

"Okay. What about a child?"

She swallows. "I don't... I don't think I have any... I don't have children." She places a hand lightly over her stomach. "The doctors told me I was incapable of carrying." She laughs bitterly. "That at least my captors weren't able to do that."

"Impregnate you."

She stares back at him, blinking repeatedly to stop angry tears from forming. The conversation that she'd had about that had been terrible and uncomfortable, and she'd spent the night after it throwing up and dreaming about a sad girl who had looked a lot like her - but with long flowing brown hair - wearing a white dressing gown. The long-haired girl had been staring down at mattress covered in blood.

And then there had been a woman holding a bundle of blankets (something had been in it) and shaking her head and why had the long-haired girl been crying?
"You immediately denied that Henry was a lover or a sibling. Perhaps a friend?"

"No." She scratches her arm again.

"So that brings us back to a child."

"If I had a son, wouldn't he be looking for me?"

"Perhaps he no longer lives."

"He's alive," she responds, again with absolute certainty.

"Okay. Do you recall why you were calling out for him?"

Her brow furrows. "I don't."

"Do you recall anything about the dream? Or was it a nightmare?"

"I was reaching for him and I think he was reaching for me."

"What did he look like? Was he young? Older? Tall? Did he look like you?"

"He had dark hair like me, but his eyes weren't mine. He was... maybe twelve?"

"So your son." He leans towards her. "Have you noticed that you keep scratching your arm? The one – correct me if I'm wrong – where the letters H and E were cut your skin. Is it possible, Regina, that you're actually the one who did that?"

She blinks and blinks and then there it is – just an image of her with a shard of glass, bent over her own arm pressing the sharp tip into her skin as she carves.

"Henry," she whispers, and now she can't stop the tears from falling down her cheeks, watery rivers making their way across skin that still bears the marks of several years (she still doesn't know how many) of torture. "I can't remember..."

"Just because you don't now doesn't mean you won't," Todd says, his voice gentle in a way that she's come to know as the one he uses when he's worried.

Worried about her sanity.

They're all worried about that around here because it seems like every day brings with it the surfacing of new trauma and pain and so very much sorrow.

This is far worse, though, because she knows deep down that this boy matters.

He means something to her.

He's someone that she never should have forgotten.

But she has, and it hurts her far more than blades or electricity ever could or will.

"I have a friend," Todd says. "He works for the police department as a sketch artist. I could have him come over here and maybe you could describe Henry."

"You think that will help me remember?"

"I think it might," Todd nods. He leans forward in his chair. He's still across the small room from
her (she's always thought his rather curious extended distance was as a courtesy to her because of her unwillingness to be touched unless it's absolutely necessary as most of the contact in her physical therapy is). "You already understand, Regina, that you've been through a horrific trauma, whatever it was. It caused you severe damage to your mind and your body. I know you're upset because you've forgotten this boy, but it won't do you any good to beat yourself up for that. The mind is chemical and science and it doesn't bend to the sentimentality that we might want it to. In your heart, you may love this child desperately – enough so that you know instinctively who he is to you – but your brain still needs some time to catch up. And you need to be patient with yourself."

"I think we all know by now that patience doesn't come easily to me, Doctor."

"Be that as it may, you could do more harm than good by pushing here."

"And yet you want me to speak to a sketch artist."

"I want you to tell him what is in your immediate mind. Nothing more than that."

"You think it will help?" she asks again, her voice low and shaky.

"I really do think it might," Todd replies. "And maybe it'll even lift your spirits. Children have a way of making us see and understand the best of ourselves. So, are you game?" Off her hesitant nod, he smiles. "Fantastic; I'll make the call."

*** ***

She's halfway down the stairs to where the offices are located when she feels the buzzing in her pocket. It takes her a moment to realize that it's her phone, but when she does, she grabs at it roughly, assuming that it's Emma checking on her and meaning to scold the infuriating – endearing – woman for extreme concern.

Even if it is rather nice to have someone care about about her after all this time.

Before she can say anything, though, she sees the name on the screen says HENRY and the picture is one of her and him together, his arm wrapped lightly around her waist as the two of them look away from the camera. It's a recent one and she doesn't know when it was taken or when he'd put it on her cell (or Emma had) but either way, she almost doesn't pick up the call because she's staring at the photo and wondering how she'd gotten lucky enough to still have him.

"Henry," she says finally, when she remembers to answer the phone.

"Hey, Mom," she hears, and is once again surprised by the depth of his voice.

"Is everything all right, sweetheart?" she asks, trying to sound calm, but failing.

"Yeah. Gram and Rubes just got back here. They said you and Ma took off to deal with Jackass. I just wanted to check on you and see if you were okay."

"We haven't…we're about to go…we haven't yet."

"Oh. Are you sure about this?"

"You're afraid I'll do something…evil," she observes, her voice shaky.

"No," he replies immediately. "I'm afraid he'll hurt you. Or Ma. And I can't lose either of you. I can't lose you again, Mom. So if it means he gets away with it –"
"This has to end, my little prince. Victor and all of these people…it will never end as long as they're in our lives. The Home Office will keep coming after me and they will keep coming after you and eventually even Emma if that's what it takes to get to me and force me to do what they want me to do. If I thought for a minute that we could just walk away or push them out of town and everyone would be safe and you would be, I would. But…we can't. "

"I know, but…I love you."

It's an openly blatantly manipulative statement and she knows it and he knows it, but at the same time, she finds that she doesn't care because she's gone so very long in her life without such words and such feelings and this just feels good.

"I need you to remember that, okay?" he continues. "Even when I was angry at you and even when I was…underneath all of it, I always loved you, Mom."

She closes her eyes and lets that sweep over her because the truth is that she likes to think that even in her darkest days after her "escape" – even in the jagged haziness of her badly torn memories, her desperate hope that Henry had always loved her as she had loved him (that someone had loved thereby proving that there had been enough good within her to be loved) had been enough to push her forward even when every other part of her had wanted to surrender as her captors had wanted her to. There's a reason, Regina believes, that she'd imagined him for so long as her pillar of support and strength within that prison.

And that reason had been that his belief in her has always made her stronger.

Because Mother had always been wrong.

Mother is wrong now, too.

"I know," she says softly, swallowing hard between forced out words.

"Good, because I have a girlfriend. Or at least someone who might be one if I can get up the guts to ask her out. She makes me laugh and she likes my beard."

Regina chuckles at that. "I want to meet her, then."

"Me, too. Will I see you tonight?"

"Nothing could keep me away from you. Never again."

"I'll see you tonight," he says and she thinks he's choking up with emotion.

So she says she loves him and hears him say the same again and then she hangs up the phone, takes a deep breath and continues down the stairs.

*** ***

*She holds the picture in front of her, the one that had been drawn for her by the artist. It's not quite perfect, but the match to her memory of the boy named Henry is unsettling enough that she's been struggling to find sleep. Thankfully, she's far past the days when the nurses here would feel the need to sedate her; now, they mostly leave her alone unless she wakes up screaming or in a hysterical state.*

*This isn't that.*
This is pure sadness because deep inside of her, she knows that this is her son.

And she misses him so desperately.

She wonders if he thinks her dead. Is that why he'd never come for her? Is that why he doesn't appear to be looking for her? She's been gone a long enough time (absent knowing the last date that she can remember before this whole thing started, she's unable to say exactly how long it's been...but it's surely been awhile, long enough that Henry probably doesn't even look like this anymore) so perhaps he's given up on her. Or perhaps that fear that she has of the kind of person that she once was is why he's never looked for her. Maybe he hated her.

Maybe he's glad that she's gone.

She stifles a sob and pulls the picture against her chest. She closes her eyes and concentrates on the breathing exercises, trying desperately not to think about the intense pain she feels everywhere (even after her nightly painkillers). She tries not to think about the pounding in her head or the burning in her chest. She tries not to recognize the way her hip and leg ache enough to make her want to cry.

She counts and counts and breathes and breathes.

And then she sleeps.

She dreams of Henry, twelve years old and so full of hope and love.

She dreams of Emma Swan, Savior and Enemy, the flip of her coin.

She dreams of Snow, the step-daughter who should have been a sister.

She dreams of Storybrooke and characters out of forgotten stories.

And she dreams of the Evil Queen. When the woman turns away from the mirror that she's looking in to face her, Regina sees her own face staring back at her.

She wakes up silently, tears on her cheeks, and finally knows who she really is.

*** ***

His office door is wide open, and though it probably shouldn't, just the casual nature of this man right now when he has to know that the walls are closing in on him is enough to send rage tearing through the former queen's bloodstream.

Which brings with it a few sparks of magic, the power jumping from her fingers.

She takes a deep breath and remembers promises made to Snow and to Emma and to Henry and she tries not to think about being curled into herself in a cold room or being laid out on a freezing table with blood running down her back.

She thinks about the monster that she was, the one she doesn't even want to be again. She reminds herself that she doesn't have to be that woman anymore.

She can be Regina Mills, mother and friend.

And maybe she can start all over again and truly have a second chance at things like family and friendship and perhaps even love. And maybe – just maybe - she can actually even earn the chance to be someone who deserves those things.
That's what she wants.

She balls her fists and wills the magic back. That they want it is enough for her to know that she
doesn't want it. That they need it is enough to fight for control.

"Victor," she says coldly as she steps into the room, balancing her weight away from her now
throbbing hip. She thinks about Henry and Emma and Snow and all the reasons why she needs to
be strong and courageous enough to finish this.

Brave enough to ignore her own pain and focus on stopping the Home Office.

Because yes, they had hurt her terribly, but their endgame goes well beyond her.

"Regina," Victor says brightly. "It's good to see you."

"I remember," she tells him sharply. "I remember you being there with me."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand."

She steps into the room. "My leg and my hip are screaming at me, Victor. My hands and feet are
covered in scars. I have a mark across my breast and my back…I remember most of what they did
to me in there. And I remember you."

"Regina –"

"I remember you taking me from the Cannery. I remember you taking my heart from my chest and
squeezing it. I remember you touching me. I remember."

He swallows hard.

"Are you afraid, Victor? You should be. But not because of the many things you did to me. You
should be afraid because you put your hands on my son."

"I…" he looks for a moment like he's going to deny the charges but then he sees where her eyes
have tracked to, see the edge of the brand that he had used on Henry's shoulder. Only the
recklessness brought on by the Home Office being so close by caused him to be so sloppy, but that
hardly matters now. "Okay," he says softly. "So you know. You know that I paid you back for
what you did to me."

"You let them torture me for three years because I tore you away from doing more of your hideous
experiments on your brother - a man that you had already destroyed. You played one of the key
roles in turning me into what I became and then you had the…you blamed for paying you back for
what you did to me."

"You're no innocent, Regina. Don't play off like you're the victim in this."

"I'm no victim," she agrees, taking another step inside and then shutting the door behind her so as
to block that escape route off. "But neither are you, dear."

"So what are you going to do? Kill me? Make me suffer as much as you did? Oh, but we both
know that's not possible, don't we? Tell me, do you feel the flutter of your heart some days? Do
you feel my hands touching it? Squeezing it? Do you feel how many years they took away from
your life? How much less time you have? Can you actually feel the gaps in your memory? The
things you've lost."
"Yes," she says softly. "I feel all of those things. And no, I can't make you feel what I did. But maybe that's the difference between you and I now, Victor. Once upon a time, I would have wanted to at least try to make you hurt as badly as I do, and I probably would have enjoyed it intensely. Or at least told myself that I was. Now, I just want to get the information I need, and then I want to throw you into the deepest hole that I can and I want to forget that you ever existed."

"But we both know that won't ever happen. You'll never forget me standing over you. You'll never forget me touching you – you can't forget it. And you will never ever forget the feeling of my hands inside of you." He grins at her and she tries to remind herself that it hadn't been rape what he had done to her (it'd just been the removal of her heart – something she'd done to others hundreds of times), but she thinks that maybe it had been, and it almost makes her stomach flip over.

Because no, she's no innocent.

"You would be surprised what I'm good at forgetting," she says softly, a deep undercurrent of guilt and emotion that he couldn't even begin to grasp. "Now," she lifts up her hands and shows him her once again sparking hands. "I know that you helped stop and re-start my heart a few times. I should warn you that I'm not nearly as adept at the second part, but the first seems easy enough."

It's a bluff, of course (she has no intention of tearing out his heart, doesn't want to ever feel the dark bliss of that kind of magic again) but he doesn't need to know that. All he needs to know is that he's in very serious danger of dying.

"But you just said –"

"I said I needed information. I want to know where Wendy Darling is. And don't tell me that you don't know because you've been taking orders from her – such as the one to brand my son with the same mark that I have on me." Her eyes glow purple for a moment when she says this, and there's a part of her that is angry enough to actually want to hurt this man in unthinkable ways. It seems to her that it would be more than justified to do so, and perhaps it even would be.

But she wants this day to be over and she wants to go home to Henry and feel his strong arms around her. She wants to meet his almost girlfriend and hate her just on the principle of it. She wants to wake up in the morning, lace on shoes with Emma and jog down to the docks even though it hurts her body to do so.

She wants to have that breakfast with Emma even if it isn't what she thinks it is.

She wants this new beginning, this new family that she's making to be real.

She wants the forgiveness that she's forged with Snow to be just the start of better days and better things; in the end, she just wants to be happy.

And in this moment, it's within her hands – her own hands - to make that happen.

But he doesn't need to know about the decisions that she's made. He just needs to know that deep down inside of her, the Evil Queen still continues to live.

She will always live there.

It's a truth that Regina has come to understand. Bitterly and angrily, but fully.

So she stares back at Victor, a snarl on her lips and purple in her eyes and she waits for him to try to retreat because that's when they will have him trapped.
That's when he'll have no choice but to tell them everything he knows.

"Their Queen is stronger than you, Regina," Victor states. "And more evil. I have to say, I didn't think it was possible for anyone to be more evil than you are –"

"Besides you?" Regina drawls.

"I've done the things I've done –"

"You can't justify what you did to Ruby so don't even bother trying."

His face goes white for a moment before he recovers. "What do you care?"

"I've changed, Victor. Thanks to you. You helped to make me into someone far different than I was. I suppose I owe you for that. So you'll get to keep your life."

"I don't want anything from you," he stammers and then spins around, slaps his hand against a discolored brick on the wall behind him and waits for it to open.

"Heya," Emma says to him the moment the door slides open to reveal her standing there, her posture deceivingly casual. And then she's slugging him across the face with a balled fist and grabbing him before he can even recover by the lapels of coat, and roughly pulling him down into the hidden corridor with her.

"Where are you taking me?" he demands as he hears the hidden door slide shut followed by the sound of Regina's un-even footsteps following slowly after them.

"Somewhere where we can talk in private. You know, away from anyone who might keep you from losing vital body parts. Maybe we could talk about things like sadistic bosses, hidden warehouses and oh, attacking my son," Emma replies with a snarl just before she turns and throws him forward onto the ground in front of her. "Now start walking."

*** ***

It's her first night in the new apartment, and the first thing she's aware of is how thunderingly quiet it is. She'd gotten rather used to the noise of the rehab care facility and she finds that she even misses the little things like the celebrations over someone hitting a milestone in their long road to recovery. She finds that she misses the camaraderie. She even finds herself missing Dr. Todd and his never-ending uncomfortable questions (he's offered to continue being her therapist, but she'd told him that she probably won't be returning because she needs to try to put everything that happened behind her).

He had spent a lot of time with her trying to convince her that visions of another world, of being the Evil Queen who has caused so much pain, had just been her fractured mind's way of trying to explain why someone had hurt her so terribly (he had believed some of her stories about the Home Office to be feverish delusion), but what he had done had been to help her see the truth of all that she'd been. All that she can longer be, and through pain has been forced to atone for.

He's right, she realizes; her past is how she justifies her torture.

It's the only way that she can keep herself moving - to believe that she has paid and maybe now can rise back up.

Because she's better now. Not as shattered as she'd once been.
Or so she tells herself.

She glares over at the cane that leans against the wall. It'd been one thing to use it at the center, but now she's back out here in the world and it just reminds her of how broken she is and how alone she is. It reminds her of all that she's lost.

She reaches into the pocket of the coat she's wearing - she's still always so cold these days, likely owing to how difficult it is to ever put weight on thanks to her ridiculously low appetite - and fishes out the sketched drawing of Henry.

It's never far from her.

She stands up slowly, gingerly and makes her way over to the mantle above the fireplace, and rests it against the brick wall there. Tomorrow, she'll get a frame for the picture. Tonight, she just smiles at the kind eyes she sees looking back.

"All right, Henry," she says softly. "It's time to make you proud."

She touches his face with the tip of her finger, smiles once more and then turns off the lights.

TBC...
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

A/N: Hey, all - we're winding down into the final arc of this very long tale and it's about to get super intense (because the rest has been an easy going Sunday afternoon joyride, yeah?). I thank you for joining me on this insane journey thus far and buckle in, eh?

Warnings: Violence, non-graphic implications of torture and rape, psychological upheaval and that son of a bitch known as John.

The hallway is long, windy and drafty and Emma has to forcibly remind herself that this corridor is likely supposed to be all of these things due to the fact that this hidden lair of Whale's is deep underground – far beneath the hospital and perhaps even beneath the asylums that still house the more unstable elements of Storybrooke such as Owen (she finds it strange that Whale doesn't know how close he is to one of his co-conspirators, but thinks that considering the cruelty the men have been part of, that's a good thing).

Still, it's just a little bit cliché which does nothing for the ugly festering emotions that are swirling deep within her; she's thinking and feeling things that she knows aren't safe or sane, and she doesn't know what she's supposed to do about any of them because all she sees when she closes her eyes is Neal's grave, Ruby's empty eyes, Henry's branded shoulder and the grotesque scar on Regina's chest that Whale had left there when had yanked yanked the former queen's heart out.

She glances over at Regina as she thinks this, her eyes skittering over the woman who has been through so much and yet is somehow managing to keep her expression schooled and neutral. She seems calm, but she can't possibly be.

No, if Emma had to make a guess right about now, Regina is anything but calm.

She's right, of course; the once Mayor of Storybrooke might seem like she's a picture of stoic indifference, but the same things that Emma is feeling - the same turbulent fears? She is, too.

She feels the rage and the anger, but she also has so much fear and dread within her; she can see pictures behind her eyes and they all lead to her screaming and all she can think and wonder is if the future holds more of that.

She doesn't think she can do it again.

She knows that she can't.

"Do you really think that whatever you plan to do to me will wipe away everything that they – that I - did to you? Do you really think that making me bleed will help you sleep at night?" Victor suddenly sneers back at Regina as he stumbles over his own feet and almost falls flat. His tone is defiant even if the fear in his eyes tells the tale.

"No," Regina answers quietly, trailing just a step or two behind Emma as she quietly forces Victor
down the long hallway towards his secret lab; though her mind is whirling in circles and she hasn't
stopped watched Regina, Emma has been silent for the last few minutes, the anger ticking away in
her jaw speaking loudly enough. It's worrisome, actually, because Regina is well aware what rage
can do to a person, and right now the Savior is a simmering cauldron of red fury.

"You will never be able to pay me back for three lost years," he taunts. "Anymore then I will ever
be able to pay you back for three lost decades with my brother."

"Yeah, well, we can damn well try," Emma says finally, her voice hard in a way that sends an
unnatural shiver up Regina's spine. She notices that the Savior's hand is wrapped tightly around the
grip of her service pistol, and Regina finds herself wondering if that's for Victor's safety right now
because clearly, Emma is just barely holding it together. "Now shut up and keep moving; you don't
get to speak again until we get to your little torture room. Then you can talk a lot. And if you don't
want to, I'm sure we can find something that will make you want to."

"You won't hurt me," he insists. "She might have been willing to, but you're not."

"You took two parents away from my son – including the one that's responsible for him being the
man he is today; I wouldn't be so sure you know me as well as you think you do," Emma says
dully, those ghosts still swirling in her bright eyes.

"Maybe I don't," he agrees. "But she'll stop you from going too far." He laughs at that, a hint of
madness in the mirthless sound. "How the worm turns; now the Evil Queen is the one holding back
the Savior. I never would have believed that."

"Life changes and apparently, dear Doctor Frankenstein, so have I," Regina notes tiredly and then
she snaps her fingers to show him the sparks of her magic that are brewing just beneath the surface;
it's true that she has no real intention of allowing Emma to darken her soul with the taking of blood
and life, but that doesn't mean she wants Victor so assured of coming out of this in one piece.

Because he won't be, she decides with an almost frightening amount of clarity. In that moment, she
knows for sure that he won't come away from this the same.

Something here will change him as much as her losses have changed her.

Before Victor can reply, his back slams up against the metal doors that separate the secret tunnel
from the stairs leading down to his lab. He looks up at Emma for a moment and sees her wave her
gun at him as if to suggest that he should go ahead and open the doors. Perhaps he has a moment
where he considers refusing but then there's a click of a safety being released and the fear that he's
never been quite good at masking streaks across his face. "All right," he murmurs darkly,
morosely, "If you really want to see my little world, then see it, you shall."

There's a loud clink and a clunk and a snap and a whirl and then the doors creak open and it's so
very much out of a bad novel from years gone far by that Emma almost finds herself almost
cracking a smile at the absurdity of it all, but then her eyes stray towards Regina and she sees the
older woman rubbing absently at the scars on her palms and all Emma can think about is how
much time has been lost and how much time can never be regained and how she just wants this
over.

She wants the Home Office and Whale and Owen out of her town, and she wants Henry and her
parents and this crazy infuriating beautiful woman who was once her enemy and now feels like
something more to be safe. She wants to finally be able to let Neal's soul rest in peace and she
wants everyone in this town – her family most of all - to find the happiness that they have deserved for so very long.

That's all she wants.

But first they have to get through this.

"In," Emma says once the doors are fully open. "And don't try anything because you have a whole lot of soft areas that I can put a bullet into without killing you."

"Emma," Regina says softly, a curious warning in her deep quiet voice.

"It's fine; I'm fine," She nods to Whale and gestures with the gun. "In."

He steps backwards and in, and all Emma can think for a moment is that Mary Shelley had known exactly what she'd been talking about when she'd written her book because this laboratory is disturbing in ways that she lacks the words for.

Regina's eyes flicker to Victor and he grins; he knows that he's the one in serious jeopardy right now and that his options are extraordinarily limited, but when he sees her shudder in revulsion when she spots the machine that had once been used to electrocute her, it feels almost like a win, and he won't deny himself it.

"Familiar?" he asks.

Her eyes jerk towards him, widening and then narrowing with anger and fear.

"So," he says cheekily. "What is it that you wanted to talk about?" He then runs the sleeve of his pristine white coat past the blood on his face, smearing it red.

"Your boss. Where is she?" Emma demands, stepping close. "Wendy Darling?"

"You know, I don't know," he shrugs. "She could be... anywhere. Anywhere at all."

"Okay," Emma nods, her normally green eyes suddenly almost steel bluish. "Go ahead and play your games, Whale. I don't know why you'd want to considering you're not a complete idiot and you know you've lost, but please, go right ahead."

"What have I lost?" he asks. He gestures towards Regina who continues to silently look around the lab, her eyes flitting over various devices that she now has more than a passing familiarity with. "Look at her; she's remembering her time as a guest of the Home Office; she's remembering what they did to her and how they broke her down into the nothing that she's always been; she's terrified."

Emma turns, and her brow furrows as she takes in how pale Regina has gotten as she looks at the devices that had been used to bleed and beat her; the ones used to force her to submit. Still, Emma insists, "She's stronger than you think."

"She's weaker than you think," he fires back, looking entirely too smug.

"She's right here," Regina says suddenly, her voice low as she looks away from the metal cuffs on the table that had assuredly once held Ruby down so that Victor could experiment her. "And she is
more than strong enough to stop you."

"I'm not the one that you have to stop; my part in this bit of theatre is over."

"Not yet," Emma replies and then reaches out, grabs him by the lapels once again and slams him down against the metal table. He grunts in pain and may even throw out an ugly expletive towards her, but she barely hears him over the blood that's suddenly pumping in her ears as her anger blooms and explodes.

Before she knows it, her hands are around Whale's throat and she's squeezing as hard as she can, watching as his eyes widen and pop. "You're going to tell me what I want to know or I'll make sure that you never tell anyone anything again."

He gasps and spatters and she thinks she hears him insist that she doesn't have the guts to do this; even now, he's still playing chicken with her. Even now, he's still betting that she's far too good of a person to take his life away from him.

But good and bad are relative and she has a head full of memories of tears that have been shed and not near enough laughter to off-set those dark ones; when she closes her eyes, she can still see her son crying for his mother and his father and God, she feels such hatred and it feels a bit like some kind of sweet poison.

It makes it that much easier to squeeze harder.

Life is funny, though, and Victor had been right; long ago, she'd been the one trying to keep the peace. Back then, she had been the one hoping that Regina could keep her rage bottled up long enough for everyone to find a kind of uneasy truce with each other, but now a decade later, it's the former queen who places a gentle hand on her forearm and in a soft but strong voice that Emma instinctively knows Henry heard while growing up, Regina tells her, "I promised Ruby that he would live through this, and that's what's going to happen here; he's going to live and so are we, Emma. So I need you to let go of him because I made a promise."

"I'll let him go when he talks," Emma grouts back, tightening her hold again.

"He can't talk; you're crushing this throat, and if you don't stop doing that, you're going to end up murdering him, Emma. I'm not going to let you do that anymore than you would let me, and you won't. I know you won't. This is my fight, dear and I'm the one who owes Victor. If I can't have his blood, then you can't, either."

She places her hand lightly over Emma's squeezing her fingers in slightly enough to create pressure. It's this focus on Emma's hands – on the grip that she has on Whale's throat – that brings Emma back to her senses and then she's ripping her hand away from him and spinning backwards, her green eyes wide and horrified.

"It's all right," Regina says immediately, kindly. "He's alive. And can still talk." She then waves her hand in the air and suddenly the magic that has been bottling up inside of her – the magic that she's just lately been able to slightly feel but not really access more than to transport people – is leaking out of her fingers like a silky venomous snake and he's spinning onto the metal table, his arms and legs wrenching outwards like he's being held by invisible restraints. A moment later, it's the metal cuffs that had once held Ruby down which are now binding him.

"So you saved me from the Savior just to kill me yourself?" he demands, his eyes wide with panic.
He laughs, them, sounding just a little bit mad. "I knew that this whole nonsense about you changing was just that; you're incapable of change."

"I have changed. I've changed more than you could ever imagine. Which is why I won't let you die. I made a promise to Snow and to my son and to Emma and even to myself," Regina tells him as she runs a finger over the metal cuff, her mind remembering a time when it'd been on a metal table much like one where Victor is now spread out; only she'd been naked and exposed and vulnerable in a way that he never will be. She pulls her hands away and continues coolly, "And no, you can't ever pay enough for what you did to me or to Ruby or the gross betrayals that you committed against the innocents of this town, and yes, Victor, the vast majority of them are more owed than owing. You can't pay enough for those atrocities anymore than I can ever hope to pay enough for the ones I've committed. But you crossed a line of no return when you attacked my son and placed that filthy mark on his shoulder. I may have deserved it, but he did not."

"So you're going to torture me?" he asks, laughing now in near hysteria. He looks around desperately, then up at Emma like she might be able to prevent this even though his neck is painted vividly with the bruises that she'd just left on his skin.

Even now, Whale still believes that Emma can be manipulated to utilize the good part of herself even when the person asking for assistance hardly deserves it. It's what makes Emma Swan who and what she is, and he's counting on that here.

But he doesn't seem to understand just how much pain she's been caring around for all these years; he doesn't grasp the staggering depth of her losses and how the tears she's cried and the ones she's wiped away have altered her in a way that makes her sees things like Good and Evil in entirely different ways. She's never particularly believed in the absolute of either concept, and she doesn't believe in them now, but when she closes her eyes, she can see the print on the medical report of Regina's and she remembers the feel of rough terrible scars.

She knows in a way that she never truly knew before – not really – just how much people are capable of. And she knows just how much they can fall.

So Victor might be counting on Emma Swan right here, but he's probably wasting his time because the woman he is hoping for just might not exist as she once did.


He nods his head, forcing bravery that he doesn't actually possess. "Fine; then do your worst to me, Regina, but I won't tell you anything. I promise you that."

"Won't or can't?" Regina asks. "Because I wouldn't doubt that don't actually know anything." She leans in towards him, her mouth close to his ear. "Because your employers think as little of you as everyone else does; they know that you're just a worthless worm who would sell out almost anyone, but you have your uses don't you? You always have. They found in you someone who would be willing to maim and torture and abuse and somehow keep that all inside of himself. They found someone who could justify everything he did for the sake of a brother who has been lost for so very long. They found a monster who would never suffer a moment of guilt." She puts her hand over Victor's to keep him from replying, only vaguely aware now of how Emma is moving behind her, watching and listening.

She can see the agitation in Emma's muscle, and the anxiety in her stance and there's a shallowness to his breathing that seems to indicate that she's ready to jump into action if the need to do should
arise; if it battle should be necessary.

But it won't be.

Because Victor won't be putting up any further resistance, Regina thinks grimly.

Still, part of her thinks that maybe she should take a moment to calm Emma down right now; after all, she had just pulled the angry woman off of Victor and stopped her from choking the son of a bitch to death. That can wait, though.

For now, there's just this.

"I feel no guilt for punishing you," the doctor hisses at her. "Whatever wickedness I have done in my life, it doesn't compare to the horrors that you have committed. Whatever kind of monster that I am, it will never compare to the evil that you are."

"You keep saying that, Victor – you and they and everyone else keeps reminding me what I am, or what they see me as think I am – and you know what? They're right and you're right," she agrees. She shows him her palms, then, indicating the thick white scar lines there. "I have a hundred more of these scattered across my body, each one of them a reminder of a life that I took that I had no right to."

"Any scars you have, any reminders that you have, they're not enough."

"No," she agrees as she stands up and walks down to where his feet are, checking the cuffs there before she returns to the head of the table and leans in close once again. "But I've still paid more penance than you have. Or ever will no matter what happens here." She lowers her voice. "Tell me the truth, Victor, you don't know where your bosses or what the next stage of their game is, do you?"

"Go to hell."

She nods her head and looks back at Emma. "He doesn't know where they are."

"You're sure?"

"I am. I expect they fed him just as much information as they needed him to have and not a bit more; he knows they're in Storybrooke but he doesn't know where."

Emma sighs. "How did they get past the town shield, Whale? They're not from the Enchanted Forest. Wendy Darling may be a storybook character, but she's from this world and not one of the ones that we're from. How did they get inside?"

He laughs at her. "No," he says simply.

Emma starts to step forward, her green eyes deepening with rage again, but Regina moves quickly in front of her wincing when her momentarily forgotten about damaged hip screams in protest. "You're to stay behind me," she orders.

"Why?" Emma demands, her jaw setting with anger.

"Because I don't want this blood on your hands. I don't want this on your hands."
"Regina –"

"Be calm," She leans over Victor, moving very close. It's an echo of how close he'd been to her back at that horrible warehouse, how he'd relentlessly invaded her personal space and made her feel so vulnerable and exposed. She won't touch him as he'd touched her – she won't even take his heart from his chest as much as part of her craves to do exactly that (truthfully, she doesn't even know how to remove it as brutally and as sadistically as he had) – but she will make him feel the helplessness and hurt that she had. It'll probably add another stain of darkness to her heart, and she should be above and past this, but then she sees that filthy mark – the one proclaiming her son as "impure" – on Henry's shoulder and she finds that she just doesn't care; it's time for someone else to pay as well.

"What are you doing?" Victor gasps suddenly, looking down at the metal cuffs around his wrists. They seem almost like they're bending – pressing – inwards.

"Do you know what one of my first memories I had of that place was after I woke up in the hospital? I mean the first full memory. Before that, I saw more than a few flashes of being beaten and whipped and held down and –" she trails off, her entire body trembling for a moment as she fights her turbulent mind for control of her wounded body. "Early on, I saw flashes of myself being abused in every way that a person can be abused, but a few months after I recalled who I was and started to remember, do you know what one of the very first things I saw was?"

"No," he gasps, staring down at the cuffs as they continue to slightly bend.

"Good, then I'll tell you," Regina nods, her cold smile almost sickly sweet.

"You don't have to do this," Emma says softly (Emma has said this before, Regina remembers, when they'd been with Owen and Regina had been telling him her five stories; she'd declined Emma's out then, as well). She feels a hand settle lightly on her arm as if to offer comfort (she should have known that Emma could never stop touching her for longer than a few seconds, and if she's honest, she's thankful for the constant grounding that the obnoxious yet strong-spirited and kind-hearted woman supplies). "You don't have to share this with him."

"But he should know why I'm doing what I am to him," Regina notes, curling her fingers forward and making the metal bend inwards even more. "I remembered the man who tortured me every single day – the man who had once already broken my wrist as a form of 'hello - snapping both of my wrists so that he could make me feel helpless and broken; he did it so that I would feel as though I couldn't touch my magic and that I was completely at the mercy of my captors. You see, magic practitioners like myself learn to use their hands to cast. It's probably not necessary but it becomes necessary because it's how you control flow and force and if there's no control, then there's no power. They figured that out quickly and ensured that I knew that they had. Power is in our hands, Victor."

"Don't," he gasps as the metal creaks. "I'm a doctor."

"Not anymore," she reminds him. "Above all else, do no harm. Isn't that right?"

"I'm not from this world; that's not my oath."

"Perhaps not, but you shall not do it, anyway." She clenches her hand hard then, her eyes for a moment settling on the bones that had healed poorly the first time and then had to re-broken;
they're the least of her injuries, but like the scars that circle her body, they remind Regina of just how far down she had been pulled.

They remind her of just how far she'd fallen into the darkest of terrible hell-pits.

It's someone else's turn – another wicked soul's – turn to fall just as far.

For a moment, she thinks Emma will stop her, but the sheriff doesn't move and so she continues squeezing until she hears a crack of bone and Victor scream.

She stops, then, and quietly says, "How did they get past the shield, Victor?"

He looks up at her in disbelief, tears and snot running down his face. "What?"

"How did Wendy Darling and the rest of the Home Office goons get inside my town?" Regina growls, her eyes dancing with malevolent purple fury. She feels Emma touch her again, and knows she's coming close to a line she can't cross.

But she hasn't crossed it yet.

Victor will survive this. And that's all that matters; that's enough.

"The same way Rumplestiltskin got out," Victor whimpers. "I stole his scarf –"

"You stole Neal's scarf?" Emma breaks in, her eyes wide in surprise.

"I stole the scarf of a worthless pathetic man that's been dead for ten years," Victor sneers at her, relentlessly cruel even through his agony. "Because of her."

"Because of you," Emma fires back. "You helped Greg and Tamara."

"If I hadn't, she would have killed all of us with the trigger. So while you're busy over there moralizing and justifying who she is, tell me, who is the bigger evil? The one who would have killed everyone or the people who wanted just her?"

"We'll never know," Emma states. She shakes her head then and looks at Regina. "I need to get some air or I'm going to fucking kill him myself. Can we –"

"Take a breath," Regina says. "He'll still be alive when you get back. Trust me."

"I do. More than you know," the sheriff replies and then turns and flees the room, trying to get ahold of herself and all the ugly emotions that are surfacing rapidly.

"She cares for you in ways she shouldn't and you know it," Victor says suddenly, his eyes on Regina as she watches Emma's departure, a strange curious look on her face. "But we know that it can't last. She may think that she trusts you as she says she does, but that's not possible and we both know it; she could never care for you the way that you care for her. It's a lie she's telling herself to help her deal with the fact that she's teaming up with the demon queen who caused all of this."

"Demon Queen," Regina repeats thoughtfully. "Well, I've been called worse. In any case, she knows who I am and what I've done. Whatever feelings she thinks she has, they're none of your business." She leans in close to him again, making sure that he can feel her breath. "Now enough
about Emma – you are not to speak about her again unless told to. The only words I want from you now are the rest of the story and be quick about it because I can be as slow as you are."

"This town needs me."

"This town will find another way; it always does. Talk or I will break every bone in your wrists and hands as slowly as possibly can. I have three years of torture – three years of horrific things that were done to me; don't think I won't hurt you."

He swallows hard. "You don't scare me."

She nods her head at that and then looks down at her hand. She traces a finger over one of the thickest of the scars – the one that Emma had touched – and then looks up at Victor. "Your hands are free of these; it's time to change that."

She then jerks her hand and then suddenly there's a harsh crack and the sound of tearing as the bone in Victor's left wrist snaps and turns harshly, bulging out against the swelling skin, but not breaking. He's screaming, then, and it's so loud.

It makes her think of how much she had screamed and how her sadistic captors had just watched her do it; it makes her think of how Victor had held her heart in his hand and squeezed it hard enough to make her wish that she would just die.

"Talk," she practically purrs. "And I can make this much quicker for you; it can all be over and then we can just…be done with each other, Victor. Just talk to me."

He whimpers in reply; she turns her hand and his wrist splinters once again.

"Fine, fine! Just…just stop. Please."

"Talk."

"I stole the scarf and passed it out to the Home Office in the trunk of Emma's car during one of her many trips out of Storybrooke to try to find you; they were able to scientifically replicate the magic that Rumple used to cross the line without ill effect and thus create themselves immunity to the shield," he babbles out then, his words tumbling over himself as tears flow down his cheeks; for a man who has maimed, tortured, broken and re-built human bodies, he's rather unable to handle even the merest bit of torment himself, she muses darkly. "They – and I - have been passing in and out of the town for almost since the beginning."

"I see," she says softly. "So they are in town?"

"Yes."

"And they are coming after me again?"

"They never stopped coming after you; they always knew where you were."

It's hardly news; deep down she has always known that her captors had never truly let her go, and now she has confirmation of this. "They want my magic."

He clenches his teeth as if to refuse to reply again so she twists her hands and then one of his
fingers is snapping backwards and he's howling in pain again.

"Yes!"

"And the only way to get my magic is to force me to give it up?"

"They need you to give up completely; to surrender yourself completely."

"I did," she growls out. "I asked them to kill me a hundred times over."

"But you never begged them to do it."

"I never begged them to do anything. I told them to stop playing games and just end me; they despised my very existence yet refused to fully destroy me."

"Didn't they?" he laughs, sounding almost hysterical.

"No," she replies, her voice suddenly quiet. "They did not."

"And that's just it; even when they were tearing your body and mind apart, you were still fighting back," he gasps out as he looks down at his maimed hand.

"I wasn't trying to. I didn't spend every night in that cell hoping to see the next day; I didn't want to. I would have gladly died to save myself that much agony."

"Something inside of you wasn't willing to surrender; you never attempted to take your own life. Not even once," Victor explains between breaths, blinking rapidly as he attempts to stay conscious through the pain. It's not lost on her just how truly insignificant what he's enduring is comparatively, but at the same time, she finds herself more than a little sick in the stomach and heart to be doing this; she knows that she doesn't want to be this person again– someone capable of this.

Still, for everything that does mean something – for herself and for her family – she needs to understand what it is that these tormentors of hers want from her; she needs to know why she'd spent three years being tortured and seven years recovering only to find out that it's always just been a waiting game for them.

It's time for the truth even if that means a few bones have to break to get there.

Even if it means dancing on that dangerous line just a little bit.

The question is – the question has always been – can she dance back to the side of the light when she needs to or will she always fall into darkness and despair?

She imagines that she's about to find out.

There's a lovely low stone wall that sits just outside of the hospital; it's supposed to be something of a memorial to those who had fallen in the battle ten years earlier, but it's become more of a quiet resting place since then. Which is actually probably it's own kind of tribute, Emma thinks. She had never really known Neal as well as she believed that she had, but there'd been a kind of
thoughtfulness in him, something buried deep beneath years and years of betrayal. She can still remember seeing him looking out the window of their apartment so many years ago. He'd been staring at the horizon and she'd never really known why, but sometimes she wonders if he'd been looking beyond it, searching for his family.

She runs her hands through her hair and sighs; even now, she's hopelessly conflicted about him. It'd be so easy to be angry and to think that her second chance with him had been stolen away, but the truth is that she hadn't wanted one – not really. He'd been a different man and she'd been miles from the young girl that had fallen in love with him when she'd been a teenager. She'd been wary and cautious back then, but a year in jail and ten years on her own had spun her.

She and Neal never would have worked out as the people that they had become, and she understands that – most of her let him go a long time ago; it's the little girl in her that's angry about her stolen chance at finding love again – but even so, that should have been something she'd had the right to find out on her own.

She glances back towards the hospital, and thinks that she should probably go back inside and ensure that Regina is fully in control of her emotions, but she knows the way that she's feeling right now – and what she had been willing to do and might have even done if Regina hadn't been there to stop her – she's of little use to the former queen, and it's best to stay out and get herself balanced again.

Regina is going to need her very soon; the truth about the Home Office and where they are and what they want is coming out, and once it does, it'll be time to finish these bastards off once and for all. That means she has to be in control.

Emma reaches into her pocket and fishes out her phone. It feels rather stupid and silly because she's close to forty and far too old to be calling home just to hear a soft supportive voice, but the knowledge of her rapidly increasing age and supposed maturity doesn't stop her from punching the number she needs in.

And then waiting until she hears Snow's soft voice after the line picks up.

"Emma?" she says. There's a pause and then she asks, "Are you all right?"

"No," Emma replies, her voice muffled as she lowers her face into her hands.

"Are you hurt? Is Regina –"

"No. I just…we're here at the hospital. And we have Whale. He's…talking."

"Talking?"

"Yeah. Just…talking."

"Okay," Snow says gently. Because she understands exactly what isn't being said – and that there's probably little talking occurring - but this isn't the time or place to be reminding Emma of how delicate the line between good and bad is.

Sometimes, that line is irrelevant, anyway.

It's the hardest lesson that Snow White has ever learned.
It's a lesson she's had to learn over and over in her life, and likely always will.

It's both easier and harder when she sees the way Regina moves throughout Emma's townhouse, her hand gripping the cane as her body betrays her thanks to the actions of those who would consider themselves Good but never were.

Those are the moments when she really understands just how thin that dividing line between Good and Evil is, and how easy it is to become either of those.

"Emma, honey, talk to me," Snow prompts after a moment of silence.

"I thought I was okay," the blonde replies after a moment. "I thought that I had gotten past everything and I was okay because I had you and Henry and -:

She trails off, her eyes on the horizon and her mind on Neal once again.

"The past has a way of digging all of our pain back up again," Snow states.

"I know. And that's all we have been dealing with since Regina came home."

"We've talked about this before, but do you wish she hadn't come home?" Snow asks, curiosity once again in her tone.

"I wish I hadn't given up looking for her. I wish we could have healed years ago."

"Me, too," her mother admits. "But we're here now; this is what we can move forward from now, Emma. We can stop the Home Office and start to heal."

"I know."

"So what do you need from me? Tell me and I'll…tell me."

"Just the sound of your voice, Mom," Emma admits. "I just need to hear you."

"I'm here. But are you sure Regina is safe inside with Whale? Or her with him?"

"I'm not sure that either of them were safe inside with me. I wanted to hurt him so much, and it was so easy." She looks down at her hands. "I don't want it to be."

"You make your own choices, Emma," Snow reminds her, a sense of urgency beneath her emphatic words. "You've lived that way your entire life and –"

"Have I? Seems to me a lot of the choices were made for me."

"You're living that way now. We can choose how we handle the Home Office."

"You mean we can be Team Good and just scold them with our words."

"Emma."

"I know; that wasn't fair. I just…she has a mark, Mom. Over her heart." Though Snow can't
possibly see it and there's no real purpose for it, Emma places her hand over her own heart, almost as if in sympathy. She continues with, "Whale literally put his hand into her chest and ripped it out of her. The same way that magic would be done with his weird science and he tortured her that way only instead of it just being mental like it is for most people, there's this horrible scar there and you know she sees it every time she takes her clothes off to shower."

"I doubt it's the only one," Snow says softly, her voice almost too low to hear.

"That doesn't make it better."

"The fact that she's alive and fighting and refusing to stop, that makes it better."

"I know. I…I know." There's a thoughtful pause and then Emma asks, "Could you have endured what she went through? Could you have made it three years?"

The response is immediate and firm, "No, but very few people in this world or any other could. Regina is…she's special in what she's able to take. I always thought myself strong because I was able to survive in the woods and on the run, but she went through so much – some of her doing – but never was willing to give up."

"That's what they want from her," Emma notes with a frown. She stands up and starts to pace in front of the wall, her back to the tunnel leading underground.

"Well, we both know that will never happen; Regina will never surrender to them."

"You sound so sure."

"I am. Aren't you?"

"She just wants to be happy."

"It's what all of us want, Emma, but we can't get there without fighting for it."

"Yeah, I'm –" Emma cuts off abruptly as a massive shadow overcomes her, the sheer size of it dwarfing that of her own. When she spins around to face the newcomer, she sees a large man of almost six and a half feet standing there, his cold blue eyes glimmering as he smirks at her. He's holding a knife in his hand and slapping the blade lightly against his palm as he stares at her, the red scars beneath each of his eyes reminding her of a story that Regina had told to Owen about a wicked man that she'd cut at with her hands to try to get away from.

She has a feeling she's about to meet that man.

"Sheriff Swan," he greets, like he's just about to ask her for the time of day. His stance is almost casual (though she perceives an aggressive energy about him that has her immediately on edge) and his expression is almost pleasant, but in a way that tells her that he could flip from this to something far darker in seconds.

"Do I know you?" she asks, frowning deeply because no, she doesn't know him.

"Emma? Is everything all right there? Who is that?" Snow calls out.

"Oh, I'm certain that you've heard of me, and being as that you've been asking all around about me
and my associates, it seemed time to make an introduction."

"You're from the Home Office."

"John to be specific," he grins. "And from the horrified look on your face, I'm guessing that our dear broken former queen has told you all about my work."

"Yeah, she's mentioned you a time or two," Emma notes, her eyes flickering around as she tries to figure a way out of this new mess she's found herself in.

"Excellent," he replies. "That'll get us past the boring pleasantries part quickly."

"Emma! Emma, run!" Snow calls out, her voice high and sharp and frightened.

"I can't," Emma replies into the phone. "There's nowhere to go. I'm probably going to need some help here." She drops the phone from her hand, then, and backs up towards the memorial wall, trying to give herself some space to reach behind her and grab her gun. It's the only weapon she has on her besides her fists, and as strong as she is, if this is the John that had tortured Regina for three long years, then she's pretty sure that her size will be of little opposition to him.

"You do need help," John admits. "So do we. We're going to help each other."

"Yeah, I don't think so," Emma answers as she pulls her gun out and aims it right at his face, the barrel remarkably steady considering how anxious she truly is.

"She's going to try and shoot me," he laughs, looking over her shoulder. "Not falling for it, buddy."

"I admit, I'm not a very nice man, but I'm not a liar," he tells Emma with a shrug as he looks behind her again, as if to again indicate that he has a partner there.

That's when her instincts – the ones that have kept her alive for so long and in so many bad places – start to scream at her and she knows that there is, in fact, someone standing behind her. It's a rock and a hard place and she tries to turn away from John and still keep him in front of her, but there's nowhere to go.

She feels a needle jam hard into the side of her neck and then there's something cold running through her, and then there's nothing as she falls, turning around as she does so that she can look into the darkly amused eyes of Wendy Darling.

The last thing she observes – the last thing she sees – is her cell phone on the hard cement ground, the screen still on and her mother still calling out for her. Screaming at her and begging her to just hold on. Promising her that they'll come for her.

She sees John pick the phone up, hears him say, "Tell the Queen that we will be waiting for her; she can end this if she wants to. Let her know that." Then John drops the phone in front of Emma's eyes and crushes it into pieces with his boot.
Emma's eyes close after that, and then there's just the shadows of her own terrified mind.

His hands are bent and mangled, but there are lines for every action including this one – curiously enough, for all the lines that John and Wendy had crossed during their three-year-long torture of her, they'd never shattered her hands past the point of repair and now she thinks that has everything to do with the magic that they need from her – and thus far, she has stayed away from anything that can't be undone with either magic (though who he would get it from is a question she doesn't see ever getting answered) or exceptional science and medicine.

He's hurt and whimpering and in so much pain, but this is all just the slightest and almost glancing taste of what she had experienced, and oh she could do so much more to him now that she can really feel her magic once again (rage and fear, she thinks bitterly as the power swirls around beneath her skin), but she finds that she doesn't want to; as she looks at his hands, she realizes that she doesn't want to make him pay as she had because all of that has just led to this.

"Victor," Regina says softly, standing straight and tall above him now.

"I've told you everything I know," he insists, his voice breaking. She thinks about three years and every kind of torture known to man and how she'd never begged for them to stop when they'd been on top of her because that would have been letting them win and preventing them from that had been all that she'd had left.

She thinks about humiliations that most sane and normal people would never truly understand or if they even tried to comprehend her terrors, they would likely think of them as insignificant compared to being whipped and brutalized. She thinks of terrible things such as having her body be cleaned up after attacks – be they physical or sexual - by a woman with rough hands and unsympathetic eyes. She thinks of forcing back tears even then, refusing to let anyone see how much she was fighting for the will to keep fighting; turns out that they'd seen that fight, anyway and that had been what they had been trying to strip away from her.

But they hadn't stripped that away from her – no one ever has - and she tells herself that they won't do so now, either. Because of her earlier defiance, they had been forced to release her back into the real world for seven years and then been made to wait for her to find her way home. Now she's back in Storybrooke – in the town that she had created – and she won't let them defeat her here.

Not when she's finally found the family that she's wanted for so very long.

Not when she's finally found things like forgiveness, hope and friendship and perhaps even a chance to do as Daniel had once begged her to – perhaps when this is over, she can even try to love again as he had always wanted her to.

"You haven't," Regina replies. "I'm sure you know so much more even if you don't realize it, but I don't care, anymore. I have everything I need from you."

"So kill me," he taunts, spitting angrily at her as he speaks.

"I already told that you that I wouldn't be killing you, and I meant it; you will have a second chance, Victor, just as I did. And just as I did, you will have to learn to rebuild yourself all on your own. " She looks down at the metal cuffs, a finger once again running across the surface. "Most of the time, they had me bound down with either leather or rope. He especially loved rope, did you
know that?"

He blinks up at her, not understanding where she's going with this.

"No, I imagine that that's one of the things you truly didn't know. They were your bosses and they
told you where to go and how high to jump. You were never an especially blessed man when it
came to morals and this arrangement provided you with everything you could ever want –
vengeance and research ability."

"I did what I had to do to take care of what mattered to me."

"I know," she agrees with an odd smile that makes him feel as though he's lost to her in a way he
doesn't quite understand. "And considering what you did to me and what you put on my son's back,
I should claim the same and finish what I started here, but somewhere along the way, I really did
change for the better, I think, and I don't even care if you do or don't heal enough to use these
wretched hands again. I only care that after today, Victor, I never see your face again."

She moves away from him, her steps painful as she slows down and her body recalls her aches and
pains. He calls after her, sounding frantic, "What are you doing? I need help. My hands need help.
Are you just going to leave me here?"

"For now," Regina answers coolly. "When your bosses have been defeated – and they will be
defeated and this town is safe and secure once again, Snow and Emma or whomever would like to
can come and deal with you – I would expect that the plan will be to exile you from Storybrooke
permanently, but I can't say as that I especially care what they do with you as long as you are away
from me. I meant it when I said that you now have the same second chance at becoming more that
I was given, but I also meant it when I said that I don't ever want to see you again. If I do and you
come at me again or you even think to hurt anyone I care about again, I will destroy you in ways
beyond your comprehension."

"You're not more," he tells her, shaking his head frantically. "You're still evil."

"You're wrong," she says simply. She starts to turn away again, a hand on the wall to steady
herself; she hates that he can see her weakness of body right now, but then again, she figures that
that's the last thing that he's really focused on.

"You can't just leave me here," he insists. "I need to –"

"Use the bathroom, dear?" Regina smiles wickedly at that, smirking at him as she faces him, her
eyes flickering down to his crotch and then back up. "We all learn to deal with our humiliations.
We all learn how little we actually are. I did. Now, it's your turn. Don't worry, Victor, you'll get
used to the smell after a few days."

"Days?"

"I guess we'll see how long it takes to defeat your allies," Regina answers with a disinterested
shrug. She then again turns to leave, stopping by the door only to say, "He used rope on me
because people have an impulse to fight back, even when they're not fighters by design. I am a
fighter by nature and by the creation of many hands including my own and I think maybe you were
right when you said before that I had still been fighting against my captors even when I wasn't
actively choosing to do so. I was fighting because it was all I knew to do."
"I don't understand."

"That's because for as wicked a man as you are and for as evil as I am, we still think differently than they do. We think with emotion – even you, a so-called man of science – but they tested me with logic. I was fighting back even then because I didn't – I don't - know how to do anything except fight, and John knew that so he used rope to restrain me knowing that every time I pulled against it, I would do damage to myself. He knew that I couldn't help myself – that I would never learn how to stop hurting myself even when it was so simple – and he was right for so very long. But he's not right anymore, Victor, and I am done hurting myself."

She meets his eyes, makes sure that he understands what she's saying – that she won't let her desire to make him pay be what drives her back to the monster that she had once been, she won't let him be what causes her to hurt herself all over again – and then she nods her head in satisfaction and steps out of the little secret room, moving up the tunnel and up towards the sunlight where Emma is.

TBC...
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the wait. It's been a bit. This is part 1 of the 2 part grand finale. So one more and an epilogue.

Warnings: Violence, language, drugs and talk of suicide.

Thanks for all of the kind words. You know what you're in for and I appreciate all the interest.

As always, I can be found at sgtmac7 over on Tumblr.

The sunlight still hurts her sometimes.

Even seven years after her captivity, Regina still has moments where the light from above is simply too bright and her head feels as though it's about to explode. She's taken to carrying a pair of stylish sunglasses in her purse or pocket for moments like these, and so, when she steps out of the underground tunnel and emerges both from the metaphorical darkness as well as the actual one, she slips them on.

And then looks around for Emma who should be up here somewhere.

Emma, who has been strong and steady and has been the friend that perhaps she has never deserved. She tells herself that so much has changed and perhaps the wickedness in her past can finally be put there. She tells herself that maybe once they deal with the Home Office, she can perhaps start to live again.

Maybe tug on a few threads that have recently presented themselves.

Assuming, of course, that she's reading the situation and the signs correctly, and honestly, that's the biggest fear that exists there because when Regina starts to think about things – starts to really think about what appears to be more than a simple just friends kind of interest from Emma – she finds herself wondering why exactly that would ever be there. Why would Emma ever want something more than just a jogging partner and perhaps a roommate of her former enemy?

She pushes these thoughts away for now; there's little that she can do with them and what matters most is finding Emma and talking to her about their next step.

So she rises up from under the ground and the cement and she looks around.

But what she sees – what makes her heart seize before it drops like a ball of weighted lead to the bottom of her stomach – is Snow and David racing up from the parking lot, both looking far more panicked than she has ever seen them.

Except for the day that their precious little baby girl had been taken away from them by a woman whose heart had been corroded and darkened by hatred.

She closes her eyes for just a moment and tries to steady herself because that was so long ago and
the past is the past and everyone including Emma is -

"Where is she?" David demands, his face flushed red and his gun in his hand as he rushes up to her, his movements large and clumsy and overly aggressive.

"Emma?" Regina says stupidly, blinking against the sunlight that isn't actually breaking through her glasses but feels like it is because suddenly her head is pounding and buzzing all at once. She looks around in confusion; Emma should be up here and she should standing here and why isn't Emma up here? "I…"

David is on her before she can even think, his hands grabbing at her shoulders and shaking them almost violently. "Where is she?" he growls at her, his blue eyes dark and ferocious. There's something terrifying there, something scared.

"David," she thinks she hears Snow say, but it's all white noise, distortions. The world is suddenly buzzing around her and she thinks she sees walls forming.

"What did you let them do to her?" David continues, still shaking her, seemingly ignorant of the fact that Regina is not fighting back, oblivious to the way that she's gone pale and how she's almost trembling in a way that's utterly unlike her.

Or at least unlike the woman he had once known.

But right now, all David Nolan is thinking about is his only child and what Snow had told him about the terrifying conversation that she'd overheard between Emma and the bastard who'd confronted her. All he's wondering is if the same monsters who had tortured Regina have now gotten ahold of his daughter and plan to do the exact same thing to her. It's making him see bright red, and though part of him is vaguely aware of what he's doing – and that it's something that he doesn't want to be doing – he can't seem to stop himself from shaking the woman standing in front of him because she might know where Emma is and –

"David!" Snow shouts and then she's grabbing him and ripping him away from Regina. She's smaller than David by far, but she throws all of her strength behind shoving her husband to the side and then stepping between him and Regina.

"Snow," he says, blinking in confusion as the fury and blind rage drains away from him.

"Stop it," she demands. "Just…no, this isn't Regina's fault and you know it."

For a moment, David looks stunned and then he's rapidly glancing between his wife and Regina and suddenly a horrified kind of recognition comes over him because he's staring right at Regina and she's just not in the moment. Wherever she is – whatever terror she's suddenly flashing back to – it's because of him.

"I'm sorry," he breathes, and then takes another step towards Regina. "I'm –"

"No," Snow inserts. "Let me…go see if you can find any sign of Emma, anything that they may have left behind. We need…we need to be smart about this." She wants to say more, but she understands. In spite of the fear rushing through her – for her daughter and for the stunned woman standing in front of her – Snow understands why her husband had come apart. Emma is their whole world, the child that they'd lost for so very long and even the fear of that is too much.

But that doesn't excuse what he'd done, and the sadness she sees in his eyes – the anger at himself – tells her that he more than anyone else is aware of it.
He nods his head slowly and opens his mouth to speak, but Snow shakes her head and it's the still vacant look in Regina's eyes that convinces him that now isn't the time for apologies. He will apologize the moment he can, as much as he can – even more so when Emma is home safe and sound – but just not yet.

She wouldn't hear him, anyway.

He moves away, towards the benches, leaving Snow with Regina.

Letting their history hopefully be enough to help them all through this nightmare.

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She's in a car, she realizes. More accurately, she's in the musty trunk of one.

It's not her first time, unfortunately, but Emma can't say that she's any more fond of this experience than she'd been of the last…several. Oh, her days as a bounty hunter hadn't always been glamorous, she thinks wryly (even in spite of her very serious predicament) and they'd led to some interesting journeys.

But this isn't one of those.

The two creeps that have her now are the ones who brutalized Regina for reasons that she doesn't entirely grasp beyond that they'd wanted her magic.

For what, though?

Emma has a terrible idea that she's about to find out.

She feels the car come to an abrupt and slightly nauseating stop, and then she hears the sound of footsteps. There's a click and then the lid pops open.

"Miss Swan," John says with an overly large smile. Her stomach rolls and she feels a surge of anger at the use of the name – oddly, she feels like him using it is taking yet another thing from Regina only this one belongs to her as well.

A hundred retorts come to her mind, some of them are even clever despite the strange drug that she feels making its way through her. She holds her tongue, though because she knows deep down that her capture has little to do with her and everything to do with Regina – they plan to use her to get to Regina.

So she has to keep her wits about her.

And not give them anything that they want.

But that doesn't mean that she can't glare up at him.

"I figured her for more of a talker," Wendy notes as she comes around, her heels clicking against what sounds like…wood? Emma frowns and tries to look past John to see where she is but he's a big man and all she can see is the blue sky.

"Oh, I imagine our girl here is quite the talker with the right encouragement," John chuckles before he reaches down and runs a knuckle over Emma's left cheek.

If he'd been expecting her to flinch away at the touch, she imagines that her lack of response must frustrate him, but he's hardly the first person to try to intimidate her in this manner. She'd been a
prisoner and a woman in a man's job and she's fully aware of exactly what bastards like the man above her will do when they think that their sole function in life is to frighten, torment and destroy others.

"Well, then," Wendy says with a sadistic grin. "Let's get to encouraging her."

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"Regina," Snow says, a hand on her elbow. "Look at me. You're safe."

The older woman doesn't respond and that's almost more frightening than anything else because she's breathing rapidly and her eyes are wide and shocked and God, whatever she's seeing is making her shake so terribly.

So Snow does the only thing she can do: she wraps her arms around Regina and hugs her tightly and says, "You're not with them. You're home. With your family."

Regina lets out a whimper and flinches - not away from Snow, but rather away from the screaming ghosts in her own shattered mind - and suddenly her hands are trembling so fiercely. She suddenly jerks back like she's been struck and it's almost violent enough to shake Snow, but Snow finds a way to hold on tighter.

And says, "Please come back to me. I need you."

There's a long moment and then she sees Regina blink and it's clear that she's fighting her way back, but it's still not enough to get there.

Snow thinks about what she knows about Regina, thinks about the one thing that even in her darkest days had been true: Regina always protects what means the most to her. She always protects those who protect her.

And in this case, both of those include the Sheriff of Storybrooke.

"Emma needs you," she says gently. "The people who took you have her now and they will try to do what they did to you if you don't help us get her back. We can stop them, but we need you," Regina's eyes flicker up to her and Snow smiles as much as she can manage considering the current situation. "There you are." Her hand cups Regina's cheek. "Are you all right?"

"I...I think so. I'm sorry. I...don't know what came over me?" Regina replies, clearly ashamed. Then, as if remembering, "Emma? She – what happened?"

"I...I heard her get abducted by the man...the one who I think had...had you."

"John," Regina murmurs. Her hand goes up to her temple and she starts absently scratching at it as a migraine starts to thrum just beneath the surface. And of course, then there's the burn of her damaged nerves, radiating up her body.

"Nothing," David says softly as he comes back over, his steps slow. He holds up Emma's shattered cell phone. "Except for this, but I don't think it will help us."

"Probably not," Snow agrees. "Regina –"

"Yes," she says immediately, but almost mechanically.

"What are you thinking about?" Snow prompts.
"The games they play," Regina replies. Her eyes flicker up and meet David's and almost immediately, he opens his mouth as if to apologize but then she's running right off the top of his attempt to speak and she's saying, "Tell me everything."

"You mean about what I heard?"

"Yes," the former queen answers coolly, drawing herself up and steadying her shoulders. Her eyes hard, she says, "I need to know what they want with her."

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Emma fights back.

It's what she knows how to do.

It's all she knows how to do.

She thinks about what these two monsters did to Regina and to her family. She thinks about Neal and all the closure that she'll never really get to have with him.

She thinks about Ruby and Henry and how Storybrooke had appeared to heal itself after the bloody siege of ten years ago, but in truth, it never really had.

When John lifts her from the trunk of the car, she scratches and she bites and she digs her nails in as hard as she can, drawing blood wherever she can.

John's clearly both surprised and not surprised by her fight and he even grins as he struggles to hold her, but then she catches him across the eye – in a place where years earlier Regina had as well – and his patience snaps and then he's slamming her down to the hard cement and laughing when she gasps in pain.

"That sounded like something broke," he taunts as she rolls to her side, a hand over her stomach and her eyes tightly closed against the pain rushing forward.

"John, dear, don't dally; we're on a timeline," Wendy orders. "We have a present to deliver to our Queen." She chuckles then, the sound so cold and sadistic. "I expect she'll be finding our other gift for her soon. Do you think she'll enjoy it?"

John glances over at her and then shrugs, "I only wish I'd been the one to get to do it," he replies. "It would have been nice to be the one to kill that smarmy fuck."

"Next time," Wendy promises as she steps away from John and Emma.

"You think he'll make it out of there?" John asks as he pushes Emma down again, his knee shoved hard into her back. You know we can't let him live."

"We told him to come right back here," she reminds him. "But I think we both know that he won't be able to pass up a chance at the Queen. And she'll have to do whatever she must to protect herself as always. I imagine that she'll take care of our problem for us. Now, up with the girl; we have much work to do." She says this over her shoulder as she walks away, her heels clicking against wood.

"Who'd you kill?" Emma demands as John grabs her by the hair and pulls her up, yanking her shoulders back so as to make the pain of her broken ribs worse.
"That's not for you to worry about," John tells her, his mouth (and hot tobacco smelling breath) close to her ear as he runs a hand down her abdomen, resting it for a moment over her broken ribs before applying enough pressure to make her gasp. "The only thing that you have to worry about anymore is making sure that you do me a big favor and put on a convincing show for our dear Regina."

"If you think that I'll help you –"

"Oh, I'm hoping you won't. I'm counting on your resistance. I'm counting you to fight back and struggle and tell her to stay away, it just makes everything that much more impressive and emotional. And the more impressive and emotional you are, the easier it will be to get her to just… give in finally. Because she might have the need to always survive for herself, but for those she cares about – for those she loves and this is what this is all about isn't? Well, I'm guessing that for you and for her little boy, she'll be falling down on her knees for you. For us."

"What the hell do you want from her?" Emma demands, her teeth clenched.

He grins and then runs his hand across his face, his touch making her think of all of the stories that Regina had told her, of all the torments suffered.

"Everything."

*** ***

She leads them down the dark hallway, back towards Victor's lab where he will most certainly still be tied to the table, probably still whining in pain because of his shattered wrists. But if he thought that pain was bad, he's going to find out how much worse it can get unless he tells them where they can find Emma.

Regina's done fucking around. Not that she ever really was to begin with, but she's done playing with these monsters. She's lived with them in her mind for so many years and she's felt every mark they left on body a thousand times over, but this is her breaking point. This is them going after what matters to her child.

This is them going after the family that has given her a reason to believe that one day she might finally find forgiveness for her sins; this is them going after the woman who has given her hope that eventually she might find happiness again.

She won't let them take that away.

"Victor," she calls out as she steps in, her hand lifting to flip on the lights. Which is weird because she doesn't recall having turned them off, but maybe –

"Oh my God," Snow whispers.

"I don't think he's going to be able to help us," David says softly, earning a hard look from Regina because really, had any comment been necessary there?

Still, he's right.

Victor won't be helping anyone – friend or foe – ever again.

He's still tied to the table, but it's more like an autopsy slab than an examination one, and it looks like whomever had done this had conducted their postmortem on him while he'd been still alive; his eyes are open in terror and pain, but there's a long Y-cut down his middle and what used to be
inside of him is now outside.

It's messy and amateurish, like someone had just vented all of his rage on him.

And God, there's blood...everywhere.

Regina looks at her watch. Fifteen minutes has passed since she'd left him here.

"These people have my daughter," Snow says softly, tears in her eyes.

"We'll get Emma back," Regina promises, turning to look at her. "Today."

"No, you won't," a voice says coldly. "The only way you two will ever see each other again is when they toss her body into the same grave that you're in."

David reacts first, his gun out and quickly trained on the wild haired man as he steps out of the shadows, his clothes streaked and smeared with Victor's blood.

"Owen," Regina breathes. She can feel Snow hovering close to her all of the sudden, anxiety rolling off the younger woman in thick crashing waves.

Owen holds up his hands, one of them still holding a knife stained red. "That felt good. Really...really good," he admits. "But I think this will feel better."

"You take another step and I will bury every bullet in this gun in you," David growls. "In fact, I might do that, anyway. Where did they take my daughter?"

"Back to the beginning," Owen answers with a grin, his voice delivered in a high pitched almost hysterical giggle. "It's a perfect little circle isn't it, Regina?"

"Put the knife down, Owen. You know you're not going to win this one."

"We'll see." He steps forward and almost immediately, a shot rings out and he falls with a loud shout to the ground, a hand over the bloody hole in his knee.

"David," Snow whispers, eyes wide as she sees the hatred in her husband's.

He'd fought so hard to get his family back and what she sees there tells her that he will do whatever it takes to make sure that he doesn't lose it again. But it's a slippery slope and just minutes ago, he'd gone after Regina for the same reason.

It hadn't been okay then.

It might not be okay now.

She doesn't want blood on his hands.

Apparently Regina is thinking the same thing because she steps in front of David and his aim and moves towards Owen. "What do you want to happen here?"

"I want you to die," Owen hisses at her.

"Not by your hand."

"Then let me die."
"Not by my hand. Not if I can help it."

She stands up to walk away from him, her mind already elsewhere, back on Emma and how to get to her and get her out of this nightmare but then she hears him screaming and knows he's rising up to grab at her. She hears Snow cry out for her and then she's turning and her magic is flaring and there's a loud crack as his neck snaps and breaks.

She hears his body hit the ground and it might as well be the echo of a gunshot.

Because apparently she can't help it.

Apparently this story was always meant to end this way.

She was always going to be the beginning and end of this boy's life.

Only her need to find Emma – to make all of this right – keeps Regina up on her feet. The pain rushing through her body is excruciating and her head is on fire.

But none of that matters.

All that matters is finding Emma.

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Emma spits blood out (again) and looks upwards, smiling slightly despite the fact that her heart is pounding and this is quite literally the last place on earth that she wants to be. Her arms hurt from being held over her head (just as the trip in the trunk of the car hadn't been a first for her, this isn't either, but she doesn't like it any better just because she's been here before). She thinks she's been in this position for about an hour or so, but time is moving in a way that she can't even begin to gauge and though she knows it hasn't been that long, she wonders how much worse it had been for Regina to lose time over the course of three years.

"You're back," John says with a grin. The red marks under his eyes – ones made by Regina's hands and by the frightened and furious nails of his other victims - are bright and gruesome, made so much worse by the creepy nature of his smile.

"I was just taking a small nap," Emma answers as she adjusts against the rope restraints, hiding her anger at herself for passing out after the last round of him punching her in the chest with his balled up fists. "What were you saying again?"

"You're a cheeky one," Wendy notes. "I can see why our Queen likes you."

Emma clenches her jaw, refusing to talk to them about Regina again.

"She's getting quiet again," John notes, his knuckles trailing over Emma's cheek.

"Mm. She probably thinks that will matter. You know, silence didn't really help Regina. She still ended up where she did. How she did. Broken and pathetic and whimpering to a shrink about the monster she finally accepted herself to be. Do you know the wonderful things we found in that man's files?" She laughs at that. "Three years we had her and barely got her talking, but she spilled to him."

"How did you get like this?" Emma asks and it's a clawing vicious echo of an old conversation with the woman that she now very much wants to keep far away from her, but she can't help but wonder how a girl that Neal had once adored had become a monster who could torture and kill
with such ease. Regina had allowed herself to become exactly such a person and now she has all of
the scars of her tumble into darkness, but Wendy seems immune, almost casually fascinated by the
ease with which she is able to control and even determine life and death.

And the disturbing pain in-between.

"We all get changed by our experiences," Wendy says. "I faced a demon and lost and then I was
given a chance to become better than I ever imagined possible and I took it. And I made it my sole
purpose in life – as many lives as needed – to ensure that what happened to me with Pan could
never happen to anyone else."

"You think torturing and maiming and killing is what will protect others?"

"I think destroying magic is what will protect others."

"Magic is elemental."

"Yes," Wendy agrees. "And elements can be destroyed by other elements."

"Why not just have focused on taking down the bad guys?"

"Like the woman that you think that maybe you've fallen in love with?" John asks with a smirk. He
says the word "love" like it's a joke.

Like it's something sick and disgusting. A perversion of the natural order.

"She's changed," Emma replies, refusing to speak to his words.

"Because I changed her," Wendy reminds her.

"You destroyed her; she rebuilt herself. Into something better. Good."

"She has no good in her. All just dark magic and lies."

Emma doesn't reply to that, just stares back at them.

"And back to silence again. But here's the thing, love: if your precious Queen is as good as you
think she is now and if she cares for you as much as you care for her, then she will most certainly
come to your rescue. And if you're right and she does, then there's only one way that this can end.
With her surrender."

"I won't let her do that."

"You won't have a choice," Wendy tells her, lifting a hand up to trail it down Emma's arm in a
gesture that would be almost kind if not for the fact that she's clearly trying to taunt Emma with the
bizarrely gentle nature of the strange touch.

And again, Emma finds herself reminded of Regina's terrible stories. She finds herself reminded of
tales about sharp fingernails being pressed into open and bloody wounds and of being touched
simply to let her know she could be.

"When she does come," Emma answers, accepting that yes, they're probably right and Regina will
come for her (though hopefully not all by herself; hopefully her parents will be there, too). "Then
we're both going to kick your asses."

Wendy laughs at that and then looks over at the mini-cam that has been staring blankly at them
since Emma had been dragged into this wretched and terrible room. "I think it's about time to turn that on. And give the Queen her show."

"I was hoping you would say that," John chuckles and then as if to show off his happiness with his bosses' decision, he pulls back and slams his fist into Emma's gut as hard he can, smiling as she grunts and shudders against her restraints.

Emma sees Wendy turn on the mini-cam, sees the red blinking light showing record and then all she feels is the pain as John performs for the Queen.

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She can barely walk by the time they get to Gold's shop and though she's furious at herself for needing it, she doesn't decline David's arm. She knows that David is trying to apologize for what he'd done earlier, but she's just trying to stay up.

"What happened?" Rumple asks immediately, for once dispensing with the games. His brow is creased and it's clear that he's concerned about something.

"They have Emma," Snow answers as she takes Regina from David and guides her over towards the counter so that she can lean her bodyweight against it.

"Victor is dead," Regina adds. "They want me back. We need to know why."

"I can answer that," Rumple replies grimly. "They want your magic."

"I know that part," Regina snaps as a shudder of pain goes through her hip and her legs almost give out from beneath her. She's come to understand that the hurt gets worse when her mental state turns bad, but that's little consolation now.

Because mind over matter only works when your mind is calm and centered.

Hers is anything but that.

"They want your magic to destroy all other magic in this world," Rumple answers and though his voice is soft, there's just a hint of fear beneath his words. He's not a man who scares easily and so it's this understanding that causes her own fear.

"Is that possible?"

"If they have all of it all the way down the cellular level, yes," he nods. "That's what she's been after for the last ten years. You have a very rare kind of magic within you, Regina. It's elemental, natural and strong through practice and use."

"But until I came back here, I hadn't used it in years."

"You can't unlearn what you've learned. Your magic was just...asleep within you, dampened by your fear of it and lack of trust in your abilities or desire to use them again. Which is why they did what they did to wake it up again," Rumple informs her as he moves around to where she is and lightly settles his hands on her. It's an intimate gesture, but for once, it's not an intimidating one. She feels curious warmth spread up her hip and through body and knows that it's the equivalent of a mild magical painkiller but without the mind-altering effects.

"Could they be trying that with Emma right now?" David asks.
"I doubt they're even aware that she has magic within her. Back when Regina was kidnapped, Miss Swan was just coming into the understanding that she had it, but to my knowledge, she never pursued training or use of it. And even if she somehow shows them that she has it now, they wouldn't be able to obtain it quickly or fully. They worked on Regina for years to get her to where they wanted her to be and still didn't succeed. So this is their second plan to force the first.

"I still don't understand," Regina says, standing up straight and testing out the numbness she feels in her hip. It's odd, but it's a workable situation. "How would stealing my magic – even all the way down as you say – destroy all magic?"

"It's that powerful," Rumple states, that grim tone back in his voice again. "True elemental magic is called such because it is part of nature. My magic comes from a blade – most magic comes from artifacts such as wands or books. You had to learn to use those things to focus and channel your abilities, but you always had the capability of being able to cast with just your mind or hands. It was your lack of commitment to the darker intents of your pure magic that slowed you down."

"So they steal my magic –"

"No, they tried that with what Owen did to you. Then they abducted you and tortured you so that they could try to make you give it to them by force and they're now going to try to make you give it them by choice. It's that choice which will make the surrender of your magic that much more…catastrophic," he says.

"Because my magic can destroy all magic."

"If you give them your magic, it's magic in its more pure form and it can be used to cause a sort of…implosion of magic throughout this world," Rumple states.

"This has happened before?"

"In most worlds that are now completely without magic; this one never was."

"So she doesn't give it them," Snow says. "And we find a different way."

"You must," Rumple tells her. "And not just for me or for you."

"Not for you?" Regina counters. "When is anything not for you?"

"Consider magic as being part of the ecosystem of this world. It's like the worms in the earth. They're seldom noticed, but they are essential. And yes, I would be extremely…distraught…about the loss of my magic, but it wouldn't kill me."

"You're saying the eradication of magic could cause more death."

"Besides just yours. And yes, you would need to die to surrender it."

"Suicide," she says dully.

"That's what they've been pushing you towards for ten years now."

"I know," she says softly. "I just never knew why."

"No one is dying today," David says. "No one else."

"Don't make promises you can't keep," Rumple scolds. "And this one you can't."
David doesn't reply to that, just glares at him.

"Can you help us find Emma?" Snow asks. "Can you help us stop them?"

"We can do a locator spell, but I'll need an item of hers that means something to her –" He gestures towards the broken phone in David's hand. "More than that."

"I'll call Henry," Regina says softly. "He'll know what means the most to her."

"You want to involve Henry in this?" David asks, clear surprise in his eyes. Of all the things he would have expected from Regina, this is the very last of them. She has been as fiercely protective since her return of her boy as she was before she'd left and it's hard to imagine why she would want him in the middle of this.

"No," Regina admits, sounding terribly tired and even a bit sad. "But we're hardly going to be able to hide what happened to her from him. And he's not a little boy, anymore. He knows what I went through. He can do this much for us." She looks over at Rumple. "And then he stays here with you while we go rescue Emma."

"You don't want my assistance in your fight?" Rumple queries, cocking his head.

"I think we both know that your desire to avenge Baelfire could blind you to our purpose," Regina says pointedly. "So for your son, protect mine. And his."

Rumple blinks out his agreement, no other part of him twitching. But then he says quietly, "You know that you can't give them what they want, don't you?"

"For you or for me?"

"Isn't the same? You'll be dead and I'll be without magic."

"Right now the plan is to find her and bring her home," Regina says softly, looking over at David and Snow. "Everything else will fall into place as it will."

It's an answer that means nothing and the way Rumple is frowning at her in response suggests that he knows as much. But he just reaches out and hands Regina the receiver for the phone on the counter and says, "Call your boy."

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Her head drops back against the wall and she gasps as a sharp flash of pain explodes behind her eyes. The actual physical abuse stopped a little while ago – Wendy had sent her thug off to deliver the videotape and now it's just her and this terribly proper and incredibly vile woman – but every part of her hurts.

A lot.

Which is kind of embarrassing because this isn't even a percentage of what Regina had gone through and yet she's already feeling completely worked over.

"Are you resting well, Miss Swan? Getting ready for our next adventure?"

"I was resting. In the quiet. And then you started babbling again. What is it about bad guys and their ridiculous need to never shut the fuck up. I mean, do you guys really think that your super weapon is boredom or something? It would explain why you always end up getting your asses beat
all over the place."

"You're a brave girl," Wendy says as she steps over to her. "So confident."

"I have a lot of experience with watching monsters like you go down."

"Monsters like me," Wendy muses. "And yet you're becoming quite friends – perhaps even something disturbingly more than that – with the worst of them."

"What she was isn't what she is," Emma snaps back. "She actually bothered to try to become a better person. She took what you pieces of garbage did to her and she tried to become something worthwhile. That's who Regina Mills is."

Wendy laughs coldly. "You have no idea who she truly is. But don't worry, my dear sweet girl, I'm going to show you. You see, we do much more than just make the Queen bleed or cry. Sometimes, it was entertaining to let her talk."

"I know everything that Regina did."

"Doubtful. But you're about to." She crosses the room over to the video camera and then turns it around so that view screen is visible to Emma. "You see, I had darling Victor keep an eye on the two of you and he told me about this strange growing relationship between you and how protective you've become over her. I thought that before you make any decisions that might affect your son –"

"Her son."

Wendy smiles tightly at that. "That you should hear from her lips what she did to you." She turns the camera on and pushes play. "I must admit that this is just one session. There were many more over three years. But this one is just for you."

The screen flickers on and though it's small, she can plainly make out Regina sitting on a chair in the middle of the room, wearing a torn hospital gown. Her hair is shorn all the way the scalp and there are cuts and bruises everywhere on her.

"Hello, Regina," a voice says; Emma recognizes it immediately as belonging to John who is apparently sitting somewhere off-screen. She focuses on Regina who looks like she's bizarrely drugged and yet in considerable pain. It's the strange metal prods attached to her fingers, though, that get Emma's attention.

They look like they're some kind of device meant to deliver electricity; like the one that had been found here in this cannery after Regina had been kidnapped.

"Let's get this over with," Regina gasps out, shuddering against the apparent coldness of the room but refusing to bring her arms together in order to warm herself. It's like she refuses to give her captor the satisfaction of it.

"Soon enough. We're going to talk about Emma Swan today. I know she's been on your mind quite a bit lately if your night-time delusions are any indication."

"My night-time delusions are brought on my your drugs. Shall we talk about Cookie Monster as well?" she asks. And then she looks curiously to the side.

Like maybe she's seeing someone there that shouldn't be there.

Perhaps the Henry that Regina had seen standing beside her for three years.
"Perhaps. But today we want to talk about what you did to her. The many terrible ways that you ruined her life. Even before it started. Now you know how this works: I'm going to ask you questions and if you lie, you'll be shocked and since the drug in your system will make you incapable of your typical kind of easy sociopathic fabrication, well, you should start with the truth. Or don't; I admit that it's rather entertaining listening to you scream in pain." He chuckles coldly at this.

"I don't care what's on this tape," Emma tells Wendy, tilting her head away and closing her eyes against the image of a badly wounded Regina on the screen.

She'd read the report, absorbed the descriptions of what they'd done to her, but she'd specifically avoided the pictures because she hadn't wanted to see how much a human body can be wrecked; the only thing preventing that now is the thin hospital gown that they have Regina in, but it doesn't hide her face or arms.

It doesn't stop Emma from being forced to notice the ugly and disturbingly fresh wounds that caused the scars that now litter Regina's body.

"You can close your eyes, but you can't un-hear what you're about to hear."

Emma just glares in response.

And tries desperately not to listen as John forces Regina to talk about the past.

About a child that she'd almost murdered.

About a would-be lover that she had murdered in a jealous fit.

About an attempt to frame Snow White for murder.

About a poisoned apple fritter that likely would have resulted in her death.

About a plan to mass murder everyone.

Every detail is laid out. Clean and cold. Meant to cause maximum revulsion.

And then John asks her if she'd considered murdering Emma at any other time.

"Yes," the exhausted and worn down Regina on the tape says, her head lolling backwards as she fiercely shakes beneath the weight of repeated shocks (sheer stubbornness and pride had caused her to refuse repeated orders for information until the point when she simply couldn't stand up to the intense pain any longer).

"What did you want to do to her?"

"I wanted to rip her heart out," Regina replies, almost lazily. If you didn't know better, you'd think that the pain and exhaustion had worn her down to such a simple confession, an admission of unapologetic hatred towards her enemy.

"With your bare hands?" John presses, a gleeful excitement in his tone.

"Yes." She smiles strangely then and chuckles as she looks at the camera. "With my hands. I wanted to reach into her chest and pull her heart out and crush it."

"Like your mother who murdered people in that manner. You are her daughter."
"Exactly like my mother did," Regina says and she's still grinning at the camera. "And yes, I am her daughter. And I'd have just as much success as she did."

It looks almost like she's lost her mind, like she's gone entirely around the bend.

But she hasn't, Emma thinks.

Because Regina had been coming apart at the seams, in excruciating pain and her mind had been splitting down the middle from being forced to face the darkest parts of herself and still, she'd been trying to send a message to Emma.

That message is what matters now; it's what makes Emma refuse to give up hope that by the time all of this ends, everything is going to be all right.

Turns out that she's Snow White's daughter after all.

She smiles at Wendy and hopes to hell that it unnerves the crazy bitch.

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"Mom!" Henry calls out as he rushes in, and there's something about the way that he moves that makes Regina think for a moment that it's ten years ago and he's still that ten-year-old little boy with an obsession all about a storybook. But he's not that anymore, and when his arms go around her, it's his love that reminds her of that because ten years ago, he might not have been able to hug her like this.

"You brought the blanket," she notes as she steps away from him.

"Yeah," he says, holding up Emma's baby blanket. "But when I got to the house, this was there. For you." He holds up videotape. Addressed to THE QUEEN.

"You think it's from them?" Snow asks. Then, off Regina's look. "Of course it is."

"Rumple, can you play this?" Regina asks, motioning to the tape.

He takes the tape from Henry. "Not with anything that I have." He swirls his hand around and a video camera capable of playing the tape appears in front of them.

"Can you do that trick, too, Mom because cool; can I have a motorcycle maybe?" Henry asks, and it's only because he still doesn't understand exactly why he'd been asked to bring Emma's baby blanket that he's making jokes like this. When only silence greets him, he's looks around as if to find the mother who always gets his lame jokes and that's when he notices that she's missing. "Wait…this tape, this isn't…this is…the ones who attacked me…Mom, what's going on?"

"Henry," Regina says softly. "The people who had me…they have Emma."

"What?" he asks and it's like every part of him just crumbles. "No, they can't."

"Henry, maybe you want to step out of the room," David suggests.

"Is she…is my Ma on the tape?" Henry demands, stepping forward and taking the video camera from his grandmother. He starts to turn it on but gets stopped by Regina, her hand lightly settling over her wrist as she turns him to face her.

"Probably," Regina admits, her face screwing up into a mask of deep regret.
Regret for the hurt her son is experiencing.

Regret for what Emma is going through and doesn't deserve.

She never should have come home.

Never should have put all of them in the middle of this.

But what's done is done and all that matters now is finding a way to fix this.

"You shouldn't have to see this," she tells her son.

"And I shouldn't have had to see what they did to you, but I did. I chose to."

"Henry –"

He pushes her hand roughly out of the way and punches the play button.

And then slaps his hand over his mouth when he sees the images of his blonde mother being struck repeatedly by a large man with big hands. Emma is tough and she grunts more than she cries out, but that doesn't change the visuals.

"Come here," Regina says, pulling her son into her chest. He's taller and bigger than her, but right now he's curling himself into her arms and grabbing onto her for protection and strength. She looks over his shoulder and sees David and Snow hugging in much the same way, David's face a mess of shocked horror.

A voice cuts through everything – the comfort, the horror – and then everyone is looking at the camera again and into the eyes of Wendy Darling. Behind them, Rumple sneers in hatred, his hands tightening as he stares at the woman who had ordered his sons' death. "Your Majesty," she taunts. "It's been a long while hasn't it? We tried to get you to understand our needs in many ways before this but it seemed that your rather persistent need to survive no matter how much everyone would be better without you has kept you alive. Well, darling, I think that time has come to an end. You may not see yourself as the monster that the rest of humanity does for if you did, you would have removed yourself from this world long ago. But perhaps you are willing to see who you truly are for this girl who believes that there is a better person inside of you. Perhaps you are willing to finally face the truth about yourself and the punishment that you have earned for this silly child who protects you even though you will never deserve the love that she is offering to you so freely now. She would die for you, Regina so I suppose the question for you is, would you die for her? You have one hour."

The camera swings around then to show off the location.

"That's what Owen meant," Regina murmurs, thinking of the boy whose neck she'd been forced to snap to stop him from continuing his bloody rampage. He'd become the monster that had created him and thus ended up losing his life in the pursuit of hatred and she thinks with deep heartbreak that that's her fate as well.

"Emma's at the Cannery," David says, his voice dull as he remembers the horrible events that had occurred there ten years earlier - the blood and death.

"So that's where we go," Henry says, pulling himself away from his mother. He doesn't get far, before she's yanking him back and hugging him and whispering into his ear how much she loves him – how much he has always been loved.
"Mom," he says, struggling against her.

"You're going to be safe," she says. "My sweet baby boy. I love you. I love you."

And then she's kissing him on the forehead and a moment later, he's collapsing into her arms, temporarily put to sleep by her magic. She sags to the ground with him, holding him against her even though it causes her hip to ache again. That won't be a problem for much longer and even if it were, she wouldn't give up a moment of getting to cradle her son for anything in the world. She lightly runs her fingers through his thick hair and then across his bearded jaw. He's become such a handsome beautiful and brave young man and he'll be a great father one day.

It's only a shame that she'll never get to see it.

With tears stinging her dark eyes, she finally looks up (avoiding Snow's eyes) and says to Rumple, her voice thick with emotion but somehow still sharp, "You gave me your word that you would protect him; I expect you to keep it."

"I did," he assures her. "And I will. And you gave me your word as well."

"This ends tonight," she promises. And then looks over at David and Snow, "We are probably going to need backup. Just in case everything goes upside down."

"I'll call Ruby and get some help on its way over here," David states.

"Tell them to meet us at the Cannery. We don't have time to wait for them."

"Regina," Snow says. "What are you thinking? What's your plan?"

"Don't worry, Snow," Regina says calmly, almost serenely, a small strange smile on her unpainted lips. "Before this night is over, Emma is going to be resting comfortably in a hospital bed, drugged to the gills and not worrying about a thing.

Her eyes meet Rumple's and he's looking at her like he knows.

But then she's staring back at him and reminding him that he can't stop her.

And if he tries to, she'll go right through him.

So he simply says, "Remember your promise."

She supposes its Rumple's not at all subtle way of saying, "if you're going down, make sure you take them with you." Their eyes meet one last time – history between them and perhaps even the slightest moment of regret before it all flows away into the reality that what's done can't be altered and regrets have little purpose – and then she's nodding and reluctantly handing Henry over to him.

But not before she kisses him one last time.

If this is going to be the end, it won't be it without her remembering him.

He'd gotten her through three years of captivity and now the chance to protect him and ensure that he's never alone will get her through this last test as well.

When she stands, she looks at David and Snow and plasters a smile on her face, using it to hide the years of bone-deep exhaustion that have settled on her.

"Let's go save Emma."
"Thirty minutes," John notes with a chuckle. "Maybe she's not coming."

"Good," Emma spits at him, tasting the tang of iron in her mouth. After his return from delivering the videotape, he'd introduced her to his Taser. She thinks it'll be awhile before she's able to hear the crackle of electricity again without fear.

Not that she would show him it.

No, she's somehow managed to remain defiant and furious and unbreakable.

If Regina can do it for three years, she can sure as shit do it for one night.

"And if she doesn't come, do you how you'll die?"

"Does sound travel underwater? Because if it doesn't, can you drown me?"

"Oh, I'd be happy to drown you; it was one of Regina's favorite things as well."

"I never saw her as being much for water-play, but I'll keep that in mind."

Her attempts to annoy him pay off with a hard strike across the jaw. She hisses as she feels blood running down her cheek. "No, you stupid girl, you're going to die in the most painful way I can possibly come up with. And as you do, I promise that you will remember that the reason you are is because you cared for her."

He sneers when he says that and it's clear he means a different word than care.

But she won't play that game with him.

Because whatever there is or isn't between she and Regina, it's theirs.

And they'll have plenty of time to figure all of that out when this is over.

Maybe over a nice bottle of wine and a plate of chicken chow mien.

So with this idea in her head, Emma grins back at John and says coolly, "I would rather die caring for someone than be alive and be a worthless piece of shit like you. But then, I guess you can't really help being what you are, can you?"

John's hand lifts as if to strike her again, but gets stopped by a palm settling over it. "She's goading you, my love," Wendy says. "And then Queen will come."

"You're so sure," John notes.

"Not me," Wendy says. "Her. She's stalling for time. Goading you into trying to exhaust yourself so that when Regina arrives, perhaps she can defeat you."

John looks over at Emma; she shrugs her sore shoulders at him and grins, her teeth bloody. "What can I say? Stupid apes are fairly easy to goad."

"Right." He reaches up and grabs Emma's jaw, squeezing it between his fingers and smirking when she can't stop herself from crying out in pain. "But here's the thing, sweetheart: the ropes that are holding you up are electrified which means the only chance she has of getting you free is to give us what we want. There is not going to be a battle – just surrender. For you to live, the Queen must
She thinks that she should find a bit of comforting irony in the staggering finality of what's about to happen; she's walking towards the end of the road (the end of her road, anyway) and for the first time in her life, she's not completely alone. She has Snow on one side and David close beside on her on the other, the both of them moving with her like they're a team. Like they're an unbeatable family.

But the truth is that they're not unbeatable.

They don't know that she's not planning to leave this horrid building alive.

They think that it's the three of them on their way to rescue Emma. They think that this is all about ending this terrible nightmare that has gone on too long.

And it is, but she knows that it can't end the way they think it will.

It won't end because David is good with a sword and Snow still remembers how to use a crossbow. It's going to end because these vicious people have wanted something from her for a long time, and now, finally, they're going to get it.

They want her to give in and tonight, that's what she intends to do.

She hopes that Henry will understand, prays that Emma will help him.

She thinks that maybe – just maybe - it will be okay because she's only been back a few weeks now and though her son assuredly loves her, maybe he can be proud of her for saving Emma's life. Maybe she can earn her redemption this way and maybe - just maybe - she can finally satisfy her need for penance.

It's what pushes her feet forward despite knowing exactly where this path will end.

It's what makes her step into the Cannery for the first time in ten years.

To end things where they first began.

TBC....
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

A/N: Extremely sorry for the long delay. I'm a slow writer and this was a difficult chapter that had about twenty different rewrites (a few from the very beginning of it). In any case, my mea culpa is in the length.

Content warnings: This deals with attempted suicide so if you're sensitive, steer clear. It also references torture and there are some sexual (consensual) elements to it. All in all, I chose to go emotional over physical. Hope you like it!

"Do you wonder sometimes?" Wendy asks almost absently, a perfectly manicured finger trailing lightly down Emma's cheek, the tip of it following the flow of the blood across her jawbone and then scratching. "How your life ended up the way that it has? Do you wonder and wish that it had gone differently for you?"

"I wonder about a whole hell of a lot of things," Emma admits with a hard swallow and then a rough sounding cough. Everything inside and outside of her hurts right now and what she would really like is a soft sofa under her butt and a cold beer in her hand and preferably an eye-line on Regina and Henry so that she can ensure that they're both okay and that no one can hurt either one of them. She'd love to think that they'll never be able to be hurt ever again, but life is rarely like that and she's long since given up on believing in happily ever after.

It's not that Emma doesn't believe in happiness – her parents have it and there are others within Storybrooke whom have dug it out and made the impossible work. It's not even that she doesn't believe in it for herself – though, admittedly, it's hard to consider such things when she's strung up and bleeding everywhere – it's just that she knows it's an every single day kind of thing. She knows that surviving one crisis doesn't guarantee that she'll survive the next one. But it's a start and she really wants that.

For herself.

For Henry.

For Regina.

Emma grunts and forces herself to keep speaking. "I wonder if I left the oven on and I wonder if I set my DVR and I wonder if I wore my best underwear this morning because I really would hate to die in something with holes in it." She laughs at that and then spits blood. "But you know what I
don't wonder at all about?" A smile slides across her face. "Whether or not you're going to lose today. I don't wonder who's going to win here."

Wendy laughs and looks over at John, who is leaning against the far wall of the room, his expression one of bemusement mixed with boredom. It's been a long time since he last saw the Queen and she really and truly has been the favorite of all of the many toys that Wendy has allowed him to play with over the many years that he's worked with her. He finds himself eager and almost even anxious to see the woman that he'd so effectively broken again.

"John, dear," she says casually, a glance down at the dried blood that's now on her nail. "Can you imagine what we could have done with this girl over the three years that we had the Queen? So much stubborn attitude and presumptuous arrogance and it just drips off this so-called Savior. It might have been fun to see if we could make her scream as we did the Queen."

"I wouldn't say it drips," Emma mutters as she shifts, wincing as her broken ribs painfully protest the movement. Her eyes flicker around the room and she tries again to not think about the bloodstains that are still on the floor.

She tries desperately not to think about the man who saved her and the unsettling fact that she has never figured out how to say goodbye to the man she once so deeply loved. She can't think about him now, either, because if she does, she'll wonder what else this room will take from her.

Her own life? Regina's?

"I'm not sure she could have endured as much as the Queen did," John comments coolly, an eyebrow lifted as he regards Emma with distaste. It's almost curious to Emma just how obsessive this man seems about someone that these two lunatics had labeled as being something impure and dirty. He occasionally looks at Emma for a few moments longer than is necessary even considering his abuse of her and there's a flicker of cruel interest that she sees, but then it seems to go away and he just looks restless once again.

Like he's sick and tired of the pre-show and just wants Regina to make her appearance. Like he's more than a little bit afraid that she might not do it.

Like he worries that she might not be brave enough to walk into this hell.

But she will.

Emma knows it. Feels it. She knows better than just about anyone just how courageous Regina has always been even when she shouldn't be.

And so, when Emma hears the sharp crack and the snap of something break outside of the Cannery a few moments later and then she hears the sound of heels that a woman with a bad leg and a wrecked hip has no business wearing, she knows exactly who it is that has just shown up to end this.

She uses her magic to shatter the doors in front of them, and then she's leading them through the long room full of pipes, and David is trying not to remember how years ago they'd come here looking for Regina and ended up without her and without Neal and with Emma unconscious in his arms.

He tries not to think about how long it took him to scrub the blood away from his hands, and how for weeks after that, he woke up dreaming that it'd been Emma who had been killed by a bullet instead of Neal. And there had been other dreams as well. There had been dark ugly nightmares
about the strange electrical equipment within the room and the awful things that had surely been done to Regina that could have been done to Emma instead.

Snow had reassured him her husband with a light hand on his arm, all the while reminding him that none few of that the many horrors that Regina had gone through had happened to Emma and; she assures him that Emma will recover. she'd recovered.

But none of them really had and Emma that doesn't change the fact that Emma is now somewhere within that room and she's hurting terribly and it's their job to make all of this end.

"David," he hears from his side. He turns to look and sees both women now staring over at him, worry painted across Snow's features and something unreadable on Regina's. It's Regina who's speaking and when she starts again, he focuses in on her and tries to understand what her angle here is.

Save Emma. That part is obvious.

But there's more and he can feel it now.

Something that feels wrong and desperate.

It's in her Regina's eyes, too. She looks…sad. Determined, but heartbroken.

"Regina," David says and it's a weird kind of protest, because he thinks that he's about to tell her – or perhaps beg her - not to do what he's pretty sure she's about to do. Snow hasn't figured it out yet or maybe she just won't allow herself to, but when he looks back at the woman, who ten years ago had been an enemy, and sees this kind of rolling resignation there and he thinks about how he'd shaken her and now how shaken she looks, he understands what she intends to do here in order to ensure that Emma survives and realizes that he doesn't want this to happen. Needs it not to.

But Regina is smirking at him and she's shifting through masks and once she has the one she needs in order to do what she needs to do – in order to surrender herself - she's shaking her head at him to stop him from speaking and telling him that she needs him to go around the back. It's a plan of action and if you didn't know better, you'd think it was meant as a way to survive this and beat the bad guys and get everyone home for dinner.

"Why can't we just use some kind of spell to knock them out?" David queries. "Surely you have to have something like that in your...magic..." he waves his hand around and then continues with, "...that you can use?"

"I do, but it's useless here; they'll have guarded themselves against anything like that," Regina tells him. "They hate magic except when it can protect them." She shakes her head. "They've been setting this up for too long to have it come apart over something so easy. They're waiting for us… for me. They brought me here."

"She's all right, right?" Snow asks softly, her eyes wide and frightened.

"She will be," Regina assures her. "I promise you that."

She thinks that maybe it's something of a pretty lie, because if it all goes down as she thinks that it will, Emma is likely to be not just physically wounded as she's already been but also likely emotionally hurt. But she'll get through it, Regina almost dismissively reassures herself and over time, Henry will as well, and then everything in this town can return to how it was.

Before she'd come back into their lives and spun everything upside down.
Regina understands now; she finally understands at last that she always would have been forced back eventually. Even if she hadn't been so weak and so desperate for any kind of real human contact that she'd needed to come back home to a town that hadn't wanted or needed her, they would have found a way to make her do it because this is where it has to end.

Here in Storybrooke, where the magic as its very strongest in this world is where it has to be destroyed and she realizes now that these monsters would have gone to extreme lengths to make that happen – to make her return - if she hadn't been willing to do it for them. They'd released her seven years ago and waited, but eventually their patience would have given out and they would have manipulated everything to make this happen.

She understands that, but it doesn't change the memories that Henry has of being branded and it doesn't alter the fact that Emma has been injured and all so they could get her to do what maybe she should have done ten years ago.

From the very beginning.

Surrender.

She's about to step forward when they hear the loud shuddering cry of pain; it's coming from Emma and it's a greeting to her. They know she's here.

Of course they do.

Panting hard, sweat pouring down her face and pooling well…everywhere, Emma struggles for breath and to see what's happening. John is holding the Taser again and he's smirking at her, but his eyes are out in front of him.

He's watching for Regina.

And then there she is, turning and walking into view, her heels clicking against the floor. Snow is at her side, but Regina doesn't seem like she needs her. Even with a damaged leg and a hip that usually requires a cane and medication, Regina is standing up straight and tall and she looks like every bit of the dangerous Evil Queen that she once was so very long ago.

Seeing Regina like this should fill Emma with relief and joy and all of those things, because Regina is strong and proud and impressive, but there's something about the way she's walking and the way her head is up and it reminds Emma of movies about condemned prisoners walking the Green Mile and she thinks that maybe Regina isn't coming here to defeat Wendy and John but rather to rescue the once Savior by letting them have her.

So she yells, "No!"

And it startles everyone.

Which almost makes her laugh, but suddenly Regina is faltering and wincing as pain lances its way through the side she'd been ignoring and Snow has a hand against Regina's forearm, and for a moment, everyone is confused.

But then John is grinning and he looks like a kid on Christmas morning, because he can see again with his own eyes what he'd done to this woman who had once destroyed an entire world. "Your Majesty," he chuckles. "It's been such a long time. You have no idea how much I've missed you."

Emma jerks roughly and almost frantically against her ropes and then bites her lip to stop the
whine of pain that almost tears out as one of her broken ribs screams up at her. She can see the look on Regina's face, though, and it's broadcasting the unmistakable pure terror of her violent and ugly past.

Her past which has included entirely too much heartbreak, gar too much loss and more devastating pain than anyone should ever be forced to endure.

And when it comes to the cruel individuals before her, it also involves a hard wall and a whip and an icy metal table and electricity and rough cold hands.

"Let the girl go; she not who you want here. I am. So take me and let her go," Regina says finally, swallowing hard. She wants to banter back with this man, fight him with the words that had allowed her to stay strong and defiant during a decade as the Queen and the Mayor, but she's tired and hurt and the masks she'd once worn well slide off her easily now.

They no longer fit.

"Then we have an understanding, I presume," Wendy states and then steps forward. She approaches Regina quickly and, for a moment, Emma is certain that her mother will strike the woman to keep her from touching Regina, but then neither of them is moving and Wendy is running a finger across Regina's face and tense doesn't even begin to describe what all of this feels like.

No one knows what to do.

"We do," Regina says shakily, stepping back and away from Wendy who allows her to go and simply just watches. Regina then turns her head and looks at Snow. "Thank you," she says softly and tries to ignore the way Snow's eyes widen as realization finally sweeps over her. "For giving me a second chance. For letting me know what family could really feel like."

"No," Snow says, echoing Emma's previous cry (and then becoming aware that Emma is, in fact, still struggling and trying to get herself free of this mess all on her own, trying so valiantly to find a way to negate the exchange that is about to take place here). "This isn't…this wasn't the plan, Regina."

"Of course it was," Regina chuckles humorlessly - almost even sadly - as she looks at the brunette who had once been her unwanted stepdaughter. "It was always the plan."

She looks over at Wendy but refuses to look at the horrible man behind her, the one still holding a Taser in his hand, the one who she can still remember with horrifying clarity all of the ways that he had touched her and violated her and so terribly destroyed her. Before this is over, she vows that she will meet his eyes and she will make him understand that despite his beliefs to the opposite, he didn't break her as much as he believes that he did.

She had'd recovered. Perhaps not as fully as she wishes for (the pain that she feels reminds her of too many truths even now to lie), but enough so that her trauma is not why she's here today. She's here because of her family.

"Emma," she says again softly. "Release her and you can have me."

"You know what you have to do," Wendy reminds her.

"I know."

"Regina, please, don't do this…please…" Snow pleads, her eyes flickering from Regina to a still
struggling Emma to the door behind them all where David should be. Or he will be eventually. If it's not too late and all of this isn't over by the time he arrives. Regina allows herself a brief moment of wondering what's keeping him, but then sweeps these thoughts away because she's not standing here to buy herself time enough to be saved.

So Regina ignores her, having said what matters most – the only thing that matters. She could say so much more to Snow about their pasts, but they've forgiven each other and now all that matters is that Snow knows that these last few weeks have been the best of her life – the ones that have made her feel the strongest, even when the fear and pain has been present. They've made her want and hope for more and that alone is worth taking with her.

But there's nothing more to say, nothing that can ease this or make it less.

So she looks over at Emma instead and Emma is still struggling, tears and blood on her face, all of them mixing with sweat and saliva and she's fighting and trying so hard to get free. But Emma is hurt and her bones are broken and even Emma Swan can only be so strong and not all of the time. She finds herself wishing that they could have had just a few moments alone together. Perhaps even just one moment where maybe she could find a way to tell Emma all about the strange and wonderful things that are going on inside of her heart even now. But their time is up and this is all they have so she offers Emma a watery smile and says, "We may have to delay it for a few lifetimes, my dear, but breakfast would be lovely."

"Regina, no," Emma whispers and her voice is cracking so terribly hard.

But there's thick, red blood coming out of Emma's nose and her ears and two of her fingers are bent forward at a terrible, awkward angle and this woman has reminded her what it feels like to be touched in a way that is wanted, even if almost all of the touches have been deeply innocent.

She extends her hands to Wendy Darling, then, her palms up and says, "Release Emma Swan and I'll surrender myself and destroy magic for you."

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Henry Mills is definitely his mothers' son.

Both mothers.

And he's standing in the middle of his grandfather's shop now, green eyes blazing and there's magic holding him in place but his willpower is great and the truth is that Rumple doesn't actually want to hold him here. Because Henry is smart and devious and cunning in ways that make him also the grandson of the Dark One and when he reminds Rumple that the end of magic won't just mean the end of his mother but also the end of power completely, he's glaring and digging right into three hundred years of fear.

"What are you if you're not the Dark One?" Henry sneers. His words are harsh and unkind and they're not at all fitting for a boy that has always chosen hope and love before anything else, but there's a point to his fury and that point is getting to his mother before he loses her forever. Rumple had made Regina a promise – assured her that he would keep Henry safe and away from all of this and that he would stay out of this – but now Henry is testing that vow. And playing into the one weakness his grandfather has.

He's a smart boy.

And Belle is elsewhere and doesn't know about the struggle going on inside of her husband right now – maybe doesn't need to ever know. And besides, if all of this turns out all right, if they can
save Emma and Regina and magic, then it's unlikely she'll care what his reasons are for doing such would be.

His hand tightens on his cane and he thinks of Regina's cane and how life has broken both of them down more times than it has ever built them up.

"Your mother made me promise to protect you," Rumple reminds him, his eyebrow lifted as he observes the boy closely. He wants so much to be able to see Bae in this boy and there are times that he even thinks that he can – in his smile and in certain expressions – but right now Henry Mills is the son of two powerful smart woman and he's making sure that everyone knows it.

Henry nods. "Of course she did. And you can. But not without your magic."

"I'm quite adept at handling –"

"You're an old man with a cane," he scoffs. "I could kick your ass myself."

Rumple's eyebrow lifts and he chuckles low and deep. He voices to Henry then the exact thought that he'd been having before. "You know," he says with something of a smirk. "Every now and again, I think that I can see Regina in you but then you go and remind me so much of Miss Swan."

"Then you know that I will do anything that I have to do in order to get to my mom. This holding spell you have on me? You better be damned sure that it will work, because the moment it doesn't, I'm going through you," Henry snaps out. "Or you could help me and we could save both of my mothers. One plan helps you out. The other doesn't. So make your choice."

His hands are clenched and his eyes are blazing and Rumple finds himself thinking of a young boy with a scarf and a book and how that child had never gotten to know his father. He thinks of a grave and dirt and how what's beneath all of that now is hundreds of years of heartache and loss. And then he thinks about his cane and how he can't be just that man.

His fingers twitch and the holding spell is gone.

"You stay behind me, though," he tells Henry. "I promised your mother that I would protect you and even if I mean to stop her from destroying magic tonight, I still intend to honor my promise to her." It's a loophole and a bad one and Henry is smirking at him, because they both know that while Belle might not care about his real reasons as much, Regina most certainly will.

But if Regina is alive to care – alive to be angry and furious and pissed off about his semantics, well then magic is as well and all is as it should be.

And Regina and her rages at him have never frightened him before so he figures that he can deal with them now. Especially when it's this Regina.

And maybe…maybe she'll even thank him.

He chuckles and tries to think of something – anything – less likely.

"We can stop this, right?" Henry asks quietly – so much like a boy once again even though he's in his twenties now – and he doesn't know that he's practically echoing a question that his grandmother had asked his adoptive mother just a few minutes ago in a place way on the other side of town.

But where as Regina had been intentionally evasive, unwilling to show her hand just yet, Rumple is
thoughtful and even determined for so many reasons that belong to both of them and says only, "I certainly hope so."

Emma feels John's rough cold hands on her as he brings her down from the wall and she knows what he's doing, knows that he's touching her far more than is necessary. She doesn't have the experiences with him that Regina does but right now, he's letting her know what he could have done to her.

So she spits at him.

He grabs her face and squeezes it hard (he's done this too many times to her by now, and it's still excruciatingly painful), causing her to cry out. "Such a brave girl," he hisses. "Not that it will do you any good. You lose, love. All of you – your mother, your stupid father who thought he could come around behind us –" there's a sound nearby that sounds like struggling and Snow gasps and gawks and there's nothing that she can do besides hope – "And the terrible woman that you think your heart might belong to. You all lose."

"We'll see," Emma answers and swings around to try to attack him, but her body is slow and hurt and when he buries his fist in her gut, everyone yells in protest and, for a moment, there's just chaos and gray stars in her vision.

"John, dear," Wendy says, her voice sharper and harsher than Emma has heard before and certainly sharper than Regina has. There's always been a strange relationship between the two of them and though Regina has long assumed them for lovers, she's always wondered if perhaps this John was actually the one who had once been an actual brother to her. Absurd most likely and she's rarely given him much thought beyond hatred, but there are times when she wonders why a man of his cruelty would serve someone.

Why would someone with such evil in his hands be submissive to anyone?

But then Wendy is speaking again and Regina's no longer thinking about the strange relationship between the woman who sees her as an abomination and the man who has treated her as such; she's thinking about the way that John has his hands on Emma's face and her shoulders and how she just might light him on fire or at least try to if John doesn't stop touching her.

"Let the Swan girl go, love," Wendy orders. "We made a deal and we have no further need for this silly girl; she's broken and useless." Then, after a curiously thoughtful pause, she adds, "As all of us are."

She sounds oddly tired and weary when she says this and Regina wonders if maybe this isn't the end of Wendy Darling's road as well. She's been trying to destroy magic for so very long now – trying to eradicate her own demons and in doing so made a demon of herself – and now they've reached the point where every bit of hatred and raw brutality has brought them to this.

To Emma falling to her knees and Snow grabbing her and holding her close even as Emma tries desperately to stand back up and fails because her ribs are shattered and her hands are broken and she's still coughing up blood.

To Wendy stepping close to the tired worn out woman who she'd torn apart and then rebuilt only to start all over again. Repeatedly. "You do know that it didn't have to be like this, don't you? You could have just given in."

"And I am now," Regina says, her hands still out to Wendy. She spares a quick look over at Emma
and sees the blonde looking up at her, tears in her eyes and a plea for Regina to fight and not surrender still on her bloody lips.

But John is close – still so close – to Emma and he has his gun out and is pointing it at Emma's head and it wouldn't take him much to fire it and from where he's standing, there would only be a wet thump and no…just no.

That's not what is going to happen here.

"You're ready to give in?" Wendy asks curiously, her head tilted.

"I am. But the gun…Emma –"

"When you start." Wendy holds up a knife then – long and silver and covered in weird symbols and engravings. "This blade has seen so many worlds and ended so much magic. I understand that a very long time ago, it belonged to a Dark One before he found a way to kill himself with it and end his tortured cursed existence. Another dagger and another Dark One came, of course, but this blade remains…special. And it will do what it helped that Dark One do. It will help you end your evil once and for all."

"So it will," Regina says. And then repeats once more, "But Emma."

Wendy nods. "Once I know you'll do it, he'll step back."

"If he doesn't, with my last breaths, with my last bit of my magic –"

"He will," Wendy says quietly and then offers Regina the blade. "Give us peace now, Regina. Destroy magic and destroy the evil within this world."

"Nothing can do that," Regina answers and then she's taking the blade and Snow is screaming and so is Emma, but all she's aware of is the sound of her own breathing as she pulls the knife down along the veins in her wrists.

There's curiously sharp pain – she feels that first.

The cuts caused by the enchanted blade strike against the nerve endings in her wrists first and those nerve endings – ones that had seen so much abuse beneath the hands of these two– spark and crackle and then there's sticky intense magic flooding forward and upwards and it's so harsh and cold and it makes everything feel that much worse. The blood that bubbles forward and up is so thick and hot and she thinks that she can smell it in the air.

"Don't stop," Wendy says and it's all she hears even though she's fairly sure that Snow and Emma are still yelling for her. "All the way, Your Majesty."

It feels a bit strange to be called by her honorific as she's slitting her own wrists, but this woman is somehow as lost and as stuck with her own demons as she herself has always been and perhaps Regina understands why even now, she can't let go of things and see just the person in Regina.

Because maybe if she could, then maybe she couldn't have done all she did.

Maybe she couldn't be justifying the destruction of a woman all for the sake of the eradication of magic. Maybe she could have found a way to live her life and move on with it, instead of becoming obsessed with cruelty.

But Regina gets it. Too well and too much and she thinks maybe she should feel something right
now – be it hatred or anger or even strange relief and perhaps the acidic self loathing that has walked with her for so much of her life – but she doesn't. What she feels is intense fear and deep sadness. She understands the first, but the second is surprising to her. Unexpected even.

She thinks about three years spent in hell and seven years in purgatory.

She thinks of the scars that run her body like lines on a map. Invasive roads and highways stretched across the planes off her body, nature eradicated and replaced with grievous injury. The spell that Rumple had placed on her to ease her pain is long gone now and so her ruined nerve endings in her side are firing in protest as she crashes to her knees and lets out a gasp.

She hears Emma, then. Crying out her name over and over again. Her eyes focus on her as much as they can and she looks at the girl – at the woman.

Her enemy. Her friend.

Her equal. Her partner.

She tries to smile at Emma, but it doesn't work because this isn't a happy ending for either of them. Emma's hurt and broken and her hand is out and she's trying to find a way to be who everyone has always told her she is.

The Savior.

But right now, even the Savior can't make this better.

Regina blinks slowly and draws the blade the rest of the way before finally dropping it down to the ground; there are thick grooves and symbols on it and each is now stained with her blood, lines glowing bright blue as her magic bleeds out of her and is sucked into this thing. It's not Rumple's Dark One dagger, but it will end up having the same catastrophic effect on this world and everyone within it when all is said and done. People will die and maybe this is where she should have remembered the lessons of a Queen and chosen the many over the one. But the one is two and maybe three or four, but it's definitely two and those two are Henry and Emma and no one is worth more to her in this existence or any other than the two of them.

The world can burn if it means that they will survive.

Her eyes flicker up and she watches as Wendy pushes John back and away from Emma, a hand over his to force him to lower his weapon. She's almost standing in front of him now, in a strange way protecting the woman that she'd been allowing John to torture just minutes earlier. It's a bizarre kind of honor and Regina has no desire to think kindly of her; Wendy had done everything in her power to break her, violated her in every way that a person can be violated and there isn't empathy enough in this world to find forgiveness for that. But perhaps there isn't for a former Evil Queen, either.

And yet Emma is still struggling, a hand reaching for the gory blade like she thinks if she can just get her fingers around it, then maybe all of this will stop. But that's not how it works and the blood and magic are flowing faster and faster out of Regina; her head is spinning and darkness is crashing in.

This is suicide and she's dying. This is surrender and she has.

She lets out a pained whimper and then the knees that had been holding her up are falling and so is she, backwards but not yet flat onto her back.
Everything hurts and nothing hurts.

Her eyes flicker down slowly even as her body trembles and tries to drop her the rest of the way; she's still resisting, though. Something in her still is.

Apparently even now, even bleeding out, she can't give in.

There are voices still and the sound of crashing and she thinks that she hears a door crash open and then an angry shout, but her vision is all but gone now and she wonders if this is the point that you always hear so much about in death and dying conversations: she wonders if this is the moment where you see your life before you and then watch as it all speeds past you and there's nothing that you can do to grab it and pull it back.

She sighs and closes her eyes.

It's sure to be a hell of a story.

She's five and curled up in her father's arms in front of a fire in the main hall of the family estate; there's a mutt name Luca snoring away at his feet and Father is telling her a story about how he and his brothers had once been part of a legendary hunt. His eyes are kind and happy and when she giggles, he lights up. But then he tenses and she feels his hands release just slightly as Mother enters the room. He greets her cordially, respectfully, his head lowered just a bit and Regina doesn't understand why her father always seems to lose some of his joy around Mother but thinks that maybe she doesn't need to; maybe this is one of those adult things bigger than her.

Mother always talks about these Bigger Things and though Regina is young and mostly interested in the fairies and wonderful creatures that she's heard about lurking in the woods (and the dangerous ones as well), she can tell by the tone that her mother uses that one day these Bigger Things will matter.

But they don't matter yet and so she pushes them out of her mind and calls out eagerly for her mother, her young voice warm and real and there's a flicker of something in Mother, something almost unusually soft but then Mother catches herself and scolds Father and states that they have more important things to do then tell silly old stories meant to flatter his ego.

Regina's good spirit deadens at this, because young though she is, she already knows that Mother is displeased by frivolous things and so when Mother tells her to stand up and go with the servants to get her ready for dinner, she doesn't hesitate even though what she wants to do is take Mother's hand and pull her back towards Father and ask them to tell her the lovely well known stories of far off lands and breathless adventures where good always wins and evil always loses.

But she knows better, for Mother doesn't tell silly stories about fairies and unicorns and she has no interest in the worthless kind of boasting glory that comes with winning something that can't change the world even as it seems to have even less use for tales of noble heroes defeating the wicked, seems almost indignant and angry when Father tells her them.

Regina stands and she moves away from her Father and then because she doesn't truly know better and she does know how Father smiles every time she hugs him, she wraps her arms around Mother and hopes that this will be enough for her to find the same kind of joy as well. It doesn't quite work but there's a moment where Mother's hand is on her back and it's wavering but she's not being pushed away. Until she is and then Mother is stalking from the room after reminding her that she needs to be getting ready for dinner.
She looks over at Father and he grins in this weird wonderful conspiratorial way at her, shrugs his broad shoulders almost boyishly and then lowers his voice and says, "Run along now, but we'll finish our story later, won't we?"

She grins in response and says, "I love you, Daddy." So easy and she thinks that he takes a deep breath and looks for almost like he's almost shaken.

"I love –"

- you, you know that right?" her father asks, his voice quiet as he sits next to her outside of the manor. She's just a few days past ten and so much time has passed for all of them but for him and but he seems so much older that even she does now. His eyes are empty and hollow and sometimes she thinks that when she looks at him that there's nothing looking back at her. She thinks - and thinks it absurd that she thinks this - that somewhere along the way, he stopped living.

It's now, as he's sitting besides her, his eyes on the sun as it sets far in the shadowy distance, that he tells Regina something she'll struggle to ever forgive him for. It's here and now that he tells her that the stories she so loves she'll struggle to ever forgive him for. It's here and now that he tells her that the stories she so loves don't matter. What matters is that Mother wants her to focus on the things that are important. She's sick of Regina living inside insipid fairytales and silly childish ways and sick of the battles that she has to fight every day to get Regina to focus.

On her studies and on what is important – the Bigger Things that Regina seems to care so very little about – and those important things aren't the ridiculous heroic fantasies in her head.

Especially not the ones of galloping horses and bold adventure.

She's only ten and for her such adventure is still quite tame and reasonably bloodless, but it's beneath the lofty and often murky ambitions of Cora Mills and so it's become a frequent nightly event for Cora to react with anger and frustration when Regina loses focus and starts up with daydreaming again.

"You need to focus on your studies, Regina," Henry urges as he watches his daughter sip from her cup of tea, her hold anything but ladylike.

"I know, Daddy," she tells him and she doesn't know. Doesn't understand.

So he sighs and puts his palms over hers and rubs them to warm her hands as well as the cup and he says, "Your mother is concerned about some of the tales that you tell her...us. She...people worry..." he shakes his head and it seems like for a moment he can't find the right words to explain this to her. "You need to behave better," he finally pleads. "Do as your mother asks and be...be a good girl, Regina."

She thinks that her father looks vaguely ill and she's not sure why. But she smiles at him and concentrates on what always cheers him up and says, "Tell me a story about Matthew and Jonathan." They were his two older brothers and though they've both been dead a very long time now, he always brightens when he speaks of growing up with them.

But not today and suddenly he's shaking his head.

"No," he says hoarsely. "No more stories, Regina; they're not good for you and I never should have encouraged them. You need to...you need to live in the real world and not in your imagination. There's nothing...there's nothing good that can come from that. We...your mother...we want more for you."
He might as well be talking about the Bigger Things.

"Daddy –"

"Please," Henry says shakily. "Do as I…do as your mother asks of you."

His eyes are glistening and she wonders why he looks so sad, but then his jaw is setting and he's demanding she promise him that she'll focus and get serious about the world that they're in. He's intense and he's never intense, but he is now so she nods her head and she promises him that she'll -

- behave. But well, behaving was never something she did as well as her mother would have liked her to, and that's always her fault, Mother says. If she would just do as she's told to do and obey, there would be no need for punishment.

There's an incident when she's fifteen; she won't remember it until many years later when Emma Swan breaks a curse that shatters every memory spell in the vicinity.

It starts because Mother is furious with Regina over her spending too much time with the horses and in the stables, and she's angered by her daughter's disinterest in apologizing for her lack of interest in Bigger Things. During the scolding, she calls Regina spoiled, ungrateful and a waste of potential and then tells her that if she is going to act like a child in need of discipline, she will be treated as such; Mother looks her right in the eyes and says in a cold tone that if she refuses to behave as a lady of pretty breeding and potential that she is to be grounded indefinitely to her bedroom and that all of her outside privileges, including those involving her ridding lessons and her quiet alone days are to be forfeited.

Regina reacts with horrified alarm and immediately resorts to panicked begging because suddenly she can feel the walls closing in around her and it's becoming hard to breath. "Please, Momma," she pleads. "I promise I'll be better." There are tears in her eyes and she's as close to desperate as she thinks that she has ever been and considering the many times that Mother has held her up in the air for hours and hours at a time, that's saying something.

"We all have lessons we must learn, Regina," Mother says, refusing to budge on this. "This is one."

"You can't do this!"

"I can and I am. I am doing this for you, Regina; so you learn."

"Momma!"

"Enough! You will have no visitors besides your father and I."

"No!" Without thinking and acting almost completely on instinct and anger, Regina's hands jerk up and then suddenly there's fire racing up and down the walls and then there are bright angry orange flames speeding towards Mother's face.

She hears Mother gasp out in a weirdly awed tone, "Did you do this?"

She shakes her head and says no, but thinks that yes she must have.

But then she feels the fire licking at her skin and realizes that her room is ablaze and...and Mother waves her hand and then there's water flushing through and the fire is crumbling and disappearing, leaving only the two of them standing there. She apologizes and she's so afraid, but
Mother is strange and curiously not angry. Instead, she touches Regina's face with an odd kind of gentleness and says, "One day, you will be great, my love."

And then there's a sharp stabbing pain in her head and a strange stuffiness and odd cotton ball feeling to her mind and suddenly she's falling. She hears just before she loses consciousness, "But not yet."

She feels a hand on her face, moving her hair away and then -

- she's curling against him and enjoying the smell of straw and wood and sweat and how he looks at her like there's just nothing else in the world.

She doesn't remember lighting her room on fire, but she does remember four long lonely weeks locked away in her quarters and after she'd finally been allowed out again, Mother had been curiously generous about allowing her to spend time with Rocinante. So taking full advantage of that generosity, Regina does exactly what Mother wants her to do.

Until Daniel comes into her life and makes her smile without even trying to, his hands so soft and his eyes so kind and full of adoration for her. Until he convinces her that it's okay to have dreams all of her own and that it's all right not to want to have anything to do with Mother's Bigger Things.

Until he lifts her up and pulls her into his arms while she giggles and he reminds her how to laugh like she's the young girl that she actually is by kissing her lips and nibbling at her neck as she breathily attempts to tell him about her day. It's never anything special, but he wants to hear every detail and when she runs out of them, he wants her to tell him something more.

He wants to know everything that there is to know about her.

And he wants her to dream with him, think about what they could have.

Because Daniel hadn't grown up like she has with the weight of ambition crushing down on him, and his parents – long gone now – weren't like Cora so he believes in dreams and he builds a house for them with just his words and she's only sixteen but she'll be seventeen in a few days and so when he kisses her and says that he can see the two of them like this forever, she finds herself believing him and hoping and even dreaming of such a life.

When she grows quiet and morose, Mother in her head and on her mind as the air around them grows cold, Daniel lightly nips her jaw and her nose and presses his forehead against hers and asks her in such a soft wondrous voice why they can't have this. Why can't they have everything that they want?

She doesn't know. Doesn't have an answer for that; she lets Daniel pull her close and lets his words and reassurances wash over her. It's just a story now, he tells her, but one day it will be their story and they will have it -.

- all.

That's what everything believes; she's rich and has titles and therefore she must be the happiest woman to ever lived because she has it all.

She's the Queen and this is supposed to be everything she could have ever wanted. This is supposed to be the dream. It's not hers, but it's a dream all the same and Regina knows that this is
one of Mother's Bigger Things.

But it's nothing to her and all she has is the fire that runs hot through her veins, chilling her even as it tries to burn its way out of her with her rage.

She has magic in her blood and now Mother is gone because of that magic.

She has a teacher and he promises her that she will be great and powerful, but he doesn't promise her that she can still be good and they both know it.

She has a husband and a stepdaughter and every single time that she sees them and every single time that one of them touches her – and they both do with alarming frequency, believing she belongs to them – she fights against the part of her that wants them both dead. She fights against it with every bit of strength inside of her, because how evil must she be to want such?

But just as Rumple had been unwilling to promise her that she might be able to stay a good person in the hot sticky grip of magic, Regina finds herself unable to reassure herself that she'll be able to save herself from this evil.

And the more time passes, the more she feels the hatred brewing and growing and twisting inside of her, the more she thinks that she never -

- was actually a good person to begin with.

The King is finally dead and his precious Snow White is a fugitive.

The King is dead and there's blood on her hands and a man in the mirror and she's still the Queen, but now there's a different word in her title and even as she rails against it, there's a voice somewhere in the back of her mind saying she's always been this. Evil. All the way down to the core.

She stands in the middle of Snow's room, dark eyes furious as she takes in the hopeful soft colors of a girl who'd never known how much pain she'd left in her wake. There are books and journals everywhere, her imagination bright and shiny and evident for all to see. Snow is in her twenties now, but she's never lost that gleam in her eyes. Maybe she will now, Regina seethes.

Then there's fire in her hand and the room and all of its dreams are burning.

Regina has a strange fleeting thought – and it will pass because it makes no sense to her – that she's seen this kind of thing before. Been a part of it.

She thinks she hears Mother whisper, "One day, you will be great, my love."

But she doesn't actually recall Mother having ever said that and this is far from greatness as a person can get. All that she has left is the feeling of -

- being so terribly lost.

She stares out the window that looks out onto the courtyard; her tear-swelled eyes locked on the insignificant stake that will hold her still for her executioners – for the well-paid archers that have journeyed here from across the land - come morning. Father is pleading with her to beg for mercy and forgiveness and she sees that same emptiness in his eyes that she's been seeing since the day he'd told her to stop believing in stories.
He's weak and broken for everyone to see and she won't be that as well. She's going to die in a few hours and then everything will be over and maybe there will be some peace somewhere for her, but before she goes, she wants them to know that they didn't defeat her. They didn't. They...

She blinks and hot tears fall down her cheeks. They didn't beat her; they hadn't needed to because she -

- has finally beaten them.

The Evil Queen laughs and she laughs and the whole damned world is shattering into a thousand jagged pieces around her and she feels as though she's being torn apart as well. It's not all that terrible and she thinks that it's just another kind of death and hasn't she been dying for so long anyway?

The smoke blurs her vision and fills her nostrils and there's something digging through her mind and pulling things out. It's the curse, she thinks. It's building and it's writing, but it's taking from her as it does so. It's breaking her down (this, like death and the failure to ever find anything final is a constant for her) and rebuilding around her and these are her stories.

Devoid of hope and all of the dreams that such a thing tends to inspire.

Instead, she leaves these people – these wretched self proclaimed heroes who hold their heads up so high because they are always so assured of their righteousness – with the cold bitter and empty reality that has been her life for so very long. She leaves them in a place where the only color that will fill their sad and lonely lives will be that which will belong to the sky and not to the brightness of a heart and a spirit that refuses to ever give up.

She sneers in disgust, as she looks down at Snow, the heartbroken woman suddenly just a frightened young girl again as she desperately clutches her mortally wounded husband in her arms, her newborn child lost to her and likely never to be found again no matter the hope she frantically clings to.

Glass sprays down around them and she thinks to herself in a burst of vicious triumph that she won't truly understand until Emma breaks the curse many long years later, "Looks like you were right about greatness, Mother."

The world breaks in half and she -

- finds herself at her father's tomb one night and it might be ten years into the Dark Curse or it might have just been one, but she seats herself next to his casket and she starts talking to him. She speaks about how he'd taught her to fish and how to tell one tree from another. She talks about how he'd told her to hide all of her feelings and never give Mother anything to be unhappy about. His reasons had been simple – to keep Mother's anger at bay, but she wonders why he hadn't told Mother to let her be a child.

She says that she wishes she could have met Father's brothers as they sounded like good people with good hearts and she's known so very few.

There was Daniel and he's below both of them now, his body still and cold and unlikely to ever move again. She can't let him go but deep inside she knows that one day, she'll be forced to and she
thinks that no matter how far you run away and how deep into the darkness you fall, it's never enough.

She tells her father that this Storybrooke is her happy ending.

And then she laughs because she knows better; happiness does -

-exist.

He huffs when she moves the bottle away from his mouth and she smiles and remembers a little girl playing in the middle of a lush green meadow.

He clutches her fingers and gurgles and claps his hands together and he can't speak yet, but he's her son – her perfect little Henry, and no, Mother would never understand and Father might not but does it really matter if they do – and she thinks that maybe happy endings are possible again.

Maybe she just needed to be patient and wait and…

But there's something gnawing away in the middle of her. Fear, still.

Doubt.

Because he's perfect but she's not, and everything comes apart eventually.

Still, he helps her believe and it's almost easy to do so because she's his -

- "real mom..." Henry cries out as he storms into the house.

Emma stands at her door with lost lonely eyes that understand heartbreak and never winning all too well and Regina sees a room with a candle that overlooks a courtyard. She wonders how many times she'll be able to lie to herself – about having good inside of her and about ever having a chance for happiness – before she truly learns that none of those things exist.

She declares war and knows it's only a matter of time before she –.

-loses.

Henry hates her a bit more with each that day that passes and she supposes that it was inevitable that it'd come to this, but she shatters anyway.

He sees her as she is and he rejects her and she's not enough to keep him.

Not enough to fight for her father to fight for, not enough for her mother to ever be proud of, not enough for her teacher to see good in. Not enough.

Not even for a child.

Especially not one who sees the -

-truth.

All of it is true, she admits to Emma with a tired sigh and resignation and defeat burning deep in
her eyes. The blonde girl, who still only knows half of it, is understandably thunderstruck as everything Emma understands – or thinks she does - is torn asunder. But none of that matters, because all that does is Henry, and Regina will destroy and rebuild every world to save him.

But a kiss does that.

A simple kiss.

A perfect storybook kiss of True Love.

Henry opens his eyes and she closes hers.

She remembers Cora's words to her, "One day, you will be great, my love."

She laughs and cries and wonders if she's about to die -

-today.

But she doesn't die because Emma refuses to let it happen.

Emma refuses and Henry begs for her life and maybe just maybe, there's still some hope.

She dares to dream when Emma declares in the face of Archie's murder that she believes that she didn't do it.

She allows herself to believe that she can be better than this, she allows herself to believe that with Henry's faith, she can find who she once was.

And maybe even eventually, perhaps even find True Love once again.

She knows better and when it all breaks again, she has no one to blame besides herself. And Mother, of course, but it can only happen because she allowed herself to have hope that maybe she could find some happiness.

But there is none for her and Mother is dead in her arms.

"You would have been enough."

No, she thinks, probably not; she knows she'll never be enough for anyone.

So she stops hoping and lets the corrosive hatred and rage overtake her.

No more foolish storybook tall tales, no more lies from Emma and Henry.

It's time for everyone to burn, but in the end, she's -.

- the one burning.

Owen has her on the gurney and he's flooding her body with electricity and she's screaming until everything fades to darkness and fire. And then there's light again and he's bringing her back and starting everything all over again.

She screams and she dies and then she lives once again.

He tells her about his dad, tells her of the love between a father and son.
Tells her about how he’s spent the last thirty years trying to make sense of a story that makes sense to no one. But it all makes sense to everyone now.

He tells her she’s about to pay for everything that she’s ever done, and she laughs because how could such a thing ever be possible. Her eyes hurt and she can barely see him, but Regina sneers and tells him that she’s not sorry for what she did and she’ll never be sorry. She laughs when he screams and she refuses to admit how terribly afraid she truly actually is.

Because he hates her and she thinks that he might have a right to do so. He hates her and he’s crying like a child when he brings her back to life again.

"This is the end of you,” he says, a destroyed child staring back at her.

"Not yet,” Regina whispers, her throat shredded from all of the screaming and then her heart stops again and just before it does, she thinks that maybe it’s finally -

-"over for now,” the woman above her says softly.

She’s on a metal bed in the bright white room, bruised and beaten and barely conscious. She thinks that she’d been about to escape. Almost had.

But then their Queen – is bending over her and touching her face and she hears, "This is where we part ways. But worry not, we’re not done with each other yet, and maybe when we meet again, I think you’ll be ready and –"

-then she’s stumbling down a busy road and nothing makes sense. Her feet are bare and cut and she’s bizarrely naked and everything is frightening.

She hurts and wonders how she’s managing to stand up and walk, but then she hears these loud squeaking sounds and they hurt her ears so terribly.

She falls to the ground and a boy is there. He puts a jacket around her and tells her that everything is going to be okay and his eyes are kind like…

Daniel.

She’d known a Daniel once long ago, she believes but doesn't remember.

And she thinks that he’d had kind eyes and soft hands like this man does.

He stays with her until the world fades away again.

He’s gone when she -

-wakes up in a hospital bed, unable to remember who she is or was.

It all comes back eventually (and she wishes that it hadn't) and then time passes as it never used to and she tries to start all over again.

She tries to let herself be desired by others and to desire in return.

But she knows before she even starts that she won’t ever be enough for this man who wants to
touch her but will never actually know who she was and who she is and she's sick of not being
enough. So it ends and she's alone again and she thinks that she earned this and was never meant
for more.

She thinks that this is her well-earned penance and that there can never be enough of it for all of
the evil that she is and all of the blood that is on her hands. She has her answer and her answer is
she has never been good and will never be good and even in the darkest corners of her dreams, she
accepts that -

-this is what she is. Or at least she to accept it; it's harder some days to accept anything about
herself considering the shattered nature of her mind and the intense and painful difficulty she has
in pulling thoughts forward.

When she dreams (or when she's blindsided by a memory as sometimes happens when something
unexpectedly triggers it), she writes down what she sees and recalls in a leather-bound journal that
sits next to her bed.

It's a memory exercise and she does it to help her remember, because sometimes she forgets what
she's just retrieved almost before she realizes what's occurred. But it's different when the memory
is about Henry. When it's about him and their moments together, she focuses and grinds down into
her ruined mind until she's nearly crying from the pain of it.

But she remembers the details, sees the way that he loved her once.

She looks at a sticky note on the desk and it reminds her of his age.

He'll be twenty-two years old soon. Almost a man.

She's been away from him for almost ten years now. She wonders what he looks like and if he's
happy. She wonders if he still thinks about her at all, and if he does, is it with any degree of love or
is it with a heart full of hate.

She sighs and puts down her pen, her hands trembling and her head aching.

She's about to stand up, about to reach for her cane to help her over to the couch when her phone
rings; it's a job that will send her to Boston for a few days and though she's tired and could use the
rest, she needs to be out of this apartment and not feeling the walls closing in on her so she says,
"Yes -.

- "please," to the waiter even though it's her fifth ice tea and he has to be wondering why she's
sitting in this café and drinking only ice tea. But he doesn't ask and just keeps bringing her the
drinks, ignorant of the way that she's watching one of the other waiters as he putters around.

Henry, her beautiful handsome Henry.

It's his smile that makes her give in and write the letter. She watches him move between the tables
at the little cafe and she hears the way he laughs and she has to fight against herself because all
she wants to do is touch him.

She's weak and she knows better and she should leave Henry alone and not bring the burden that
is her life onto him. She tells herself that if he doesn't want to see her – if Emma doesn't want her to
see him – then she will drop this and try to forget (as she's forgotten so much) that she saw him at
all.
She knows she'll never be able to do that, but tells herself she'll try, anyway.

Thankfully, she-

- doesn't need to try because Emma Swan is at her door and she's as bold and improper and unfiltered as she's ever been. She's older and there are demons and ghosts lurking behind her eyes as well, but she's here.

She's here and she's smiling when she says, "Okay?"

And though she's far from it, Regina clutches her cane and nods and says, "Okay."

Because it's time to go-

- home. That's what this place is. Or any place where Henry is.

His arms are strong and he's crying as much as she is. She falters and thinks that she's about to collapse – and in a moment, she will actually fall onto him completely – but for now, she has enough strength to be here with him.

She wonders why it took her so long to realize that-

- she actually needs these people.

It's a family dinner around the table at Emma's and there's laughter and for a moment, all Regina can do is watch in awe because this isn't painful and she'd always assumed that it would be. The only thing that hurts is that this is the first time she's ever been part of this. But then Emma is nudging her foot and grinning at her and making half-assed jokes that are almost physically painful and Snow is scolding David and Henry and telling them to behave while chuckling behind her hand and it doesn't matter if this is the first time that they've done this, it only matters that it's not the last.

It's only matters that she's no longer-

- alone.

Snow is sitting by her bed as she dozes, the strong painkillers in her system fogging up her mind. They're not enough, though, and Regina thinks about a room on fire and books burning all around her. She thinks about a past that can't be undone and a future she's not certain exists. But then Snow is gripping her hand and squeezing it and she's talking about forgiveness and new beginnings for them, and well, that sounds like a good story, too.

Her mind remains fractured and her body remains damaged but-

- Emma's hands are around hers and her thumb is lightly rubbing against the deep scars dug into her palm. They're abhorrent; a now bloodless sign of all of the wicked and evil that she is. They symbolize the monster that needed to be destroyed and it's unthinkable that anyone would gaze upon them with anything less than horror and yet Emma is, and she finds that she can't pull her eyes away from the almost reverent way that Emma touches her.

But then Emma is telling her that she wants her here – that she is wanted.
Emma is promising her that they – as a family – will win their happiness.

Emma’s eyes are troubled, and these last years which have been spent doubting herself and hiding from the past haven’t been overly kind to her either; she has lost much and forgiven herself for even less, but she’s done with all of that and done with living in the past and now she wants to be happy. She sees and she understands and she wants to fight.

She wants them to fight and she plans to win.

She believes that they can win.

Insists that they can.

"Okay?" Emma asks and she's asking for Regina to believe her, to trust her on this. That they can do this together.

And though Regina knows better (but finally she's understanding that even if she does know better – and she does, she truly does – there are some things that she never will learn her lesson about and Emma Swan and her force of will is definitely one of those), she finds herself believing Emma. So she nods and says, "Okay."

And then it’s -

- the screaming of her name that rips Regina back to her senses. Her heart pounding in her chest and working so hard to pump the blood flowing out of her still, she wonders how long she'd been unconscious and thinks perhaps only seconds.

She should be dead and she thinks she probably will be soon, but not yet.

Sluggishly, she forces her eyes open and for a moment all she can do is sleepily blink, her blood loss significant. She's surprised that there appears to be so much activity going on around her, because isn't it almost over?

She's dying and so is magic and as long as Emma and Henry are safe, then –

But Emma isn't the type to stay – or play it – safe and she's not being smart about this; she's badly wounded and she should know better than to do anything but stay down and close her eyes and wait for this to all be over, but the truth is that Emma Swan isn't built to let people she cares about (Regina tries not to think too hard about this now because it just makes her fading heart ache) die and she is especially not built to let them die for her, so the moment the doors come smashing in and Emma’s father stumbles into the room (he's covered in blood and dirt and looks like he's just been through a war and she supposes that that confirms that John and Wendy had brought at least a couple of their mean goons along), Emma is shoving herself up to her feet and Snow is even helping her like they're planning to charge.

That's when she notices the bright golden light around Emma. It seems to be surrounding almost every inch of her, swimming up through her skin and making it almost glow. Snow and David are both too focused on what's in front of them and Emma is already in motion, but Regina sees it and thinks about a moment on a porch that had turned into a bitter fight. That had been when she'd learned about Emma having magic inside of her as well.

But Emma hasn't used it in years and she's not exactly using it right now, either; this is the magic being yanked out of her by the ceremony that is bleeding away Regina's life and all of the rest of the magic in this world.
Emma's is coming out as well, but while it is, it seems to be energizing her.

Giving Emma strength that she shouldn't have considering the cruel break of her bones and the split of her flesh, blood still staining against pale skin.

Not that it matters, Regina thinks even as she hears the sound of things hitting together (hands and bodies and perhaps a baseball and a sword) and several shouts. There's a roaring gunshot then and she lets out a soft whimper of protest, because this isn't how it was supposed to go down.

Her sacrifice – her surrender – was supposed to matter for something.

This end of her and of magic was supposed to keep those she...loves safe.

But then someone – Snow, she thinks - is screaming Emma's name out and she hears the sound of something hard hitting the ground beside her. Her head turns and she sighs and then coughs as her eyes lock with Emma's.

"You idiot," she hisses as she takes in the sight of the blonde who should have stayed down and allowed herself to survive this nightmare but who has now added a shiny red bullet hole in her abdomen to her many recently suffered wounds.

But Emma – stupid brave Emma who never does anything that she should - laughs, blood on her teeth and tears on her cheeks. And then because she doesn't want to die alone, she's reaching out for Regina. Above them, they can still hear the sound of fighting and Snow is rushing towards both of them as if to put herself over them, but all Regina is aware of is the hand that touches hers and the fingers that interweave with her own, clutching and asking for a return of the same.

She feels the heat surge through her the moment Emma's hands touch hers and knows that it's their magic merging and connecting and then as she returns the squeeze with the last bits of energy that she has, she feels the energy swell like a balloon, raw power sweeping through the both of them.

She's slumped wearily against the wall and she knows that she should be lying down (or dead), but her tired bloodshot eyes are on the fitfully slumbering woman in the hospital bed and despite the constant urging from well...everyone to take care of herself and to ensure that her own medical needs are being properly addressed, she refuses to leave Emma's side.

Instead, she leans closer and tries to ignore the blinding unsettling whiteness of the –

— fresh bandages that Snow has just wrapped around her damaged wrists.

When Snow lifts her eyes and meets Regina's eyes, she says, her voice shaking with fear and anger and so many desperate emotions, "I have forgiven you – and you have forgiven me - for a lot of the awful things that we've been through together and apart, Regina, but if you ever...ever do that again, I will never forgive you. Do you understand me?"

"I did what I thought –"

"No. No! You don't get to...you don't. Not after I just got you back."

And then Snow is leaning forward and hugging her and Regina finds herself allowing Snow to wrap her into her arms and -
- she's staring into the mirror in the bathroom, her eyes roaming over the scars on her body. She lifts up her hands and looks at the new ones there, the red lines still bright against her wrists. She breathes in and tells herself that they're just scars and they are no longer all that she is. She tells herself that she is more than these and more than her past and then -

– they're jogging together, their normal route to the pier, and for once, Henry is with them, running out ahead of them and occasionally turning around to laugh at them and harass them both about how slow they're moving these days. They exchange a look and then both of them – without a word said – throw their full water bottles at him.

"I think," Emma threatens with a grin on her face. "That it's time for –"

– "breakfast that you owe me," Emma says as she steps into the kitchen and drops into the chair opposite where Regina is working on a crossword puzzle, the eraser on the back of the pencil tucked between her teeth. "Tomorrow morning."

"Need I remind you, dear, that we have breakfast every morning," Regina reminds her with a chuckle.

"I hope so," Emma answers softly and she's looking at her and smiling a bit impishly as –

– Henry steps up on the stage and then waves over at them as he strides towards the dean, his hand out to shake his hand and accept his diploma. Which he promptly holds up to show both of his mothers.

When he returns to them, he hugs them both as tightly as he can, but then after a smile at Emma, he's turning towards Regina and burying his head into her shoulder and his arms are so strong around her and he's crying.

After a few moments of this, she looks over and sees Emma just watching and then she hold out an arm out to pull Emma in and then they're –

– both resting up against the rail overlooking the water and then Emma is turning and saying with a nervous laughing tremble in her voice that she knows that they're trying to take this slow and all but there's something that she can't stop thinking about doing and if it's okay...and then she's leaning over and there's a pause – just a small one while Emma's searching Regina's dark eyes and making for damned sure that what she wants to do here is wanted in return – and then Regina is one that is deciding to hell with this and to hell with everything else and she's the one moving in for the kiss.

They're actually kissing and it's warm and a little strange and overwhelming in all of the right ways, because while Regina is just a bit tentative and uncertain still, Emma kisses like she's someone desperately in need of water and this is the only way that she'll be able to get it. She moves in even closer now and her touch is firm and soft and her lips are –

– moving across her back.

Emma's lips are on her back and moving over the scars there and for a moment the past and everything she's been through is just too much and she inhales deeply, her breath rattling in her chest. She feels more than sees Emma stop and then she feels a light kiss against her shoulder.
"Okay?"

"No," she admits, tears in her eyes as ugly images play out behind them.

"Okay," Emma says and then she's turning and turning her and this is just warm arms and a soft body and she sighs in relief and tucks in even tighter.

There had been a time not too long ago when sleeping next to someone had been impossible and terrifying in a way that would have completely debilitated her but now, it's becoming impossible to imagine –

– these people not being in her life.

And they're always in her life these days. Whether for family dinners, renewed physical therapy appointments, sessions with Archie or random middle of the day get-togethers that always end up with a few too many hugs.

Sitting across from Snow and David at the diner, she reaches for a fry, pauses for a moment and then pops it into –

– her mouth slides lower down Emma, her lips mapping out every curve of the woman's lithe body. Being the one to give pleasure is easier Regina finds, more comfortable than the other way around by a landslide. And though she was ten years out of practice before they'd started this part of their relationship, she's gotten fairly good at it in a hurry. She's figured out what Emma likes and what drives her crazy and now she listens for the sounds, and waits to hear Emma's moans.

Now she listens for Emma to whispers out her name in that way that only she can.

Like nothing else in the world matters.

When she does, when Emma gasps her name out like a prayer, Regina lifts up and kisses her hard on the mouth, pressing her body against Emma's and allowing the feel of someone so close to her that it's almost frightening.

Emma's turning her over a few moments later and looking down at her and saying in that way that is so honest and earnest and wanting and needing and so entirely Lost and now Found Girl Emma Swan, "Let me touch you."

Regina's eyes close and open and she breathes in and breathes out and then nods, sighing when Emma puts her head down against her breasts – presses her soft lips against the long ugly whip-mark that's there – and kisses her.

Emma looks up at her. "Okay?" she says.

"Okay," Regina murmurs, her heart pounding with a thousand emotions, a million feelings and all the love that she thinks a person is truly capable of.

Emma smirks at that and then lowers her mouth again, all the while –

– watching her sleep.

She finds it nearly impossible to look away from Regina when she's dozing like this. Not in a dead to the world slumber thanks to being drugged up on painkillers, but still sleeping soundly and
peacefully. Finally, after so much time of being lost and heartbroken, Regina is content and happy and she's not hurting as she'd been hurting for so very long.

It's hard not to touch her when she's like this, to wake her up and kiss her and to make love to her until neither one of them can move. It's hard not to be overcome by a thousand emotions that she can't control; some of them so strong that they're almost frightening. She looks down and sees a woman that has spent so long viewing herself as evil and wicked and who is just now figuring out how to look at herself in a mirror again and see something more and it's all just so much.

It's all so much and it's hers.

Smiling to herself, Emma slides an arm around Regina and leans in so that she can lightly kiss her shoulder but as she does so, Regina turns and looks up at her. "Good morning," she says, her voice low and hoarse.

"Hey," Emma replies, scooting in closer. "I didn't mean to wake you up."

"I could feel you watching me again."

"I'm sorry."

Emma inhales as a hand lightly skims over her jawline and then Regina is pulling her back down and into a kiss.

"Don't be," she says, her voice so soft and full of something.

And then their eyes are meeting and -

- both of their eyes are open and they're staring at each other like they can't figure out what just happened of it even had happened. And then Emma is lifting their still joined hands and looking at the shimmering gold that's circling them and moving up and down both of their wounded bodies. It takes her a moment to realize that it's her magic moving against Regina's, trying to push it back inside of her, trying to keep it from being sacrificed. Trying to keep both of them alive.

Around them, there's nothing but chaos. Her father and her mother are struggling with not just Wendy and John (she thinks that the son of a bitch shot her and there's really nothing more she'd like to do than return the favor, but she can't really focus on much of anything beyond Regina right now) but also some of their hired thugs; her father is good with a sword and her mother is standing over the two of them with a blade of her own and somehow or another, against all reasonable odds, they're managing to hold their own for the time being. She wonders vaguely where the hell had they gotten those, she wonders, but then Regina is gasping and breathing hard and reminding Emma that they're both dying.

They're both dying and her parents are fighting, but the sounds she's hearing and the movement she can pick up even through the haze of her pain streaked mind is enough to tell her that even though her mom and dad are holding their own, they're still losing and there will come a point when even their braveness and strength won't be enough - especially with Regina down and dying and their daughter looking like she'll be following close behind her to the Grim Reaper's door.

Emma looks back over at Regina, finds her eyes and lets out a soft sigh of resigned defeat and sadness. Regina answers with a lazy smile, looking like the blood loss is pushing her into a place where all of the pain that she feels is finally just fading away and there's just these last moments of trying to connect with someone - with Emma - before it's all over.
That's when they hear it; the last thing that they ever wanted to hear in the middle of this bloodbath nightmare.

"Mom!"

She feels Regina's panic and fear and her need to protect Henry at any and every cost run hot through her like a wildfire, and she feels her own intense emotions react in kind, and then the gold magic around her is swirling and turning purple and white and deep and then there's intense heat again and she thinks she's crying out even as the magic gathers in their still tightly joined hands and then rushes outwards, flooding the room with bright light.

She hears Henry scream out for them again, thinks she hears Regina cry out in pain as the heat overwhels both of their wounded bodies, and then, even as their eyes lock once again, their desperate need to protect their son uniting them as it always has and always will, everything is just fading away from the both of them as the room violently shakes beneath the force of their magic as it flows out of them in a desperate attempt to save their son.

Her last thought is that she hopes that it was enough.

TBC…
A/N: Finally, we have reached the end of this journey. It's been long and difficult one and I deeply appreciate you taking it with me. I hope that this final chapter satisfies you and again, thank you for all of the kind words and feedback.

Warnings: Not many. A mild bit of talk of torture, implication of past rape and some non-graphic kissing and love.

Extra gratitude to Mari for helping me work through everything and to Jess for you help in editing. Much love.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

STORYBROOKE, MAINE - 2023

While the world is crumbling and burning down, Regina has a bright vision of sitting at a dinner table. It takes her a brief moment to realize that she's in Snow's loft and it's the whole Charming clan sitting there with her like it's all perfectly normal for this to be happening. There's a massive turkey in the middle of the table and dark red wine filling every glass and when she looks to each of her sides, she sees her family all around her.

Henry and Emma and Snow and David and even Ruby are there.

There's laughter and joking and Emma's hand keeps touching hers and Henry's kissing her on the cheek when he cracks an off-color joke and she thinks this just might be the perfect dream. She thinks that this might be exactly what makes life worth living and realizes that yes, she really does want to actually have this; having this would be having it all.

David lifts up a wine glass and laughs when red liquid sloshes out and then he says as he looks around the table, "We sure don't make what anyone would call a sane family, but it's ours. Cheers."

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BANGOR, MAINE - 2023

"You're late again," his secretary Lila says with a wry smile as he enters the office in a rush. Her eyes track to the oddly colored stain on his white dress shirt and it takes everything that she has not to laugh at him for the mess that Connor constantly is these days. He'd been able to handle his first child – well, his wife had been – but the twin baby boys he now has are turning him inside out and it's really a damned good thing that he does the vast majority of his business via phone.

"I know, I know," Connor Matthews sighs. He's in his mid thirties and some days thinks he's too old for all of this. Some days he wonders what he (they) had been thinking when he and his wife had decided to have more children considering the fact that they already have a much older daughter that is learning how to drive her parents insane. Not that he would give any of his kids up for the world, but he wouldn't mind a few less stains now and again. "But on the upside, I'm pretty
sure I've finally mastered the art of feeding Jimmy via airplane noises." He gestures at his shirt and then chuckles and offers, "Luke, on the other hand, is resistant to my charms and will only eat when his mother is the one making the noises."

"Luke is a momma's boy," she answers.

"Yeah, tell me about it. Anything that I need to be aware of?"

"You have a eleven o'clock meeting with the lawyers from the Derringer Group; you're going to have to give them a final decision about the high-rise project sooner or later. In or out, Connor; you can't sit on this one forever."

"I'm aware, and don't worry; I'm going to say yes today and start working on the contract. Promise. Now, anything else?"

"This was slide under the office door," Lila replies, holding up a plain white envelope. "No postage stamp and no return address. Nothing besides just Mr. Matthews written on it. And as much as I know you're intrigued by it, I'm not sure you should open it. It could be some could of crazy biological warfare thing. You know, the beginning of a really horror movie."

"Uh huh, Lila, np one is going to send anthrax to a boring ass building designer in the middle of Maine," Connor laughs and then takes the envelope from her. He turns it around in his hands and cocks his head in curiosity because it seems so innocent and inconsequential and yet somehow or another, he suddenly knows that it's anything but either one of those things. Somehow, he just knows that this letter is vitally important to him. Lila had been right; the only thing written on the front of the envelope in somewhat shaky pressed into the paper fairly deep black block letters is MR MATTHEWS.

"So open it," Lila prompts.

"I will in a bit," Connor assures her. "I need to get ready for Derringer. But if you hear any odd choking sounds and it sounds like I'm might be foaming at the mouth –"

"I'll make sure your will is updated and sent to your lawyer before you die."

"Fantastic," he grins and then steps into his office. He shuts the door behind him, looks down at his kid-damaged dress shirt, shakes his head and then drops down into his chair. He puts the envelope down in front of him, gazes at it for a moment and then sighs and reaches for the file for the upcoming call.

The letter – and whatever message is inside of it – will have to wait.

*** ***

She thinks that this must be what it's like coming back to your senses after being in the middle of a massive bomb explosion. Her ears are ringing and she can feel blood dribbling down from her nose. It's warm and wet and her first thought is that she doesn't think she has enough left inside of her.

But Regina isn't dead yet and one look over at the blonde as they both push themselves up to their knees (comically – as much as a dire situation like this can ever actually be comical – perfectly in sync with each other), and Regina knows that even if this is the end for them – and she finds herself hoping for the first time in a very long time that she will get to see tomorrow somehow – that she's
not going to go out alone. She won’t die alone and forsaken.

Perhaps that should have been her fate, but it’s not going to be.

"Emma," she says, her voice rough. She's bleeding out quickly and her chances of surviving get less with every moment, but somehow she still has enough within her to be able to do this. She still has enough – and so does Emma – to be able to save the boy that they both love more than anything else in the world. "Can you feel your magic?" she whispers, almost hopeful because if Emma does have magic still within her, then perhaps together they can still do something wonderful.

Or at least better than just dying.

"You haven’t made it go away yet," Emma grins, the smile a bit morbid thanks to the blood on her teeth. And then she's turning her attention towards where the fight is and towards where a desperately and angrily struggling Henry is being blocked from getting to his mothers (or from jumping into the middle of this fight even more) by Rumple as he and David and Snow fight against Wendy and John. Unfortunately, the two of them are holding up well, using their likely stolen magical protections to fight back against the Storybrooke team with.

Everyone looks like they've been through a natural disaster and this Cannery surely won't survive today, it's clear (it's already caving in, the walls crumbling and falling apart with each blast). Whatever their joined magic had thrown out to protect Henry, it had succeeded in doing it, but it's still not yet enough.

Because this end of things battle isn't yet over and they're both still dying which means that Wendy and John and the Home Office are still winning.

"You're thinking something," Regina notes and there's a hint of the old teasing there, something that would almost be the natural conclusion to that statement (something like "you know better, right?"), but Henry's looking right at them and though Rumple and David are trying to block him from rushing over to his mothers, he's not a little boy anymore and eventually their focus will redirect and their son will throw himself into the middle of things as he always has. Which means now isn't the time for jokes.

Even old familiar ones.

"I'm thinking they can't stop what they don't see," Emma says quietly, her eyes flickering over to John and Wendy. They're using some kind of stolen magic as a protective shield against Rumple's energy blasts (Snow and David are waiting for the shield to fall, though Emma notes that Snow's hand is on Henry's forearm and she, too, keeps looking over at them like maybe she's the one person here who hasn't forgotten that the two people who had nearly brought the roof of this place down are still powered up).

"You realize you're talking about what could be a fatal amount of energy and focus," Regina reminds her, but she's already clutching Emma's hand even tighter and both of them are glowing beneath the pairing of them.

"I know that if you die and I die before Henry is safe, he'll follow after."

"No," Regina gasps.

"That's not what's going to happen," Emma tells her and then she's again lifting their joined hands and the blood leaking from both of their ears and noses is so much worse (Regina wonders how
she's alive with her wrists slit as they are and then assumes that the magic that is actually dying with her is also slowing down that death unnaturally. Emma points their hands at the back flanks of Wendy and John, at their exposed and unprotected side.

Because despite decades of preparation and hateful corruption, they can't prevent from happening what they don't suspect ever could happen: losing.

Pride before the fall. Regina thinks she knows that all too well.

Wendy turns right as the magic – now a light lilac in color – arcs from Regina and Emma's hands and she screams at John to watch out (Regina muses that she's rarely seen this icy woman lose her cool but perhaps under everything, there was some humanity in there, maybe even a kind of love for the brute who had been her partner throughout this ugly vengeful quest of hers), but then instead of turning away, he's spinning right into the brutal magic and it catches him directly in the face, turning fiery red as it violently rips him apart.

Their violent magic (protective but vengeful in this moment) starts at the outside of John and then burrows inwards, peeling away skin and frying flesh before super-heating blood and causing his veins to explode and his organs to liquefy. His eyes bulge and then seem to pop as everything inside tries to escape and then he lets out an inhuman sound before –

He crumbles and then bursts apart, swept into the magic, absorbed by it.

Regina thinks that she shouldn't feel the vicious satisfaction that she does at seeing him die, but she thinks about an icy table and a brutal whip and large hands that had touched her with the intent to abuse and destroy. She thinks of him watching with a cold smile on his face as she'd been held down and -

He can't hurt her anymore, she thinks and somehow knows that Emma is the one telling her this.

She doesn't have much time to think about to (neither one of them do) before they're watching the magic turn on Wendy.

The woman - so destroyed by hate and the need to destroy everything that had once destroyed her - holds up her hands, protective blue glittering on them, but she's shaking her head because this is the eradication and obliteration of all that she is. This is being consumed by her own twisted hateful obsession. It's fitting and it's –

Regina's hand drops away from Emma's.

"It's over," she says. "She doesn't die by magic." Her eyes meet Rumple's and she sees the confusion and betrayal there and thinks "Join the club."

"Regina, finish her," he demands. "You promised."

"And you promised me you'd keep my son away from this," she mumbles, her words rapidly becoming incoherent as the anger floods away from her and the burst of magic that had slowed down her bleeding out dissipates.

And then she's falling and everything is growing dark and she's trying to breathe but suddenly there's so much blood. She feels arms around her and hears Henry's voice in her ear. Telling her to hold on. Just please hold on.

She feels other arms circle around here then and knows that even though Emma has a gaping hole in the middle of her gut and wounds all over her from her torture and her once again found magic,
she's clutching on to both her son and her...whatever Regina is to her. She's clutching both of them and then Henry is adjusting and he's the one wrapped around them instead.

She can feel Snow and David dropping down beside them, hands on them, soft words of reassurance and hope being offered, but it's all just noise. There's the sound of engines somewhere in the distance and the crumbling of plaster and brick as the Cannery continues to collapse and she thinks she hears more voices - new familiar (friendly) voices.

But none of it means anything to her. All that she cares about are the people surrounding her; the only ones she needs.

Regina finds Emma's exhausted eyes first, offers the stubborn and relentless woman a smile of gratitude and perhaps something far more than that and then, as the shadows creep in, she looks at Henry and says, "I love you."

And keeps saying it.

Just in case this is the end and she never wakes up again, he has to know.

He has to always know.

*** ***

He's pacing his office while on the call, his hands in his pockets and then out of them again as he anxiously fidgets and tries to focus. He would prefer that all of these boring business details be handled by someone else so that he can just focus on the drawing and the creating part of things, but every now and again as his wife likes to remind him, he has to play the game.

It doesn't help that he keeps thinking about that damned white envelope.

He walks back towards his desk, mumbles out a vague agreement to some statement made by one of the lawyers in the Derringer Group about how a certain part of the project will be compensated when items a and b are delivered by specific dates or something like that, and then sits down and picks up the envelope again. He'd told himself he'd look at it after the meeting and not now and in the middle of a potentially highly lucrative deal discussion.

But then Connor is yanking the white envelope open and pulling out the surprisingly elegant stationary inside of it, and after just a few words of the shaky black block letters, he's leaning in towards the speakerphone and saying in a trembling voice, "Hey, something just came up, guys; I'm sorry but we will have to continue this conversation later."

*** ***

It's surprising enough to wake up at all, but even more so when she looks up to see the person sitting next to her isn't Emma or Henry or Snow but rather Rumplestiltskin. He's holding her cane in his hands, twirling it around.

"Welcome back to the world of the living, Your Majesty," Rumple says coolly when his eyes meet hers and he realizes that she's finally woken up.

"Rumple," she replies and winces at the sound of her own deep husky voice.

"You seem surprised."

"I didn't think I had much more blood in me left to lose."
"You almost didn't. I'm not sure how much more your heart can take."

She smiles sadly at that.

"But perhaps a bit more," he says. "You're going to live." He motions to her hands and she looks down and notices that both are covered in tape. "You might have a few more scars than you did before – if you so choose to keep them once the internal healing part is done – but will leave this room alive."

"Emma?"

"She has a fair amount of injuries – the worst being the bullet to her middle – but none of them so serious that she won't make a full recovery," Rumple chuckles, unable to hide his bemusement about these two stubborn women who refuse to just bend and break because everyone expects them to do so.

Regina lets out a breath. Then, "If I'm fine and so is she, why are you here?"

"You made me a promise."

"Wendy. Is she –"

"For now."

"I won't kill Wendy Darling."

"You promised me," he reminds her, saying the words once again. There's something she hears, though; something that suggests to her that he's just going through the motions of this conversation. Of this broken deal of theirs.

"And as I said, you promised me that you would protect Henry and you let him throw himself into the middle of a battle because you were afraid of losing your magic and because your need for vengeance was greater than your need to protect your grandson. Thank God they didn't realize what they had there and never focused in on him. Because if they had –"

"I know," Rumple admits, real apology written in the creases of his face.

"Was it worth it? Would it have been worth it?"

Their eyes meet and for a moment, all of their history is just there for both of them to see and it's almost impossible to look away from the ugliness of it all. Equally so, it's hard not to see the regret that lurks between them.

Regret that she thinks he even shares.

"I don't want anymore blood on my hands," she insists after a few moments of silence hang between the two of them. "My magic...Emma's magic, we killed John today. We ripped him apart and...I don't want that. No more death, Rumple; please."

"You did," he agrees. "For the sake of your son. What about mine? How do I avenge him?"

"I think that's something you have to answer for yourself. But I know that where we've been hasn't gotten either one of us anywhere that's worthwhile. So do what you think is right to mourn him," Regina says. "But I won't help."

"That woman –"
"Destroyed me. I know. I'm done letting her win. She doesn't get to do it again. And neither do you or any of the other demons in my head, Rumple. Which means that maybe I get to be who I want to be. Not your monster and not hers. I don't want to be the Evil Queen ever again. I won't be her."

"Very well," he says and then stands up. He rests her cane against the wall and then turns back. "Your body has been far too hurt to heal completely and the damage is too old and too deep, but what I could fix for you, I did."

"Why?"

"Because I believe Bae would have wanted me to do that," he says softly.

She thinks for a moment and then says softly, "He'd want you to live, too."

"I know. But I can't just let what she did...what she took from me...I can't."

"You can. We don't have to keep playing into the worst of ourselves," she says, wincing as she adjusts herself in the bed. She wants to do an inventory of herself, find out what might be better, but she'll wait until he's left her.

Because even now, even lying in a hospital bed with her maimed wrists bandaged up, she doesn't want to show more weakness than she has to.

"Perhaps we can," he says and starts for the door.

"One more thing," she asks, and then waits until he turns. "While I was dying, I had these strange visions. Flashes. They seemed like maybe they were the future." She smiles a bit to herself. "A good future for me."

"And you want to know if that's certain now?"

"Yeah."

"Sorry to be the one to tell you, but the future isn't written, dearie. Even my foresight only told me bits of pieces of what likely would be, but even that could have been altered by unexpected choice. What you might have seen were possibilities. Roads, perhaps. There's no reason you can't take them."

"No," she allows. "There isn't. Thank you for...whatever you did."

"It's not everything and or even enough, but it's something," he says and then he steps out of the room, walking past Snow as she comes back into it.

A look passes between the two of them and then Snow is sitting down.

"What was that?" she asks.

"Settling the past. Or at least trying to. How long was I out?"

"A couple days. You needed a lot of rest."

"And Emma is okay?"

"She is. She needs rest. A lot more, but she's going to be fine."

"I never meant for her to be hurt. You know that, right? Both you and David, you know that I never
wanted her to get caught up in this, right?"

"We know. And what happened with him and you...he feels terribly."

"He doesn't need to. He and I may not have always seen eye to eye through our histories, but the one thing that we both understand is being a parent."

"Still."

Regina smiles slightly at her.

"Right. And for what it's worth, nothing you could have said or done would have kept Emma from being there by your side. She cares a lot for you."

"Snow," Regina says cautiously, adjusting herself once again.

"I think we have all spent more than enough time not being happy," the younger woman says with a nod of her head. "I think it's time we are."

There's a second where the two of them are just looking at each other and Regina almost laughs because hadn't she been having exactly this kind of moment with Rumple just minutes earlier? She wonders if every corner of her often sordid and uncomfortable history is crammed full of these kinds of deep relationships that seem to always have been so intense? She supposes that it is and then laughs because really, what else is there to do at this point?

"What is it?" Snow asks.

"Nothing and everything, dear," she says and reaches out a hand towards Snow. It's usually a motion that Snow initiates but this time she's the one who finds herself craving the contact and though there's just the slightest of pauses before Snow's fingers grip hers (no doubt owing to surprise), the contact comes quickly and then Snow is the one who is laughing out loud.

Her words aren't nearly as humorous, though. "If you ever do that again -"

"I won't," Regina promises her, her head falling back on the pillow but her hand never loosening from Snow's. "I want to live. I want to see my son graduate college and get married and...I want to find happiness, Snow."

It sounds so simple and easy, even to her ears. But she knows better and knows that allowing herself to hope for it is just the beginning of the road.

"You will," Snow promises her. "All of that, you will have a chance to do."

"Where is Henry?" she asks, glancing back towards the door.

"Taking a walk with Ruby. He's been a bit anxious going room to room."

"Right. And how is she? I know she didn't want Victor to be dead."

"Conflicted. I think maybe relieved and upset with herself that she is."

"Would you like me to talk to her?"

"I would, but aren't I supposed to be the one doing that."

"Yes, but I think that there are some things we're both glad that you don't understand," Regina tells
her kindly, wincing again. "But you can be there. I think at this point, she's a lot like me and just doesn't want to be alone."

"Okay." Noticing Regina wince once more as she yet again shifts to get comfortable on the bed, Snow asks, "You want me to check around and see if I can get you some more painkillers? Things are a bit weird around out there right now because no one quite knows the hospital power structure with Whale...dead. Thankfully, we have some good doctors, anyway."

"I'd prefer not," Regina assures her with another squeeze. "I'd like to sleep a little more and then I want to see my son and I want to see Emma. But until I fall asleep, I want you to tell me some stories. Something...lovely."

"I have stories about me and David," she offers.

Regina groans and then with a small smirk says, "Tell me them, anyway."

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"Everything all right, Connor?" Lila asks as she steps into his office with a cup of tea in her hands for him. She had already seen the iCal for today's meeting show up as PART 2 for tomorrow. Which seems really strange considering how long he's been delaying this decision with the lawyers.

He looks up. "Yeah. But I think I need to step out for the day. Take care of something." She notices that the envelope is open on his desk and the letter is clutched between his fingers. "Yeah, it has to do with this," he admits.

"What is it?" she asks.

He hands it to her so that she can read it.

"Dear Mr. Matthews. You probably don't remember me and if so, that's a good thing, but on the off chance that you do, I am writing this note because I wanted to say thank you for an act of kindness you showed me seven years ago in the middle of a crowded street. The Internet allowed me to find you and identify the kind man who protected a scared and wounded woman who had no idea who she was. You gave that woman – you gave me – your jacket that day and stayed with me until I was in good hands and you took care of someone that you'd never met. I haven't had a lot of people in my life do that for me and it has taken me a very long time to get to this point, but now that I'm here, I would really like to thank you in person."

Lila looks up at him. "Is this –?"

"You remember, I told you?"

"Yeah. But that was so long ago."

"I know," he admits. He gestures towards the letter again.

She reads, "I will understand if you have no interest in seeing me; that was a very long time ago and some things are left in the past. If so, please accept my gratitude and know that you made a difference in my life. If you are at all interested in meeting me, I'll be sitting out by the bench in the park just outside of your office at three this afternoon. I'm a dark-haired woman and I will be wearing a dark coat over a red blouse and slacks. Whatever happens or doesn't today, thank you for reminding me that good people do exist; after what I went through, I didn't believe, but your kindness helped secure a foundation that was there but uncertain, and now, I truly do believe."
"Regina Mills," he murmurs to himself. "That's what she signed it."

"You want me to look her up."

He frowns for a moment and says, "We should, right? Just to be sure this isn't some weird game." He shakes his head. "But it's not; I know it's not.

"So what are you going to do?" Lila asks as she sets down the tea.

"Meet this lady at three o'clock," he says as he turns to look out his window and down at the park below. He can see the bench he presumes she'll be on in a few hours from here and finds himself already wanting to watch for her.

"You're sure that's a good idea?" Lila queries, frowning slightly.

"Honestly, I don't know. I mean someone worked that poor lady over something awful, but the thing is, even if it's not a good idea, I think it's something I still need to do," Connor replies, his eyes still on the bench.

Because he's been telling himself for years that he'd forgotten that weird day with the badly beaten naked woman in the middle of the road. And he's sworn to himself that he'd let go of her haunted eyes and the way she had looked up at the blue sky in wonder. But he knows now that he never had.

Perhaps, after today, he will finally be able to let her go.

*** ***

"Mmm, I was having a really really good dream," Emma mumbles as she blinks herself awake and looks up to see Henry sitting over her bed, a schoolbook on his knees. He smiles when he sees her looking back at him and puts it down.

"Hey, Ma."

"Hey, Kid. Everything okay?"

"Yeah. I mean besides you being in and out of consciousness."

"Sorry about that. Hole in the gut."

"Right. Don't do that again."

"Copy that," she sighs. "Where's your mom?"

"You two ask for each other," he muses, lifting an eyebrow and grinning at her in a way that tells her that trying to weasel out of this just won't work.

"Answer the question, you little shit."

"Don't call him that," Regina scolds as she enters the room, her hand atop the head of the cane. The touch is softer, though, Emma notices. Less like the only reason she's standing is because of the cane. She thinks that has to be a good thing even if she doesn't actually understand it at the moment.

"Yeah, don't call me that," Henry mirrors. He stands up, then. "How about I leave you two alone. I'm sure you have a lot you want to talk about, right?"
"Subtle as a brick, kid."

"I am your son."

"Actually, that's a fairly good idea, sweetheart; I think as much as Ruby was able to help keep you distracted a few days ago while you were waiting for Emma and I to wake up, you might be able to help her get her mind off of things now. She's been with your grandmother and I for the last hour talking over what happened with Victor and I think that maybe she could use –"

"A chocolate sundae with her favorite Henry," he grins. "I'm on it." He leans down – way down – and kisses Emma on the cheek and then does the same with Regina, looping his arm around her waist for just a very brief moment.

When he's gone, Regina takes his seat, looks at his textbook and then places it on a nearby surface. And says, "You have a hole in your stomach."

"I do. It kind of hurts."

Regina rolls her eyes.

"But we're alive. We won."

"You got shot, Sheriff."

"But you didn't, Deputy." She then promptly breaks into song.

"Well I guess that answers the question about painkillers, doesn't it?"

Emma laughs. "Actually, I'm sore, but I feel pretty much okay. And I'm coherent." She lifts up a hand and brushes hair away from Regina's eyes.

"I suppose it's pointless to tell you that you should have –"

"Yes." Emma frowns then. "I do have a question for you, though."

"Anything."

"When we were both zonked out, I had these weird…visions."

"You did?"

"Of us. Of…stuff with us. Like…romantic stuff. Which I'm cool with, but –"

"I know; it's a bit…unnerving. I asked Rumple the same question a few days ago. Apparently, the magic that we were sharing between us showed us the opportunities and the possibilities involved in choosing to live. Nothing we saw is in set in stone or an absolute, but it did present us with… options."

"Gotcha. Well, for my money, it was pretty hot."

Regina laughs at that. "You sure your mother hasn't gotten to you with the painkillers? She's been trying to force them on me for the last few days."

"I'm sure and hey, I made you smile," Emma notes.

"You did," Regina agrees with a mock exasperated shake of her head. It doesn't fool Emma for a
moment and instead Regina gets a knowing grin.

Infuriating and beautiful.

And full of the understanding that has always existed between them.

Thankfully, before it can get too deep, she changes the subject. "Ruby is –"

"Finally healing, I believe," Regina confirms, her voice soft and tired. "It will be a long road for -" she chuckles because if anyone understands such a thing, it truly is her. "But she has Snow and we both know your mother is unrelenting."

"We do. And it's time for her to heal," Emma says and means that it's time for all of them to do so.

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Once he's alone in his office again, Connor turns to his computer and pulls up a search engine. He has a collection of newspaper articles stored in a box at home, but right now this will allow him to revisit that day more quickly.

Not that the details are a mystery to him.

He pulls up several articles about this unknown woman with the shaved head and the damaged body. They'd stopped after awhile and he thinks maybe that must have been when someone in her family had found her.

He thinks maybe the articles talking about her lack of identity had come to and end when someone had stepped forward to bring her home again.

No pictures had ever been published (nor the location of the hospital that she'd been staying in, though he'd had a pretty good idea where she'd ended up after the doors had closed behind her) – presumably out of fear that whomever had hurt her would go after her again. All he has is his memory and he wonders if he'll recognize her and realizes he hopes he won't because if he doesn't, then maybe she looks healthy and good.

Maybe she is.

He turns away from the computer and looks at his clock.

Just a few more hours now.

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The first morning that everyone is finally home from the hospital and back home at the townhouse, she leaves the bed that she is sharing with Emma (in a completely chaste way...for now, at least and then she scolds herself for even thinking of more than that because despite everything that had happened in her visions and despite what Henry and Snow think and how Emma seems to not be shying away from her, nothing is for sure and neither one of them has really made any moves to suggest they want more) and sneaks downstairs before five in the morning so that she can make breakfast.

For the time being, she's just working on making freshly baked blueberry muffins but eventually, by the time they wake up, it'll be all the fixings of an epic breakfast and Regina knows that it's unnecessary, but she thinks that maybe she's trying to make a statement and let Henry and Emma know that she wants this – that she wants to be part of all of this.
Her hip is still wounded and the nerve damage is still there and always will be for the rest of her life, but it’s less and for the first time in a very long time, she actually believes that with some intensive therapy (something she’d dismissed after losing faith in the value of it), she might one day be truly better than she is today and only need her cane and her pills on days when her exhaustion or stress get the best of her as opposed to almost every day as it’s been for so many years. The doctors that had helped her for so long after her presumed "escape" from the Home Office had reluctantly told her that she would never improve from the broken state that she’d been in, but now thanks to what Rumple was able to do for her and the hope that she once again feels deep within her heart, she actually thinks she might be able to prove them all wrong.

"Do I even want to know what you’re doing awake at this god awful time of the morning?" She hears from behind her just as she bends down to remove the large tray of blueberry muffins (with brown sugar on top) from the oven.

"You should still be in bed," Regina answers and then turns to face Emma. The blonde is leaning against the door-frame, her bathrobe pulled closed over her slim body. Which is good because even though she’s completely on the mend, she still has white tape over her stomach (because magic really isn’t a fix-all no matter how much everyone might think that it is and there are still rules about magic and healing when the wounds break through more than skin and chip off of muscle and bone) and Regina finds herself short of breath every time she sees the bandages and is reminded of why they’re there.

Not that Emma won’t rush to reassure her and remind her that she’d made her own choices, but still, this woman is in her blood and in her heart now and the sight of her with injuries hurts her far more than she cares to admit.

"I should," Emma agrees. "And so should you." There’s a gently playful smirk on her lips and it reminds both of them of what there is between them and what has been getting deeper and more intense for many weeks now.

The thing that had somehow appeared almost out of nowhere, but when you really thinks about it, has probably always been there. Not that either one of them could have seen it so many years ago when they’d been just Mayor and Sheriff and Evil Queen and Savior. But now, as just Emma and Regina, they see it and they feel it and neither one of them is running away even though both of them know that there’s a lot of danger in pursuing this.

"I couldn’t sleep," Regina admits as she places the steaming muffins on the counter. "I have a lot going on in my mind and…it’s all a bit…complicated."

"I know," Emma allows. "I felt you get up from the bed."

"I'm sorry. I can sleep downstairs until —"

"I'm perfectly fine with you in my bed," Emma grins and then leans over and picks up one of the muffins, dropping it almost immediately and wincing.

"Hot?" Regina asks, her eyebrow up.

"Slightly. But you know I always did like dangerous things."

"You might, but your flirting is reprehensible. And you don't even have painkillers to blame for it this time. I was willing to cut you slack before."

Emma laughs. "This is weird," she confesses. "And before you do that thing you do where you
"retreat, I don’t mean us, I mean the figuring us out part."

"True. But it's just breakfast, right? And I did promise you one."

"Well, actually, you said it would be lovely," Emma notes as she goes for the muffin again and picks at it. "But that was when you were about to die."

"You're still upset with me about that."

"Seems only fair. You were pissed about me getting shot to try to protect you so I get to be mad that you tried to commit suicide to save my life."

"What would you like me to say here?"

"The truth. Why? Why was then when you decided to stop fighting back?"

"Henry needs you."

"Henry needs us both," Emma replies sharply. "You really think he could have handled losing you again? I'm his mom, Regina, but you're his mother and you coming home to us, that closed up a massive hole in his heart. You dying...he wouldn't have been able to deal with that and I sure as hell wouldn't have been. You know, I keep thinking about this and wondering if you being so willing to die was just all a part of your self-loathing — she holds up her hand to stop Regina from interrupting. "But then I talked to my mom and I thought about it a bit and I realized that no, this is just you. You do this because you don't think you matter to anyone. And you act like if you just disappeared again, we could all just go on with our lives so easily."

"Emma —"

She shakes her head. "I think that I'd really like to kiss you right now."

Regina blinks twice, surprised by the sudden shift and then even more surprised by the absolute sincerity she sees in Emma's green eyes. "What?"

"Because you might think that I'm the stubborn idiot, but trust me, you can more than give me a run for my money there so maybe I just need to —"

"Kiss me?" Regina asks, wide-eyed and thinking of her visions that had shown her and Emma having their first kiss in front of a rail. Rumple had made it clear that those were just possibilities, and though this situation is decidedly different, it seems some things might be turning out the same.

"I was always better at acting than talking," Emma says as she steps around the counter. Her hands lift and then she's cupping Regina's face and smiling somewhat uneasily as she waits for some sign of whether to continue or stop. "But I need to know that you're interested in this as much as I am."

"I am. I just —"

"It's just a kiss. That's it."

"If it's just that, then why are we both acting like idiot children?"

"Because my first kiss that I got from some kid named Jimmy Wilkes in the fourth grade made me tingle all the way down to my toes," Emma replies and then she laughs. "Yeah, even I can do some sappy sometimes."
"I thought that you were all action and no talk; it would seem, dear, that I'm going to have to get things moving if they're going to move at all," Regina teases and then she's the one leaning in and very gently pressing her lips against Emma's.

The kiss is soft and chaste and it would be perfect if not for the fact that Emma can feel Regina suddenly trembling as she fights against her many dark fears; she might be able to talk a brave cocky game, but this is terrifying for her.

Emma knows that sexuality is a minefield of pain and fear for Regina – even more so over the last decade than it was before and unfortunately, that's saying something awful, indeed. She was once a girl sold into marriage with an elderly king and she'd learned to use her body as a weapon to get what she needed when she needed it. She'd used it against others and even against herself. And then she'd had it used against her in a way that Emma knows will always leave behind scars. Not physical ones, those scars, but ones all the same.

So this kiss, the fact that Regina's lips are now moving against hers and she's not pulling away (yes, she had initiated it, but Regina remains an impulsive woman and just because she does something doesn't always mean that it's what she wants to do), but rather stepping closer to the sheriff, well that tells Emma all that she needs to know to understand that her feelings for Regina are not only shared but shared in such a way that it's clear that the former queen is interested in pursuing a romantic relationship with her.

The kiss deepens and then Emma is swiping her tongue over Regina's lower lip and asking for entrance into her mouth and there's only the very slightest bit of hesitation before Regina is allowing it and then there's just the touch of hands and the press of lips and the blissful moans of gentle satisfaction.

When Regina finally pulls away, she's breathless and wide-eyed and then she's laughing and saying, "Tell me I at least still remember how to kiss?"

"I'd say you do," Emma assures her, running her thumb past her lip and pushing down the part of her that really wants to pull Regina back to her and start kissing her all over; she knows that they really need to go slow on this and knows that it's not just Regina that needs that. She's had a few lovers since Neal's death, but none of them have meant all that much and this absolutely does. This is something she wants to be careful with and so...reluctantly, she will be.

"Good. Now go back to bed; breakfast will be ready in a few hours."

"Okay," Emma agrees. "But just so you know, the breakfast I invited you to was meant to be an actual date and I still plan to take you on it eventually."

Their eyes meet again and there's something soft and life-worn there, two women who have been through too much and will always find dark doubts lingering past the point of reason. "Are you sure about this?" Regina asks.

Emma knows what she's being asked, but chooses to use humor to make her intentions clear. With a pout, she queries, "Am I not a good kisser?"

Regina laughs. "Well, I don't have many women to compare you off of."

"But you do have some, right?"

"And I do, and yes, you would be the best of them."
"Good answer." Her hand steals out and then she's clutching Regina's within her own for just a moment and meeting her eyes and what was playful very quickly becomes serious and all about Emma saying that everything else aside, they've gone through far too much to ever doubt each other again.

So Regina steps forward and then her arms are around Emma's torso and it could have been another kiss but there's this moment – this need – and she wants to feel the warmth of this woman who wants her. She wants to feel it and let Emma know that everything she's feeling is entirely reciprocated.

She feels Emma press soft lips against the exposed skin of her collarbone and then for a moment, they're just holding each other. Just allowing the emotions and fears and doubts and even the triumphs of the last several weeks to wash over them; neither of them had believed that they were going to survive their fight against the Home Office, but somehow, together and fighting for and with each other and their family, they had both made it.

"This is hard to believe," Regina admits.

"We live in a town full of fairytale legends," Emma reminds her.

"And I'm the Evil Queen," Regina says, stepping backwards. She's caught by the hand before she can get too far and gently pulled back towards Emma.

"You are a Queen," the blonde insists. "But I've always seen you as Regina."

"I know." She leans up and presses another light kiss to Emma's lips, holds it there for a moment and then again steps away and says with a teasing smile and bright eyes that are almost dancing, "Now unless you want breakfast to be burnt, I really need you to go back to bed so I can concentrate on it."

"Fine," Emma agrees with a loud yawn. "But just a suggestion: more brown sugar on the muffins. The kid is a fiend for it and I kind of like it, too."

"I'll think about it." She waves her hand at Emma and then watches as the blonde makes her way back up the steps – slower than usual thanks to her gut injury – before turning around and picking up the bag of brown sugar.

*** ***

"You really are okay with me doing this, right?" he asks for probably the fifth time during the conversation with his wife. He's sitting behind his desk, staring back at his screen and the Skype'd image of her. She has one of the twins – Luke – sleeping soundly in her arms. "Because if you're not –"

"Mysterious woman shows up out of nowhere," she sighs. "I'd be lying if I said that I wasn't a bit anxious about this, but well, you've been dreaming about her for seven years. Unless you're planning to run away with her –"

"I'm not," he insists. "Never. But…she said she's better and I think…I know it's stupid because I mean, she's just a lady from seven years ago, but –"

"But you need to see it with your own eyes. I know. Honey, I'm okay with this."

"You could join me."
"Baby."

He chuckles at her mockery, her way of gently telling him to man up as she rocks one of the boys against her. "Right. I'll call you right afterwards."

"Hey," she says as she readjusts the little one. "What happened to that woman has haunted you for so long. Maybe today that gets to stop."

"I hope so. I love you."

"Love you, too; pick up diapers on the way home. And dinner. Chinese?"

"You got it," he promises and then as he's disconnecting the video call, his eyes flicker up towards the clock. Where it says two-fifteen in the afternoon.

Forty-five minutes to go.

*** ***

Henry's half running and half walking up well ahead of them and this does feel like the visions that she and Emma had shared but she's not about to tell either Emma (she imagines Emma knows, to be honest) or her son that.

Instead, she walks slowly with Emma; both of them still feeling the soreness of their many recent injuries. Emma's middle is still tingling and tight thanks to the bullet wound and the broken ribs that she'd suffered and Regina knows that even with Rumple somewhat healing her, the pain from her hip and side will show up more during physical exercise. Still, both of them welcome this because it's about moving around and getting blood pumping again as opposed to actual running. And conversation, too. Apparently.

Because Emma really is terrible about shutting up during these walk/jogs.

"So when do we start on the whole magic training thing?" Emma asks.

"I'm not sure we do," Regina replies. "Or that we should."

"The two of us just teamed up to tear a dude apart at the molecular level; I can feel all of that still tingling inside of me. I guess I could ignore it again –"

"Or learn to control it," Regina sighs.

She feels Emma's hand slip into hers. "I know. I mean all of that was about stealing your magic from you and destroying all of the magic in this world and I will understand if you never want to use it again. I really will."

"But in case we ever need it again –"

"I'd like to know how to defend our family," Emma says solemnly. "I'd like to have the ability to stop anyone else who might get some insane idea in their head about coming after us to think carefully before they do it."

"Magic is...frightening," Regina admits as she looks up ahead and watches Henry hitting bushes as he passes them with a stick; he knows that his moms are having an intense conversation and so he's trying to give them space for it. "It has caused me and many others because of my actions against them so much pain."
"Does it always have to be painful?"

"No. But it always –"

"Comes with a price, I know." She holds up her hands. "If we're in this together, if we take care of each other and watch out for each other –"

Regina chuckles. "You don't have to hard sell me, my dear."

"I'm serious."

"I know you are," Regina says and then turns Emma towards her and lightly kisses her on the mouth, inhaling the soft satisfied sound that the sheriff makes and how she can already feel Emma pushing in to get closer to her.

When they finally separate (with Regina using the pad of thumb to lightly wipe a bit of moisture off of Emma's lower lip), they see Henry watching them well up ahead of them, an eyebrow lifted in cocky amusement. He smirks at them, shakes his head in mock exasperation at their antics, and then turns and keeps meandering forward to give them more time.

"So I never got around to asking you what the salad thing was about," Emma notes as they start walking again. She takes a large gulp of water from the bottle and then hands it over to Regina who does the same.

"Hmm?"

"First couple of nights you were back. I ordered pizza and you a salad."

"Right," Regina recalls. It's easier to touch these kinds of memories; the past is still painful and pulling from it still makes her head pound, but what has come since is there and bright and she can remember it all with ease.

Emma notices the slight delay in response and offers up, "You don't –"

"No, it's all right. This memory – this story – isn't traumatic so much as just a consequence of what happened to me, I suppose." She shrugs her shoulders and decides this is something that she can own; it's a piece of the whole of what she'd been through but hardly on par with something like the cane. "After I woke up in the hospital, I had a hard time keeping food down. I was on a liquid diet for a long while and then when I was well enough to try to eat solids again, I attempted to eat just salads thinking it'd be safer. But I think that it's one thing when you're consuming them somewhat willingly in order to lose weight or as a side dish or because perhaps you enjoy them."

"But another when you don't have much of a choice."

"Right. So no real story there just...something I grew to actively dislike."

"Got it. No salads with dinner. Though I can make a great Caesar."

"I'll keep that in mind," Regina chuckles, handing the water bottle back.

"Perfect," Emma nods. "Now, our son is looking back at us like he thinks we're hobbling too slowly for him; we should probably try to catch up to him and remind him that we can take his ass down anytime we want to."

"We are not taking down Henry."
"He's too big for his britches. That beard thing he has certainly is."

"You're giving him a complex about his facial hair."

"The only reason he has it is because of his new girlfriend."

"Whom neither of us has yet to meet. I thought for a moment that it might be Ruby that he had an interest in, but it doesn't seem to be the case."

"I think if she would say yes, he'd have asked her out, but she sees him as a little brother and our kid is a good kid. He won't push what isn't there."

"I think Ruby needs the friendship more, anyway."

"Agreed. Anyway, you make a good point about the kid and his new girlfriend; unacceptable." And with that, she throws the bottle at Henry.

Who catches it with one hand, drinks heftily from it, laughs and then trots back towards his mothers. "Your arm has gotten better, Ma," he teases.

"Now you know why I call him a little shit," Emma grouses.

"Shush. Henry, when are we going to meet your new girlfriend?" Regina asks. "I presume she's someone you're going to school with, yes?"

"She is and the next time you guys come to visit me at the campus, you can meet her," he promises. "But only if you're both on your best behavior."

"So no cracks about your...facial hair."

"Exactly. And I'm thinking of growing a full beard."

"That will only take you the next six years."

"Mom," Henry says, elbowing Emma away. "You love it, right?"

"I think it's very handsome."

"We've had this discussion before," Emma insists. "She's hopelessly biased."

Regina shrugs. And then winds an arm around Henry. "Okay, so we can't meet her just yet, but you can tell us everything about her, right?"

"I can do that for sure," Henry agrees and then he suddenly grows oddly serious, his green eyes becoming dark with intensity. "But only if both of you promise me – and I mean really promise me – that neither one of you will pull the shit that you two pulled a few weeks ago ever again. I want your word. Both of you."

"Kid –"

"I get it; life happens and all that crap and we can never really know what will happen especially in this town, but Ma, you got shot and Mom, you knocked my ass out and walked right into that place. You gave yourself over to them. And I know why and I know that you two are crazy about each other –" he smirks when he sees both of them shift a bit anxiously at that. "– but I need to know that you're going to stop...I need to know I'm not going to lose either of you."
"I told you," Emma says softly.

Regina ignores her, instead turning Henry to face her, her hands cupping both of his cheeks; he's quite a bit taller than her so this time, he's the one almost bending down. "At the time, I really believed that I was doing the only thing that could be done to save Emma. I believed that I was making good on...I believed I was paying a price for all of the evil that I have done. I believed that I was doing penance for it and that the only way I could pay and ensure her safety was...like that."

" Haven't you done enough of it?" Henry asks, swallowing hard as his eyes sweep over his mother and he no doubt thinks of all the scars on her body.

"I don't know," she admits, her hands holding his and lightly squeezing to reassure him of her words. "I'm not sure that when you have as much blood on your hands as I do that you can ever truly pay enough or do enough, but I am ready to try living again. I promise you that I have no intent of ever leaving you again. I told your grandmother that and I told your mother that and now I am telling you, my little prince; I'm not going anywhere. I'm not."

"Neither one of us is," Emma promises. "We're the family that you won."

"Good," Henry says and for a moment he's just her little boy again and he's smiling at her like he has a secret. He leans in and grinning, says, "I spilled wine all over her when she and her parents came into the café for lunch."

*** ***

"Good luck," Lila says to him as he exits his office and pulls on his jacket. He looks as nervous as she's ever seen him (well except for when he'd been trying to get through traffic to get to the hospital in time to see his children born). "And if she ends up super crazy, you are allowed to get up and leave."

"I know," he laughs. He gives her a wink and then steps out of his office and into the elevator, trying breathing exercises as it descends fifteen floors.

All the while trying to figure out exactly why this is making him so nervous.

He can still remember that day so clearly and still see all of the wounds. He thinks it funny that she was nude and he barely recalls her body – just the lines that had run their way across her. And the bruises around her wrists.

He desperately hopes that today will wipe away those terrible memories.

He desperately needs today to do that.

*** ***

She's standing over Neal's grave when she hears the footsteps behind her. A turn to the side (and for a brief unsettling moment she's thrown back ten years and she remembers Hook coming up to her instead, guilt-ridden and hoping for redemption for failing a mother and a child) and she sees Gold standing there. His hands are resting lightly on his cane (she thinks of Regina now and how much less she has to use hers) and he's just watching her.

"I can leave you two alone," Emma finally offers, stepping backwards.

"You can," he nods. "But there's no need to; we're here for the same."
"Are we? I'm here to try to finally let him go."

"So you can move on." It's a statement and not a question.

"Yes."

Another nod and then, "I'm here to apologize for failing him."

"You killed her."

"I didn't. I left her in Mendell's cell beneath the asylum. Eventually, she will need to be moved outside of Storybrooke and I have resources that can assist me with that. Once they're in place, she will put somewhere where she won't be able to ever hurt anyone in this town ever again -"

"Will she be hurt?" Emma asks.

"Would it truly destroy you to have vengeance in your heart? To want someone who caused you so much pain to pay?"

"I don't know," Emma allows, her eyes sweeping towards Regina's crypt and her mind returning to all of the people in her life who have allowed vengeance to own them and control them and in so many ways destroy them. Regina and her mother had recovered, but she was sure she could and realizes that even if out of fear alone, she doesn't want to know. "But I know that I would prefer not to feel that way; it hasn't done you any favors. It didn't do Regina any favors, either."

"Perhaps not. Either way, today, I walked away."


"I promised him vengeance."

"Which would have always been the wrong way to honor him and we both know it," she says. "Neal – Bae – he saw the best inside of you even when he couldn't remember it. He loved you even when he didn't want to do it."

"He always deserved more than me," Gold says as he steps over to the grave and places a hand on it. "He always deserved a better father."

"Maybe so, but I think he would still be damned proud of you today."

"I hope so." He tilts his head and looks at her curiously. "And you, Miss Swan? Are you finding the closure that you came here in search of?"

"He saved my life," she notes with tears in her eyes. "He didn't have to, but he did because... because he loved me. We were over and I wasn't going to give him another chance...but we still loved each other. We did. I think the best that I can do to honor him and what he did for me is make sure his son remembers who he is and try to be happy; have to believe he'd want that."

"It's dangerous who you've chosen to love."

"Perhaps, but I'm not quite the pure white light Savior, now am I?"

He smiles thinly at that. "I've always liked you, Miss Swan."

"You've always despised me."
"On the contrary, I just find you a general nuisance with a bad habit of getting in the way of my plans or otherwise unsettling them. But it's hard not to...respect someone who is able to see the truth of who she really is."

"And do you? See who you really are?"

"Sometimes," he says. "Be careful, Miss Swan; even with all of her changes and having to face the truth of her past, the one thing that has remained the same is the intensity in which Regina loves. If this isn't as serious for you—"

"Not that it's any of your business, but it is."

"Very well. Then I suppose I wish you both...luck."

She laughs. "That looks like it kind of hurt."

His response is half of a sneer. "I'd like to be alone with my son now."

"Okay," she agrees. Her hand lands on the top of the tombstone and she says, "Your son was my first True Love. I have my son because of him. I am alive because of him. Those are things that I will never forget. I promise you that even if today is about letting him go, Neal will never be forgotten."

"Thank you," Gold says softly and then he's turning away from her.

Emma casts one last look back, thinks about standing over Neal's freshly installed tombstone and telling a drunken Hook to take the people who had just wanted to go home back to the Enchanted Forest aboard the Jolly Roger. She thinks about standing exactly in this place talking to Regina's crypt and wondering if the woman had been alive. It's been ten years now and finally; it really is time to let the Home Office's reign of terror end.

They've been defeated and per a message from Belle, the walls around Storybrooke that are meant to keep unwanted outsiders (but not everyone) from coming into the town have been reconstructed and now, it's time to start living again.

*** ***

He approaches the bench slowly, his eyes on the woman that he sees sitting there, her hands folded in front of her, rested gently atop of a cane. She has dark (long) hair and a dark coat and her posture is almost rigid. He thinks she might be as nervous about this as he is. He looks around and he takes in the rest of the park, noticing all the families he sees and then smiling when he sees a boy in his twenties and an older blonde woman in her late thirties nearby playing Frisbee.

Mother and son, Connor thinks and thinks one day he'll enjoy teaching his boys how to do toss a frisbee.

But for now, this is about today.

Which is just a normal day.

And this is just a normal meeting.

Only it's not.

He takes a breath and comes from the side and says, "Ms. Mills?"
She turns around and for a moment, the breath catches in his throat because this lady in front of him doesn't look at all like the woman that he'd tried to help out in the road seven years ago. She might be holding a cane, but she still looks strong and vibrant in a way that had seemed impossible when she'd been stumbling through traffic as she had been.

She looks healthy.

"Mr. Matthews?" she asks, her voice low and a warm smile gracing her face.

"Connor. Please."

"Regina." She stands up and there's a small hitch as she does so, but then one hand is settling lightly on the top of the cane for balance and she's extending the other hand to him. He only hesitates for the very briefest of moments before he's taking it and marveling at the strength he feels in her grip. "Thank you for being willing to meet me today."

"It took me by surprise," he admits.

"I can imagine. Will you sit with me?" she gestures back down to the bench. As she does so, he think he sees her glance outwards towards the boy and the woman and nod at them and it occurs to him that those two are here with her. Friends? Family? Love? He supposes that that's none of his business.

He waits for her to sit and adjust herself and then sits down next to her and folds his hands together.

"You're nervous," she states. Then chuckles. "So am I."

"I've thought a lot about you over the years," Connor admits, turning his wedding band around on his finger in an anxious circle. "I don't know that I have ever really been able to forget you or what happened that day."

"Thankfully, I don't remember it at all. It's one of the memories that I never got back and I'm okay with that. But that doesn't mean it didn't happen." She gestures towards the cane.

"But you look like...you look like you're better," he notes and smiles awkwardly because he can almost hear his wife laughing at him for his words. He can hear her reminding him that you're never supposed to tell a lady she ever looks less than perfect. He wonders if that holds true when you've seen the lady far less than that.

"I am better, but it's taken time," she says and he thinks there's a lot that's not being said here, but doesn't dare to push because despite the connection that they share from that horrible day, they don't know each other and they aren't friends and this is all just about closure. "A lot of it. But I wouldn't have had the chance to recover if I hadn't gotten help from a lot of different people in my life. If you hadn't helped me that day, I wouldn't be here. I could have been hit by a car or...I may not remember what happened, but I do know what you did saved my life and you didn't have to do anything, but you did."

He shrugs. "I really didn't do much; just did what any good person should do," he tells her. "I know you want to give me a lot of credit for that and I guess I appreciate it, but I didn't really think. I just...I didn't want you to be hurt like you were."

Connor watches as her eyes flicker back over to the blonde woman and the boy again (he notices both of them are mostly just pretending to be playing Frisbee now, their attention mostly on what's going on between the two of them on the bench) again and she offers up a smile that is somehow
overpowering in just how beautiful and honest it is. "I know."

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It starts with kissing and then becomes more than that...which takes them up the stairs because of a simple light touch against her back; it's Emma offering her gentle support when her fatigued from therapy legs start to give up and it's Emma not saying a single word about the deep frustration she feels every time she has to slow down and remember that every bit of new movement she has is a gift. It's a soft smile and an understanding of her pride and it's Emma somehow always understanding what she needs and her realizing that even when the two of them were at war and not communicating, they had always known each other better than anyone else every truly would.

It's realizing that all this life and all of this pain has brought her to this place where she has this second chance and it's not with someone perfect, but rather someone who spends every day trying to be someone worthwhile.

She doesn't always succeed but she always tries and Regina finds herself thinking about a young girl on a horse and all the dreams in front of her.

She thinks about Emma and how she had given up her child because her own dreams had been crushed beneath the sadistic weight of life. She thinks about how that woman had struggled against the worst of herself and defined herself.

She thinks about good people and bad people and realizes that finally, she gets to be the one – the only one – who decides what she is or isn't now. Good or bad, it's finally her choice to make.

So she kisses Emma and takes her hand and says, "Upstairs."

Which is where they are now. Hands and mouths connecting with almost feverish childish passion as Emma presses up against the bedroom wall and sure, there's a bit of struggle for position, but it's hard to be too indignant and domineering about anything at all when someone is kissing your neck.

Which Emma is doing with considerable skill, one of her hands sliding up beneath the hem of Regina's blouse. There's a moment of panic when she feels fingers dancing on her back because she knows what Emma will find there; this isn't the first time there's been some under the shirt touching, though, and Emma most certainly is aware of the thick scars on her back.

She knows and doesn't care.

Oh, but this whole thing is so damned confusing and that strikes Regina as rather bizarre because she's been with so many lovers in her seven very strange decades of life. This shouldn't be as intensely emotional and raw an experience as it is, but it's been so very long since anyone touched her like this out of kindness instead of with the desire to cause her pain. Even the man that she'd considered trying to start again with...well he hadn't been cruel or anything, for sure, but he hadn't known her and when he had looked into her eyes, he'd only seen someone to bed and nothing more.

It hadn't gotten that far, but she thinks that tonight will.

And it's terrifying. Because she can remember the visions and seeing herself freeze up the first time that Emma had kissed the scars and she thinks of just how much easier it will be to give than to receive considering all that was done to her and the memories she has of violently forced touches.

But this is Emma.
This is Emma and her touch is gentle and understanding and she knows that if this is the one place where her visions truly do become reality (more than just in throwing the bottle at Henry during a run), then that will be okay.

Still, it's odd because she's standing in the room that she's been sharing with Emma even on the nights when Henry isn't home and they're kissing like they have nowhere else to be but here. They're kissing like everything is about this moment and what they have is something worth holding on to.

The funny thing is that this is hardly as she might have imagined it with Emma; as the Mayor, any thoughts she might have harbored of bedding the Savior would have involved extreme displays of dominance and unwavering control. Even as Regina, she would have wanted it fast and meaningless.

But that Regina is long gone now and the Regina that she is now is someone who wants to actually feel and be felt and that's more frightening than she thinks is possible. She's terrified of the moments when her clothes will drop away and all she will be is a woman in her mid forties with a wounded body that's littered with too many scars to avoid even if one were to try to do so.

"Hey," she hears and then Emma is lightly kissing her right shoulder and then her jaw, her lips gentle and occasionally resting against warm skin.

Regina smiles shakily, not quite convincingly. "I'm fine. Just –"

"You know we don't have to do this if you're not ready to; we're in no hurry," Emma assures her, straightening up to give Regina some space if she wants it, but not quite moving away from her. "We can go back downstairs and we can crack open the tub of ice cream and we can throw on a movie."

"Are you finally starting to think that maybe you made a mistake yet?" Regina asks, the tease in her tone a total lie. "Going down this road?"

"On the contrary; I'm trying to figure out how we didn't realize ten years ago how much better things might have been between us if we'd spent the time doing this instead of antagonizing each other," Emma answers lightly, her hand reaching down to take one of Regina's, her thumb immediately gently stroking against the dense white ridge of scars there. It's become something of a soothing thing between them, for grounding and comfort.

So Regina sighs and then lifts her other hand up and brushes blonde hair away from Emma's green eyes. There's a thin scar there above her brow, her own forever mark courtesy of John and Wendy. Regina had offered to remove it, but Emma had chuckled and said that she would prefer to keep it. Likely her attempting to make a statement about the nature of scars and their lack of being able define her with them and it'd been hopelessly sweet and cloying, but it'd also been Emma being the big-hearted fool that she's always been.

For better or for worse, they're tied together by what they've been through and by the pasts that have created and reshaped them. But they're also connected by the desire to be their own keepers and own their own lives.

And so now Regina leans up and kisses the scar – her lips as light against the rise of it as Emma's thumb is against her palm – and says softly, "No movie."

She drops her mouth to Emma's and claims her lips in a fierce and almost possessive kiss; her heart is pounding like crazy and she's terrified, but she feels the need and the want and even the
desire to do this. She wants this.

"Let me touch you," she says into Emma's ear.

"Only if I get to touch you," Emma replies, her hands under her shirt and coming around to cup her lace-covered breasts, a thumb lightly sweeping over an already hardened nipple, teasing it. Her touch is firm but reverent and Regina can't stop herself from letting out a soft moan of pleasure.

"Give me time," she moans as she drops her face against Emma's shoulder.

"But this is okay?"

"This is...this is perfect."

"Good. As for the rest, I want to touch you everywhere, but I'll wait until you're ready. You can have all the time you need; I'm not going anywhere."

A wide smile crosses Regina's face – at first loving and deeply touched by just the sincerity and depth of feeling that she hears from Emma and then it changes and there's something there that almost looks wicked and seductive – and then she's locking her arms around Emma and pulling her back towards the bed. The moment they reach it, she pushes instead and then laughs.

"Neither am I and lucky for me," she whispers as she lightly bites Emma's earlobe and then straddles her atop the plush mattress and pushes her shirt up so that she can feel warm skin beneath her fingers. "I don't have to wait to touch you."

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"You have a family," Regina notes, looking down at the wedding ring that Connor hasn't stopped around turning since he'd sat down next to her.

"I do," Connor provides, looking over at her. What he sees in her eyes makes him let out a breath – she feels as awkward about all of this as he does; as uncertain but perhaps she's also just as in need of closure as he is.

"With kids." She points to the stain on his dress shirt. "I...remember a bit of those days and how very difficult it was to keep any of my clothes clean."

"Tell me about it. I have three of them. A girl and my two twin boys. They're both in the how much food can I manage to get all over dad stage." They share a laugh at that and then he says, "Is the young man over there yours? He keeps looking over here like he's worried about you. They both do."

"They have a habit of keeping an eye on me. And yes, he's mine, yes."

"And...she's your...wife?"

Regina chuckles at that. "I've never been much for titles...like that, but for what it's worth, Emma is...my partner. My significant other, I suppose you could say."

"I would like to meet them. I mean only if that that's okay?" He's not entirely sure why he's asking for this, but he supposes that it's for the same reason he decided to come down here and see this woman; it's the same need to know that everything had worked out, that this story which had started with such horror had turned into something beautiful and wonderful.
"Of course. But perhaps, if you're so willing, we would love to take you and your wife out for dinner. It's not much as far as gratitude goes, but –"

"You don't have to. You really don't owe me anything."

"I understand."

"But if you insist upon it, then yes, I'd be happy to take you up on that; let me call my wife and see if she can get a sitter for the kids for tonight."

Regina smiles at him and again he's struck by the beauty of such a simple and normal every day expression. He's struck by how very different this woman is from the shuddering one that he'd held in his arms years earlier.

*** ***

"Something's bugging you," Emma notes, curling closer to the naked woman resting in her arms, her fingers rubbing up and down sweat slicked skin. They've been sleeping together for several weeks now, both of them taking their time to get used to each other and finding out that they're curiously compatible with each other. It's been something of a wonderful surprise to learn that even in sex, their ability to read and truly understand each other better than anyone else is something that has held steady.

"Not bugging me exactly, but...I've been thinking about the day they let me go," Regina replies. As she speaks, she shifts and the moonlight streaming in through the windows catches against skin, illuminating her scars. They're not what Emma sees the most, though; what she sees is the healthy glow of her lover; the warmth of a healing body and spirit.

The healing that continues to happen for both of them a bit more every day.

"Yeah?" She thinks back to the police reports of that day and thinks about how Regina had wandered into traffic naked and stripped of her memories, her exposed body a mess of hideous open wounds and horrific scar tissue.

"And about Wendy Darling and how I should probably go and see her."

"Will that help you?"

"I don't want to ever see her again; I look forward to when Rumple tells me that his contact on the outside has agreed to take her. I know I probably shouldn't and know that I should be concerned about what might happen to her, but...I want this over."

"You don't want to ever see her again, you don't have to," Emma assures her.

"I don't," she says again. "But she's not the reason I was thinking about that day. Not specifically, anyway." Regina turns in her arms, their legs tangling together. She kisses Emma lightly on the lips and then the nose and says, "I don't remember it."

"Okay."

"But I know that a man ensured my safety. Made sure that I wasn't hurt anymore than I already was. I think I need to see him."

"Why?"
"I need to put that part of my life behind me. The Home Office is gone, but there's still that. There's still me in that intersection and that man. I feel like… I feel like that's something I need to… face. Does that make sense?"

"Doesn't need to make sense to me, only needs to make sense to you. Do you know who he is?" Emma queries, her arms tightening around Regina.

"I was hoping you could help me with that. I've seen a few news articles, and I suppose I could try to look him up on the net, but that's more —"

"My thing. We'll find him; you think you want to go see him? Meet him?"

"I think that maybe I need to."

"I'll be right there with you if you want me to be."

"I do," Regina says and then she's leaning up and kissing Emma and pulling her down atop her. They've done this before and ended up stopping before it could get too far – or more often than not flipping positions – but this time Regina clutches her arms and takes a breath and says, "Touch me."

*** ***

When dinner is done and they're all standing together outside of the restaurant, Regina looks at Emma and then looks at Connor's wife (a feisty bright woman who reminds Regina more than a little of Emma) and after handing her cane to Henry, she finally steps forward and hugs the man who had seven years earlier climbed out of his car and placed a jacket around a frightened woman that he'd known nothing about; he could have driven on and let it be someone else's problem and he could have watched a news report that night of a strange crazy lady killed in the middle of the road, but he'd done something. He had followed his instincts and chosen to be a good person and he had been that.

She hadn't known it then, but he'd been the first bit of proof after three years of hell that good could still win and people could still choose to be it.

So even though she thinks that she will always struggle with being touched by anyone who isn't in her family, she hugs Connor Matthews tightly and he holds her close in return and she whispers, "Thank you."

And then, with one arm wrapped around Henry's waist and her hand in Emma's she watches Connor and his family walk away, all of them having finally achieved their much-needed closure.

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It's Thanksgiving and she's going to kill Snow if the damned woman who has all of the cooking skills of a drunk mongoose doesn't stop getting in the way of her and David actually trying to prepare the turkey. But Snow is quick to remind her that she's been the one cooking these birds (for better or for worse and Emma makes a coughed out comment about how it's definitely been for worse) for the last ten years and that Regina is actually the one in the way at the moment.

Emma steps in between them and brokers a deal for peace and harmony.

It lasts a full five minutes before Regina is trying to expel Snow once again and Snow is insisting that it'll end up too dry if Regina has her way. But then the turkey is being pushed into the oven and the door is opening and Henry is coming in with his new girlfriend. She's a sweet young girl
and has no idea what she’s getting into, but she doesn’t get much more of a hello before she’s being hustled into the kitchen and asked to help with stirring the gravy.

It's the only way to keep Snow from making it as thick as molasses.

It’s when Regina finally steps out of the kitchen with a bottle of deep red wine that Emma finally catches her hand and pulls her close, sweeping arms around the older woman’s waist and slowing her down long enough to look around.

To realize that what had started as a nightmare has become a dream.

Her cane is against the far wall and she might need to use it to walk out of here tonight, but then again, she might not. Her head still hurts time to time and memories remain rough to the touch and feel and pull, but nothing about the now hurts.

She has Snow and David and she has her son and she has Emma's love and whether she deserves it or not (and part of her even with kind words from Archie will always doubt that she does) she finally has a new beginning as well.

Thanks to Rumple and whatever strings he had been able to pull, Wendy Darling is being held somewhere outside of Storybrooke now (somewhere securely, somewhere where she can age and perhaps eventually find her own peace) and though that's a relief to know that the woman is away from her, she understands that penance will always need to be paid and perhaps can never be paid in full. She understands and accepts these things and is willing to try every day to make amends, but she thinks that maybe there’s no more reason to stop living while she tries to atone for the sins of her past.

So she turns in Emma's arms, presses her lips against Emma’s soft ones, holds the younger woman close for long enough to let every bit of emotion and love that she feels seep into the blonde and then chuckles down deep in her throat and says in a scandalized whisper, "Your mother is invading the kitchen again; she must be stopped."

Emma laughs and kisses her again and as they move in step towards the kitchen to wrestle Snow away from the gravy (she puts up a fight and then pretends to sulk for a few minutes before finding her husband and wrapping herself into his arms so she can watch everyone like the proud matriarch that she envisions herself to be), Regina thinks that she might not ever truly deserve all of this, but she also has no intention of ever letting it go again.

This town and the people that are within it are her home and so when David lifts up the wine glass and does the toast to the family that surrounds the table - the family both new and old - Regina feels something warm inside of her and with Henry on one side and Emma on the other, she knows and finally accepts that this is where she is meant to be.

-Fin

Chapter End Notes

I can be found over on Tumblr at sgtmac7
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