Summary

Henry's faith in the curse is tested when the sheriff leaves Storybrooke. When bad things happen can Regina convince Emma to help her make things right?

Notes

This chapter contains a scene from 1x21 An Apple Red as Blood. I have described and added on to the original dialogue as I see it.
Hopeless

Emma hurried down the stairs to grab her suitcase and was halted by a knocking at the door. She opened it to reveal Henry.

"Hey, Emma. Everything okay? You sounded strange over the walkie."

"Oh, I um, I'm OK." Emma closed the door behind the boy. She wasn't sure how to say this, let alone want to say this. "Just, um, yesterday when I tried to take you away you were right. I can't take you out of Storybrooke, but I can't stay either."

"What?" said Henry.

"I have to go."

"Go? You mean, leave Storybrooke?"

"Yeah, I spoke to Regina. We made a deal. I'm still going to be able to see you, just not every day."

"No! No, you can't trust her!" the boy spat out in frustration.

"I have to, it's my only choice. It's what's best for you, Henry. Every time I fight her someone else gets hurt."

"No, no, no! You're just scared. This happens to all heroes. It's just the low moment before you fight back."

Emma got down on her knees and grasped desperately at Henry's jacket to emphasize her point, "Henry! This isn't a story! This is reality. Things have to change. You can't skip school, you can't run away, and... you can't believe in curses."

"Y-you really don't believe?"

Through tear stained eyes Emma gazed up at her boy, "I... this is how it has to be for a while. I made a deal and I used my superpower. She's telling the truth and she's going to take really good care of you."

"Yes, but she wants you dead!" Henry didn't understand how Emma could not see it.

"Come on, Henry!"

"You're the only one that can stop her."

Emma stood up and crossed her arms, unable to get at what Henry was trying to tell her. "Stop her from what? All she's ever done is fight for you. I just, got out of hand. I'm sorry."

Henry was hit with the realization that this woman really was going to leave. If the Evil Queen got her way (which was always) he might never see Emma again. He lunged, wrapping his arms around his birth mother. "You can't leave me! Just when I've found you. Just when we were starting to be a family. Don't you want to be my mother?"

"Of course I do!" Emma broke Henry's desperate embrace. "Don't ever think you mean nothing to me, Henry. But I can't stay. Regina is your mother, too, and she loves you. She would do anything for you. Give her a chance."
Henry simply stared dumbfounded at Emma. His world was coming apart. "This isn't supposed to happen! This is not how it's supposed to be!"

Henry turned and ran from the apartment despite Emma's shout to come back. Emma agreed with Henry about one thing: This was not how it was supposed to be.

Since day one she had indulged in Henry's fantasy, fearing it would break his heart if she didn't. Regina was right, though. Pretending in Operation Cobra would just make Henry further believe in a make-believe world. For a normal child this would be fine, but in Henry's case it was unhealthy. He believed in that fairytale book so deeply that he was losing sense of what was real. He was skipping school and leaving Storybrooke to knock on the doors of complete strangers. Most important of all, he couldn't see that his adoptive mother loved him. Henry needed a strong parental figure who could give him everything a young boy needs. Emma saw now that she was not capable of this. She was to blame. She was the one who broke the closed adoption and pandered to a kid who believed in curses. Regina did not. If Emma left, maybe Henry would see that.

She shoved her arms through the jacket. Carrying the suitcase in one hand and grabbing the door knob in the other Emma Swan exited Mary Margaret's and left Storybrooke the way it was before she arrived that fateful night.

Hopeless.

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The street lamps cast a glow on the damp side streets. The air was cold and carried an eerie scent of smoke but Henry Mills ran as fast as his legs would carry him. He would not stop until he got Emma back.

Storybrooke was different, its people were starting to wake up. Emma's mere presence had transformed the town and, in turn, the town had transformed her. Now it was his fault that she left. He shouldn't have pushed so hard. Maybe the curse wasn't as bad as the book made it seem. He didn't want to be wrong about Operation Cobra, but if believing in it caused his biological mother to leave he had to end this game… or put it on hold for a while.

There was only one problem; he didn't know where she would run off to. Last time it was as simple as looking through a few Google searches. A lot had changed since then. Emma Swan had changed. Henry suddenly had the sinking feeling she wouldn't return to Boston. She didn't want to be found this time.

With sneakers slapping furiously at the ground Henry crossed the empty street at ten o'clock. He was desperate and he knew of only one person who could help him. He wasn't thrilled at the prospect but if he wanted to get Emma back there was only one who had the power to find her.

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I Promise

Regina Mills removed the apple turnover from the oven and placed it steaming hot onto the island counter. When she couldn't sleep the fully stocked kitchen was a place where she could think and, of course, eat away her worries. If this were Fairytale Land making pastry would be as simple as a flick of the wrist, but Regina liked to keep her hands busy. Some things are better done without magic (especially in a land where it didn't exist). The kitchen was also a useful place to pass the time until her absent son came in after curfew.

Where Henry was at this hour was not difficult to figure out. Regina remembered the last time she spoke to Emma and the deal they had struck. If the sheriff was leaving Storybrooke for good this time the least she could grant Emma was one last goodbye from Henry. This day had been one of farewells and Regina grinned in satisfaction.

A slam of the door awoke the woman from her blissful reverie. "Henry? Is that you?"

Regina threw down the towel she used to retrieve the turnover and pushed open the kitchen doorway. "Do you know what time it is?"

Not a second later she ran into an out of breath Henry. "Mom!"

"What have I told you about running in the house? And it is far past your bedtime young man, I hope you have a good explanation."

Henry ignored the stern look on his mother's face. "You have to bring her back! You have to find her before it's too late!"

"Who are you talking about?"

"Emma!"

Regina let out a labored sigh and placed her hands on her hips. "Henry, I will not have you demanding things of me, especially when they concern Miss Swan. We agreed together that it would be best for you if she left. I hope she hasn't put any delusions in your head of an alternative solution."

"But she hasn't. That's the problem. You've convinced Emma that she isn't good enough for me, so she left."

"Enough! This is not up for discussion. Now brush your teeth and get into bed." Regina turned Henry around by the shoulders but the boy resisted and grabbed her hands, one in each of his own.

"Please! I know how much you hate her. Every time I see you guys fighting it's always about me. Emma may have given me up, but that doesn't mean she doesn't care. She's a part of me. Making her leave won't change that."

Regina looked down at the hands resting in Henry's grasp. She didn't remember the last time her son had touched her like this. Even as a toddler he did not need such stimulation. Regina was not the smothering type but Henry's rejections never stopped her from the occasional brush of the cheek or kiss on the forehead. It pained her to see him so sad, so desperate, so without hope. Knowing she was Henry's last resort at bringing Emma back did not give her pleasure. Parents wanted their children to feel like they were their own hero and only they have the power to change their circumstances.
Self-confidence was the road – or at least one of the roads – to power, Regina thought.

"You have to find her. You're the only one who can." Henry stared up at the woman who raised him, tears in his eyes. His voice cracked and became unsteady, "I'll stop believing in the curse… the book… that you're the Evil Queen, all of it. I promise. Just bring Emma back!"

She closed her eyes for a moment, her face unreadable. After a moment of silence between mother and child Regina Mills gazed down at her feet and said, "Henry, I need you to clean up and go to bed now."

"But."

"Now" she said sternly. "I'm going to call the babysitter while you're getting ready for bed."

Henry cocked his head with curiosity. "Wait, you're going?"

"This conversation has already gone on long enough. It's getting late; I want you rested for school tomorrow."

Without a word Henry let go of Regina's hands and raced up the staircase figuring the sooner he got in bed the sooner she could go and start the search for Emma.

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After kissing Henry goodnight the mayor gave strict instructions to the babysitter, making sure that if she didn't return before morning Henry would be woken at the appropriate time, given breakfast, and sent safely off to school.

Regina didn't think she would be away that long, then again she never had reason to leave Storybrooke. She had no idea where to look for the missing Emma Swan and even less of an idea of how to convince her of a return.

Climbing into her car she started the engine and rolled down the front seat windows.

"This is ridiculous." she said to no one in particular.

The deal that was struck was advantageous to both mothers – at least that was what Regina thought. Emma wouldn't have the responsibility of taking care of a wildly imaginative ten-year-old and Regina didn't have to worry about a curse-breaking, tramp of a woman taking away her son.

However, the way Henry looked at her made Regina think differently: the deal did not benefit him. The moment he took her hands and begged her to break the pact she had made earlier that day Regina realized Henry would never let it go. He would never let Emma go.

He had even vowed to let go of the curse business.

Did Emma mean that much to him? she thought. After all the fights they had about the Evil Queen and the spell she cast on the town, was it as simple as letting Emma stay?

Henry's happiness meant everything to Regina, so if that entailed Emma remaining in her son's life she would have to learn to deal with that.

Chin up she pulled out of the driveway. The wind carried the scent of smoke to Regina's nostrils. Someone must be burning a forest full of leaves… illegally.

The mayor drew in a breath and let it out in a huff. Where is that goddamned sheriff when you
Mr. Gold had his methods. When he found the appropriate place to hide away the precious glass vial he made sure there was more than one way to retrieve it. At the time of its stowing away there was no telling when it would return to its rightful owner. Magic was unpredictable.

The moment Emma Swan entered his town Mr. Gold had been plotting, chipping away at the mayor's credibility like an axe to an old tree that was past its prime. Regina's period as Mayor of Storybrooke was up. It was her time to fall and Gold would not only witness this coup d'état but instigate it.

That time had finally arrived. He made his way silently through the wood searching for the spot. Minutes later he came upon what he was looking for. The well in front of him was aged and not in use. In fact, there was really no reason for an ordinary well such as this to be located so deep in the forest. This, however, was no ordinary well. The waters that ran under this spot held a very special power. This power would return what one has lost.

With intent in his eyes and anticipation in his hands he withdrew the aforementioned glass vial from his breast pocket. Stretching his arm over the stone well Gold uncorked his creation and without a moment's hesitation let go.
Knock, Knock

Emma's heart ached. The faces had already started to haunt her. Henry, Mary Margaret, even dearly departed Graham.

The bed creaked beneath her as she fell back in exhaustion. After only two hours of driving she pulled over into a semi-rundown hotel and checked into a standard room. Emma didn't care about creature comforts, but a nice bed and shower were better than the seat of a VW Bug. And as much as she wanted to sleep she knew that it would not come this night.

All through the drive her conversation with Henry played over in her mind. Emma didn't regret the way she handled the situation but every time the memory of the boy's face came back her emotions took over. She must have broken down three or four times since leaving Storybrooke. She didn't want to leave. Not really. However, if there was anything Emma learned from being around Henry it was responsibility. With her son around her she had to act the mature adult even if that was something she wasn't used to. Making the decision to leave was what any responsible person would have done. It was right for Henry and it was right for Emma. She wasn't cut out to mother a child when she still felt like a child herself; unloved and parentless.

I'm not running, am I? Emma had thought to herself. No.

Henry didn't need her when he already had a mother who had taken care of him all his life. Who needed two mothers when he clearly had one that gave him everything necessary? And Operation Cobra; Emma went along with it because she thought it would help Henry. She truly believed he would let it go like all children did when games failed to hold their interest. Emma was wrong. As a parent, she shouldn't have taken the situation so lightly.

That was how she justified her decision to leave. It wasn't running when your reasons were for protecting others. This was about Henry's welfare, not her own.

After dropping her bags off in the hotel room Emma had the urge to rid her mind of what had transpired that night. The blonde had slipped into a nearby bar that boasted $2 shots and a wide selection of foreign lagers. She spent the next hour at the end of the counter keeping to herself as she stared into her whiskey. Several shots of whiskey, she remembered.

The fabric of the comforter under her hands felt different from her bed at Mary Margaret's.

No, Emma thought, not my bed.

That was Mary Margaret's guest bed and she gave it to Emma for a time. With a track record like Emma's there was no telling how long she would stay in Storybrooke, but she found she wasn't ready to deny that the bed was hers, if only briefly.

Henry had been hers too, or at least a shared part of him. Emma realized that Regina was also one of those faces that haunted her. She would not like to admit it, but there was something about the mayor that she missed. Before she could analyze the reasons a sharp knock at the door jolted Emma upright.

The tank top and shorts she wore had been donned as a result of the heat from the whiskey. She had hoped that no one knew where she was staying and, therefore, was not expecting any visitors. The knocking resumed and Emma crossed the room to answer, neglecting formality of dress.

A stern, mayoral face in high heels greeted her at the entrance. Without hesitation, the woman's
eyes deliberately glazed over Emma from head to toe.

"Miss Swan, I see you've settled in nicely."
"Regina."

Staring open-mouthed, Emma ignored Regina's blatant inspection of her attire. "What are you doing here?"

Knowing the woman wouldn't have the hospitality to ask her in, Regina walked past Emma. "I've come to discuss our arrangement."

Making a sweep of the room she noticed a rumpled bed adorned with distasteful sheets, a nightstand, a rotting desk, and a bathroom she dared not enter. Regina couldn't understand why anyone would want to sleep in such filth, much less set foot into it. Yet here she was. Relieved, she noticed the still packed bags on the bed.

"How in the hell did you know I would be here?"

Regina looked every bit as defiant as a hawk that had caught its prey. "Magic, of course."

Emma stiffened.

The mayor tipped her head to the side as Emma clearly didn't catch the jest. "Really, this is the only hotel for miles and that piece of junk you call a car sticks out like a sore thumb."

Regina's mocking tone caused the blonde's face to redden in frustration. "I thought we agreed Henry would be better off with me gone. Now I am. You wanted that, remember?"

"Well, things don't always go the way you want them to. People can be unpredictable. That's what life is like when you have a child, not that you would know anything about that."

"I never wanted this!" Emma emphasized with her arms outstretched. "My life was just fine before Henry showed up at my door. Then I got to know him. I got to know my son, Regina, and he made me realize my life wasn't all fine before. It hurts to let him go, but I did what I had to do, for Henry."

"It relieves me to know that you understand this is not all about you."

Emma rolled her eyes.

Regina paused, looked down and then up to meet the woman's pale green eyes. Her voice was low and just above a whisper. "Henry is asking for you to come back."

"And you? You want me to come back as well?"

"If I didn't, Miss Swan, I wouldn't be here in this sordid hovel of a room asking you."

"But you haven't asked me yet."

Getting flustered, Regina sucked in a gasp of air and let it out to calm herself. "Will you get in your ugly yellow car and come back to Storybrooke? Please?"

Emma smiled at the sardonic request. She was enjoying this a bit too much and wondered if Regina was too. Suddenly, a thought struck her.
"How were you going to convince me to return? What was your big plan, Regina? Blackmail? Kidnapping? Seduction?"

As soon as Emma made the last suggestion the mayor moved luridly close into the blonde's personal space and drawled, "You have no idea what I am capable of."

Emma gave a soft chuckle despite the serious look on the brunette's face. "Is that supposed to be some sort of come on?"

The smirk on the face in front of her told Regina that this wasn't going to work. She suddenly felt strangely out of breath being in such proximity to the other woman. There was no reason this shouldn't work, she thought, because it usually did with the weak minded. Regina was starting to learn that this girl was anything but easy.

"Don't get me wrong, it's kind of hot, but I think it suits you a little too well. It's so 'Evil Queen,'" Emma quoted using her fingers to emphasize.

Regina glared at the blonde. "This is not a game."

"A game you seem to know rather well, wouldn't you say?"

"I don't know, dear, you appear to be immune to my charms."

Emma realized then that the mayor had not removed herself from her very close proximity. Before Emma knew what she was thinking she replied, "If you wanted me, all you had to do was ask."

"If you were under my spell you wouldn't realize it until it was too late."

Leaving Emma to ponder the notion, Regina took a step back and exited the hotel room. As she carefully made her way down the crumbling steps outside she wondered if there was any truth to Emma's last words.

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Emma’s attention snapped back at the sound of the door slamming shut. Shaking her head she felt as if she had woken from a dream, and as with all dreams, confusion began to fill her mind. What had exactly just happened? Emma thought.

She wasn't sure what troubled her more, that Regina had asked her to return to Storybrooke or the way Emma had felt in the woman's presence. In the past, they both had gotten in each other's faces more times than she could count. The right hooks and verbal jabs they traded were a testament to how much these two hated each other. This time, though, there was an unexplainable, almost pleasing sense of desperation between them. She remembered catching a fleeting look in the mayor's eyes as they were breathing the same air.

The queer feeling in her stomach told her that what had transpired between her and Regina was no dream and was in fact very real; too real.

Emma shook her head again to clear her mind. Plucking her bags off the bed she hurried out of the room.

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Emma ran out to meet Regina as she was unlocking her car door.
"Did you come to berate me some more, Miss Swan?" Regina asked with a sigh.

"No, I just wanted to know which exit you were taking because 108 seemed a bit slippery the last time coming in to town.

"The 109."

Nodding, Emma turned towards her own car. Before she got too far she shouted back, "Must have been one hell of a spell, huh?

Regina didn't turn around, but unknown to the sheriff acknowledged with a silent smile.

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The two women drove separately on the freeway keeping a safe distance from each other physically, and as Regina would have it, mentally as well. The Mayor of Storybrooke did not like being controlled. She had always been the aggressor in her encounters with the townspeople. They would cower in fear whenever she approached and acquiesce to her every wish. It satisfied her, but not for long. For years Regina had longed for a good fight, and ever since that mysterious blonde haired woman arrived Emma Swan had graced her with that opportunity.

After an hour or two of driving in the night they took their exit at the 109. Emma looked out her windshield to see the outline of a familiar forest looming before her.

Suddenly, Regina's car swerved up ahead. Emma squinted and saw through the fog the red lights of the Mercedes braking. The early morning dew must have left the road slippery because Emma's VW also began to lose traction. Emma slowed down but not too fast as to spin out. Regina was not so lucky.

The second her VW came to a halt Emma ripped open the door and sprinted towards the wreck shouting, "Regina!"

"Ugh," came the reply.

Emma was staring down at a slightly bruised and scraped (but alive) mayor. The visibly pained woman grabbed hold of Emma's shoulders as she was hauled out of the ruined Mercedes. When they were a safe distance from the scene Emma dropped Regina in exhaustion.

"Umph, hey!"

"Sorry," Emma responded, thinking about the city hall fire, "you were heavier than I remembered."

Regina glared and then winced in pain.

"Did you break anything?" Emma's voice of worry spoke through the mist. The hurt woman gently covered her throbbing arm.

"First a bounty hunter, then sheriff... now you're a physician?"

"Let me see, it could be dislocated."

Regina was about to draw away from Emma's helping hand but something in the distance caught her attention.

"Oh, no."
"Really, it's probably not that bad. Just let me remove your jacket so I can be sure there are no bones sticking out."

"No, not my elbow. Look!"

Emma followed the direction Regina was pointing to. With the exception of a ditch sporting a considerably dented Mercedes there was nothing out of the ordinary with this picture. She looked back in confusion and worry.

"Regina, I think you might have a concussion. We should take you to Dr. Wh-"

"Emma!" the brunette grabbed a handful of the woman's leather jacket and stared hard into her eyes. "I am not seeing things. I'm not dizzy, I don't feel nauseous, and I am certainly not seeing two of you, thank God. Now help me up and walk me ten feet ahead."

Emma's mouth fell agape and then closed. It was the first time Regina had used her given name. This must really be serious, she thought.

"Alright, but we're taking this slow." She brought Regina up onto slightly wobbly legs and pulled her close. The injured mayor leaned into the embrace with vexation and a little gratitude.

The two women shuffled forward. After a dozen paces Regina gripped the helping shoulder in alarm. "Here, stop."

She didn't let go of Emma. If this was what she feared then she would need the support. With a deep breath Regina extended her good arm forward. Her hand met resistance and she immediately snatched it back in surprise.

Emma flinched at the quick movement. "What is it?"

Before Regina could answer, an apparition gleamed before them; a barrier glowing in soft purple through the smoky fog. The hunched woman stretched out her arm a second time and glided her palm over the seamless obstruction. A soft crackling ran across the surface.

"What is this thing?" Emma tilted her head back to take in the size of what was in front of her. She guessed that the enormous dome must be big enough to enclose an entire town; a town like Storybrooke. "Regina, I don't remember seeing this the last time a drove through here."

The mayor noticed the agitation in Emma's voice. Turning her head she gave up a look mixed with fear and pity. There was nothing that could prepare this woman for things to come.

"We're being kept out of Storybrooke."
The electricity coming from the dome crackled around Regina's tingling fingertips. She stared in wonder as she withdrew her hand.

"Someone is keeping us out," said Regina.

"Someone? Who would do something like that? How could they do something…?" Emma was too confused to finish. She couldn't rationalize this sort of situation. She couldn't believe what she was seeing, yet there it was right before her glowing in purple and sizzling from Regina's touch.

"Gold."

Emma looked over to the woman still leaning on her and matter-of-factly replied, "That's highly unlikely. The guy owns a pawnshop, not a magic emporium. Mr. Gold can be conniving, I know, but what motivation would he have to keep you and me out?"

"He wants what was taken from him and will do everything possible to get it back." Regina disengaged herself from the blonde. "If that means getting rid of the town's mayor and its sheriff he wouldn't think twice."

"But how could he do this…" Emma pointed to the apparition, "... whatever this is?"

Regina knew she couldn't talk her way out of their predicament, not when there was a giant magical dome presented in front of them. There was no way to sugar coat this explanation. She let out an impatient sigh. This was going to be like talking to a three-year-old, she thought.

"Gold once had the power to do things like what you're seeing now. He lost that power, it was a long time ago." She then looked away lost in thought. "He's clearly found a way to get it back."

She managed to limp a few steps away from the barrier and sit down in the grass. There was no doubt in her mind that Gold set up the magical obstruction for he was the only other person besides herself that could wield magic like this. Even if by some small chance someone knew about the curse they would not have possessed the power to enact a barrier capable of surrounding the entire town. Still, she had a feeling there was more going on here than a magical "Do not enter" sign.

"How's your arm?" Emma tried to ask without the hint of concern. She was unsuccessful.

Regina looked up at the blonde and then down at her arm as if she had forgotten all about her accident in the Mercedes. She pulled up the sleeve of her suit to reveal a black and blue limb. It didn't look good, but she could no longer feel any pain. In place of the discomfort she should have Regina felt a familiar sensation coursing through her veins. How curious, she thought. The woman tentatively placed a hand over the injury, focusing all her energy on the location.

Emma saw Regina's eyes slowly droop and then close. Mental exertion appeared in the lines of her forehead and in furrowed brows. A golden light emanated from the woman's hand onto the wound. It was so bright Emma had to turn away until it dimmed and then extinguished. Regina pulled her hand away to reveal a perfectly tanned, toned arm.

Emma, stunned, quickly squeezed her lids and opened them expecting to witness the bruised and broken arm she had just seen no more than a minute ago. She was sadly disappointed.

"Okay, um… what the hell?!" Emma spat out in a mixture of anger and confusion. Her scrunched
face panned from the once injured arm to Regina's face and then back again. When she didn't get an immediate response she asked, "Did some sort of magic juju rub off on you when you touched the barrier? Do you now have the same power Gold had?"

"Has," Regina corrected, "and yes, I do believe something has rubbed off." Her eyes never left her arm. She was staring at it dumbly and in wonder.

Emma kneeled in front of the awestruck woman to get her attention. "You clearly know something I don't, here. I need to be filled in sooner or later if I'm going to help you."

Regina snapped out of her reverie as if Emma had jabbed her with a hot poker. Irritation was painted on her face as she scoffed, "Again, I'm receiving advice from a –"

"Uh, uh." Emma warned her with a finger and a raised brow. "Don't you think the circumstances are calling for us to work together? You might not want to admit it, but Henry is going to need both of us now that…” Emma glanced back at the magical dome. "Stuff is happening."

"How astutely put." Regina flatly said as she rolled her eyes. Not as disoriented as before, she raised herself up from the ground brushing off a few stray blades of grass from her trousers. She returned to the spot Emma had carried her to but did not reach out to touch the barrier this time. The mayor was tired. She would give anything to be home with Henry, safe and sound. Swallowing her pride she turned to face the other woman. "I suppose it's time you knew a few things about me."

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The two women had been walking along the outside of the dome for a while. Regina admitted to Emma that her powers were not strong enough to penetrate such magic, but if she could find a vulnerable area in the surface they might be able to gain entrance. On their walk through the forest Regina told Emma what she needed to know and nothing else. The last person the mayor wanted to share her secrets with was Emma Swan; however, recent events had taken a dramatic turn. The only thing she cared about was keeping Henry safe. It was all she thought about since the day he was put crying and squirming into her arms. She swallowed over the lump in her throat. There was a time when Storybrooke was safe for the boy. Henry could walk the town safely without being solicited by mysterious, stubble-faced men on motorcycles and kidnapped in the middle of the night by estranged, biological mothers.

Evil plans had been unearthed once Emma had settled in Storybrooke and the opportunity was fresh for enemies to get back at the people who stole from them. Change was not the only thing that came along with Emma, but confusion. One could say the new visitor had brought new life to the town. The endless curiosity and gossip revolving around the blonde's appearance revitalized the townspeople and the hours they would otherwise be spending in boredom. This novel feeling just happened to impress itself upon her own son. It had been so long since she had seen her son laugh. He was so full of life when he was around Emma. It was obvious to everyone that Emma provided Henry with the happiness that Regina had tried and failed to give. Though Regina felt threatened by the other woman she couldn't fault her completely. Henry followed her around like a puppy. Her son was just as stubborn as his adoptive mother; once he had an idea implanted itself in his head nothing and nobody was going to stop him. It was one of the reasons she sought to bring the sheriff back; she couldn't allow her son to go on another quest to retrieve the woman. He should have been safe in Storybrooke. Looking at the barrier shining in the midday light she knew he was anything but.

Confusion and change. Regina was familiar with these emotions, but had not felt them for some time. She wanted Emma out of her life and at the same time wanted her to stay. On the one hand, it
was infuriating to even meet the blonde's eyes knowing her son shared those same hazel orbs. On the other, she longed for help in protecting her son; help from someone without an agenda. What better person to help her than family? A younger Regina would disagree with a statement like that. It was family that abused and abandoned her, and made selfish decisions regarding her future. Until Henry came along Regina didn't know the definition of true family. Being a mother transformed her into a fierce protector of what she held most dear. She could see this fierceness in Emma now. She knew she could trust in it.

"So you're telling me that you cursed all those people to a life not their own just so you could have a fairytale happy ending?"

Emma was walking alongside the brunette, patiently taking in Regina's tale. The vegetation was getting thicker in the direction they were moving in. Up ahead she spotted a rotting log in the path of the inattentive mayor and without a second thought lightly grasped the other woman's wrist in warning. Regina reacted by looking down and stepping over the obstacle. They continued without speaking of it.

"I don't expect you to understand."

"Understand what? That you punished innocent people or that you had such a sad life?"

Regina whirled towards Emma, but continued to walk ahead. "She was far from innocent!"

"Who is 'she'?" Emma stopped walking and stared inquisitively at Regina.

"Never mind."

"You're not the only person in the world who had a crappy life growing up." Emma sighed. "I mean, look at me. My whole childhood was spent moving around in the foster system; sharing a home with people I felt no attachment to, people who didn't love me."

Anger rose up in Regina. She turned and stalked back to where Emma had halted. "You have no idea what you're talking about! You of all people have no right to school me on life lessons."

"Hang on!" Emma held up her hands in defense. "I'm not trying to argue with you. You just have to know that you're not alone. There are a lot of sad people out there, but if we all held on to every bad experience we've ever had there would be no hope left in the world."

Emma suddenly realized what she was doing. I'm consoling her, she thought. From the story Regina had recounted during their walk the blonde should have been chastising her not comforting her. Emma couldn't help it, though; she was starting to think Regina was more like her than she had thought. Why do I feel the need to protect her? Emma asked herself.

"Miss Swan, I thank you for your touching, yet misplaced need to console me, however, this is neither the time nor the place." Regina motioned with her hand in a 'Let's get on with it' gesture. "May we continue the search?"

"After you," Emma replied with a smirk.

The two women forged ahead through the forest, this time in silence. It wasn't long before Regina sensed the weak spot she had hoped to find. Without wasting any more time she placed both palms against the barrier and concentrated. A vibration cascaded along the surface, spreading out as if her touch was a pebble hitting a calm pool of water. The barrier opened like a portal and Regina quickly motioned for Emma to follow her. Seconds later the portal closed behind them.
"Neat trick," Emma observed.

"Yes, well, not all my spells are worthy of praise."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing," the brunette shook her head. "Just forget it."

"What, did you rip someone's heart out?"

Regina gasped. She met the blonde's eyes and witnessed a smug look. Emma was joking, Regina knew that. There was no way the sheriff could have linked his death to her; more often than not Emma's rationality verged on being narrow-minded and not analytical. Regina made every effort possible to hide her shock at the woman's allegation. This was not the time or the place to argue over the morality of her actions. Then again, there would never be a time or place for anything like that.

"Regina," Emma frowned at the silence while noticing the pained look on the brunette's face. Her tone elevated with each word. "You didn't, right?"

She didn't dare look at Emma and instead shut her view of the blonde and the forest surrounding her. Regina didn't want to say his name. Her head was commanding her not say it, but her heart was begging for closure. She had told Emma many things that day she didn't want to, but within a split second she thought how strange it was to have all those secrets and not be able to tell them to anyone. Before she could stop herself her lips uttered the name. "Graham."

She heard a voice shriek out in pain. For a second Regina thought it was a wild animal crying out in agony, bleating in distress. She felt an iron grip shove her into the nearest tree knocking her head back against the bark with a soft crack. Emma had her body flush against the groaning brunette in a not-so-intimate hold. Regina blinked away the pain in her head to reveal the tear-stained eyes of her attacker.

"You!" Emma whimpered; her face only inches from Regina's. Such confined proximity amplified the features on Regina's face as Emma studied her eyes, her nose, her cheeks, and her lips, searching for something, but failing to discover exactly what. "You killed Graham," Emma choked out in a whisper.

The pinned woman didn't bother with an acknowledgment. The pain of the tree digging into her back was nothing compared to what her heart was experiencing. Her chest constricted at the truth that Emma spoke. She had thought what had happened to Graham meant nothing to her. From her perspective he was a plaything to be used for her own pleasure, just another pawn to be moved around her chessboard. Now she was being confronted head on with the emotions of someone who mourned his loss; someone who saw him as a person. Maybe I deserve this, Regina thought.

"Well," Regina looked down trying to hide the shame she thought she'd never feel, "now you know what I'm capable of."

Emma released her and stumbled back a few paces. "How do you live with yourself?"

Regina raised her head to lock Emma's eyes in a hard stare and stated with slight conviction, "How does anyone, with all the sins they've committed? They get up every morning and act like it never happened."

A hand met Regina's cheek with an audible crack. The mayor winced as her face twisted at the force of the blow. She slowly stared back at Emma, eyes widened and mouth open in shock.
"Let that be a reminder." Emma said.

The blonde turned on her heel and disappeared into brush and timber. Regina remained where she stood to feel the lingering sting of a memory she would never forget.

***

Henry sat on the steps of his school, waiting and watching. The babysitter had done all that Regina had asked of her, or rather, demanded of her, but his mom said nothing about picking him up from school. Regina must have assumed she would be back soon enough to do it herself, Henry thought, but school had ended over an hour ago and she had yet to show. Maybe something had happened on her way to find Emma. Perhaps Regina had lied to him or just didn't put the right amount of effort in tracking her down. Maybe she had found her, but Emma didn't want to come back. Or maybe something even worse had happened. Henry could come up with a hundred reasons why his mom wasn't there to get him from school. Minutes passed like hours and he soon found himself wishing not only for Emma's safety, but for his mother's as well.

"Henry?"

The boy turned to the voice of Mary Margaret who was making her way down the steps.

"What are you still doing here? Isn't your mother supposed to pick you up?" she asked as she slipped the messenger bag off her shoulder and sat beside the boy.

"She must be in a meeting or something." Henry shrugged his shoulders trying to act casual. He didn't know if Emma had informed Mary Margaret that she was leaving Storybrooke and he didn't want to mess things up between them. He hoped Emma would come back soon enough that he wouldn't have to break the news to Mary Margaret.

She gave Henry a sympathetic look and put her hand on his knee in a sign of reassurance. "I'm sure she just got held up at the office. She wouldn't forget about you, Henry."

"Yeah," he replied simply.

"How about this," the teacher perked up. "You let me take you to Granny's for a hamburger and that chocolate milkshake Emma tells me you love so much. We can even do our homework."

Henry didn't think the combination of food and homework would cheer him up at all, but neither would moping on the step and coming up with disaster scenarios.

"Mm," he said, trying too hard to appear in contemplation, "okay, but let's do homework after we eat."

"Deal."

***

The midday sun cast streams of yellow light through oak branches. She was getting deeper into the forest, deeper than Emma cared to go. She would rather stay outside the scary, glowing barrier, but she had a job to do. Emma was Sheriff of Storybrooke and she couldn't protect its people if she was on the outside. She also didn't want to leave knowing Henry was purposely being kept from her, especially when it was being done by less than conceivable means.

When Emma was a good distance from where she left Regina her legs gave out. Her body wrenched from uncontrollable sobbing, nails digging into earth grabbing for something fixed in her
spinning world. She didn't know what she was more upset about, Graham's death, her friends being cursed, Henry in danger, or being wrong about Regina. So she cried for them all.

Instinct told her to run, to leave behind her son, her job, the lies, and everything else Storybrooke had to offer. Then she remembered the things Regina had told her, those impossible things Henry urged her to believe but she refused to accept. He had been right about the curse all along. It crushed her that after all the faith he had in her and how hard he tried to make her believe, Emma had still remained blind to the truth, her son's truth. Horrified, the consequences dawned on her: she disappointed Henry and abandoned him in the most desperate situation imaginable.

Something clicked in her brain. Henry was in danger, what was she doing sitting in the dirt crying? Wiping her tears away she got on her feet and started walking.

***

Regina was sick of the forest. She always felt a delightful sense of freedom in the Enchanted Forest version of these woods, but while the greenery and fresh air there once gave her a zest for life, now in the wilderness of Storybrooke she just felt claustrophobic, as if it were all closing in on her. The whole lot from the leaves dancing in the wind to the flapping of crows' wings agitated her. Everything was in harmony here and Regina felt like an intruder.

She should have been reassured by the power that was returned her, but all it had done was simply leave an emptiness in her soul. Never before had magic left her feeling this way. She would give anything to escape her surroundings and feel whole again, but necessity urged her on.

Soon Regina found what she was looking for. Not two feet away was an old stone well with creeping ivy around the base of the foundation that confirmed its age. She continued towards it but was halted mid-step by the far off sound of a twig snapping. A cunning sneer formed on the woman's lips. Quick reflexes enabled her to spin and unleash a controlled burst of fire in the direction of her enemy. To Regina it was all in done in slow motion, but to her attacker it would have looked like a blur.

A resounding "Shit!" emanated from her target. There was a rustling of leaves and a grunt. Regina drew back her firing arm and extinguished the flame by clenching her hand.

A rattled Emma with leaves in her tangled blonde hair and dirt smudged on her chin cautiously peeked up from the fallen tree she dived under. "Jesus," she muttered. "Regina, it's me!"

Regina gave out an exasperated breath. She stood down, but remained alert and ready for an impending attack (physical or otherwise).

Taking the mayor's annoyed expression as a sign of ceasefire (or close enough to one) Emma came out from her hiding place. Brushing dry dirt from her jeans she made her way over to Regina. "What else do you have in that enchanted arsenal of yours, a nuclear warhead?"

"Do not test me, Miss Swan."

Regina's stare clued her in to the leaves still buried in her long locks and a mortified Emma swiftly removed them.

"Why are you following me?" Regina continued.

"I'm not," insisted the blonde.

"Lost then, I take it?"
"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Emma countered. She cocked her head to make her point. "I do have experience in tracking people down. In fact, I made a career out of it not too long ago. Maybe I was trying to find you."

"And why would you do such a thing? I'm a monster, remember?"

"That's not the word I used, but it's not a bad characterization considering what you did." Emma saw how that affected the mayor and quickly changed track. "I wasn't trying to find you. It's just coincidence that we happened to stumble upon…" Emma looked at the site behind Regina, "... the same well."

"Yes," the mayor narrowed her eyes, "because there are so many wells scattered in this forest."

Emma ignored the comment and pushed past the woman to get a better look at the solitary well. She placed her hands on the stone rim and leaned over slightly to gaze down into the void. To Emma, it looked like an ordinary well.

"So are you going to tell me what's so special about this thing?" Emma looked over her shoulder and waited with a raised brow.

"You are seriously mistaken if you think I'm going to tell you any more. The last time I was honest about what was going on you had me against a tree." Regina rolled her shoulder at the memory.

"Listen," Emma warned, putting her hands on her hips, "I don't even know if I'm in my right mind now. After the day I had it's no wonder I want to get away from here, but there's one thing I am sure of: I hate you for what you did. You had absolutely no right to curse my friends and I will never forgive you for Graham."

Regina's face was unreadable. Her hands were clasped tightly behind her back and the cool breeze of the late afternoon caused her to shiver inwardly. The swell of vulnerability began to rise within the brunette but she skillfully forced it down. She stood as immobile as the mysterious stone well while Emma went on.

"I'm staying, and this time you can't convince me otherwise. Gold clearly has something up his sleeve and I'm going to protect my son." Emma then took a deliberate step forward and finished with a stern look. "If you want to lend a hand, I would be very grateful."

"Miss Swan, I don't think I like your tone. I have even more a right as you do in protecting my son." Regina's words were firm, but betrayed a bit of desperation. "If you want to help me in doing that then I would be very grateful."

Emma threw up her hands and bellowed, "Fine, all right! As long as we have the same goal then I guess we're on the same side."

"For now," added Regina.

"Okay," the blonde said. She gestured to the well. "Now are you going to explain the significance of the well?"

"Gladly," Regina approached it. She reached inside the dank opening and brushed her fingers on the inside wall of the stone. She removed her hand to reveal fingers tinged with a brownish purple deposit. "Our friend Mr. Gold used this well as a gateway to unleash magic into this world."

"You can tell just by looking at moldy residue?" Emma questioned, wrinkling her brow.
"All magic leaves traces, Miss Swan."

Emma frowned and nodded slowly at the explanation. "So how do we stop him?"

"We aren't going to do anything, at least not right now."

"But you said –"

"You need to see that Henry is home." Regina confronted Emma with a deadly serious look. She spoke slowly hoping the blonde would understand every word she said. "You must not stop for anyone or anything no matter what the urgency. If there is an earthquake that threatens to tear this town apart you don't stop to save anyone. You run. I don't care if Miss Blanchard trips and cracks her head open, the priority is my son. You get there as fast as you can. Miss Swan, I am depending on you to make sure he is safe."

"Yeah, of course," Emma was caught off guard. She didn't expect the other woman to so quickly hand over responsibility to Henry. Then again, this was their son they were talking about; Regina had to trust Emma with his well-being even if it meant letting her go off alone in the middle of this crisis. "Where will you be?"

Regina stares into the distance, the setting sun casting a blood red glow on her somber face. "I have to see someone about a curse."
The streets of Storybrooke were just as silent and deserted as they normally were. If any changes had occurred Emma didn't notice. There was not much of a way of telling, of course, because everyone was (or should be) sleeping soundly in their beds. Everyone, that is, besides Emma who was power walking her way down the pavement. She had started out at a run after exiting the forest but became winded and sore, suddenly wishing she had her trusty VW. She wouldn't stop though, not if she were caught in raining acid or an earthquake caused by Rumplestiltskin's magic. No apocalypse would keep her from her son. Witnessing the nightly sprinkler systems kicking in and the occasional fireplace glow in a window Emma realized there would be no apocalypse. Not tonight at least.

When Emma burst through the unlocked door to the mayor's residence she wasted no time in calling for Henry. There was a faint sound of voices and she followed them to the den. A flashing light emanated from underneath the closed door. Emma's chest tightened as she laid a sweaty hand on the door knob hoping that Henry would be on the other side, alive. The knob unexpectedly jostled of its own accord causing Emma's heart to jump and the door swung open.

"Emma!" Henry flew into the arms of the blonde in a flurry, knocking the wind out of her. "I knew you'd come back! I knew it!"

"Kid!" Emma choked out, wrapping her arms around the little body. She hugged him so tight he protested, but she held on a little longer before releasing him. Still catching her breath from the journey and the scare that Henry gave her she managed to continue. "Are you all right?" She put her hands on either side of his face and then checked his forehead for a fever, looked him up and down surveying for wounds. She wouldn't trust her eyes, though. If Henry wasn't sick or hurt she had to hear it from his own lips.

"I'm fine," Henry brushed her concern off. "I was worried about you. You left, just like that. I… I didn't think you would leave me again." Henry hung his head and then lifted his small eyes to Emma in shame. "$t is my fault. I should have listened to you. The curse… it was stupid. I really believed - I wanted to believe, but you didn't. I never wanted you to go because of me."

Emma shook her head and replied, "No, don't say that. It was wrong of me to leave like that. I never wanted to hurt you, Henry, you know that right?" Henry nodded. The blonde smoothed back his untidy hair and took in every inch of his boyish face. Before, she couldn't see much of a resemblance because she always saw Regina's expressions on his face. That sly grin, those expectant eyebrows, and the creased frown that screamed, 'Are you for real?' Now, with those hazel eyes staring back into hers, there was no doubt that this was her son.

"Henry, did I hear someone at the entrance?" The swinging door to the kitchen opened and a short young woman walked in carrying two mug fulls of hot chocolate. The site of Emma stops her in her tracks abruptly, the whipped cream jostling dangerously atop the steaming liquid. "Emma?"

The blonde didn't know how to react and so she stared speechless at Mary Margaret who was sporting a tilted head like she couldn't believe what she was seeing. There was no telling what magic in Storybrooke had done to the cursed townspeople. It could have caused them to remember everything they were forced to forget and Snow White might very well be standing right there in the Evil Queen's den looking down on her long lost daughter. Or there might not be any change at all, leaving the town to remain cursed and its people ignorant of their true selves. Emma told herself that this could just be the sweet schoolteacher, Mary Margaret Blanchard, gazing worriedly at her friend and roommate. Emma took a deep breath and tried not to hope for one option over the
"I didn't hear you come in last night." Mary Margaret walked across the room to set the mugs down on the end table. "Where have you been?"

"I, uh… I got held up at the station. There was a ton of paperwork. I just decided to crash in my office."

"Oh, no wonder you look so tired." Mary Margaret's face turned down in sympathy. "Do you by any chance know where Mayor Mills is? I'm starting to really worry. She was supposed to pick Henry up from school but she never showed."

Henry passed a nervous glance to Emma. She couldn't tell if it was because he didn't want her to tell Mary Margaret where they had been or if he was genuinely worried about where Regina was. "Um, I just heard from her, she was stuck in a really awful meeting; some sort of mayoral crisis." Emma spoke to Henry, giving him a genuine look of apology, "Your mom is really sorry she couldn't pick you up from school. She's on her way, though."

"Hmm," Mary Margaret frowned. She was hoping for a more appropriate justification as to why a mother would leave her own son waiting on the steps of his school. "Well, I took Henry for dinner at Granny's and we did our homework. We were just going to watch some cartoons and sip on some hot chocolate… would you like to join us?"

"No, thank you. Regina should be here soon, so Henry should probably get ready for bed. I don't think we want to be at the end of her wrath tonight."

"I suppose you're right." Mary Margaret shivered slightly at the likelihood. "Let me just get my school bag and then I'll head out."

Once Emma and Henry were left alone in the den he turned to her and asked, "Okay, where is my mom really?"

"She had to make a quick stop before coming home. There's nothing to worry about."

"So she found you? How did she convince you to come back?" Henry asked inquisitively.

"Henry, I need you to understand that it was my decision to come back. I want to be here, so I'm staying," Emma then averted his eyes in embarrassment while adding, "and we both know your mother can be persuasive. Let's just leave it at that."

Henry sighed, showing his frustration. He gave up when he saw Emma's stern face. "I'm just glad you came back." He covered his mouth to stifle a yawn.

"All right, I think it's time for bed. Go on." Emma put her arms around Henry again and gave him a kiss goodnight. She followed him into the foyer until he turned hesitantly.

"So you're staying? For good?"

"For good. I'm going to be here for you, Henry, every day."

Henry returned her smile, lunged in for another hug and then raced up the stairs. Mary Margaret appeared with her bag and shouted good night to him as he disappeared into his room.

"What a night, huh?"
"You're telling me," Emma breathed out, running her fingers through her hair.

Mary Margaret let out a soft giggle. "I'll see you back at home. You are coming home, right?"

Emma opened her mouth and then closed it, startled by the question. Home. Snow White's home. Her mother's home. Emma then gave her head a shake and reminded herself that this woman was still her roommate. "Yeah, uh, of course. I'll head out just as soon as Regina shows up."

Mary Margaret gave a nod and opened the front door. Something made her stop. The woman glanced back and looked Emma over with a hint of admonishment. "You should probably take a shower. You look like you went rolling around in the forest."

Emma laughed as her friend crossed over the threshold out onto the porch. After the door shut her smile turned down into an expression of shock. I never had to be this careful around Mary Margaret, Emma thought, I guess I better get used to it.

***

The chime of a bell interrupted the pawnbroker as he put the finishing touches on his work. The door had been locked, however, the sound that the door made when opened told him that it had been a forced entry. He placed the object carefully on his storeroom table and rose from the stool. Judging from the way the door slammed shut, the glass panes jostling in their frames, he was to greet a most irate visitor.

"Mayor Mills, so glad to see you about Storybrooke again." Mr. Gold approached the counter unaffected by the woman marching into his shop almost leaving behind a trail of fire in her wake.

She slammed her hands down on the counter and demanded, "What have you done?"

Mr. Gold appeared undeterred by her fiery gaze. "Getting to the point, I see. It's a quality I like to see in a woman."

"I will not let you dance around my question." Regina leaned forward with hands still gripping the glass counter. "Now tell me."

"For someone so skilled in the dark arts you don't seem to know much regarding them." Gold narrowed his eyes in a challenge.

"You released magic… in Storybrooke," she slowly mocked. "What gives you the right? You are risking the integrity of your own curse, one that I had cast. What is in it for you if it is broken?"

"Mayor Mills, I'm touched by your concern," he smiled placing a hand over his heart, "but there is really no need for it. In fact, this whole town, like me, has endured quite swimmingly while you and your sheriff were on vacation."

Regina scowled, "And how is that, I wonder? You couldn't rely solely on magic to keep us out, as I am here right now in your little shop."

"I knew the barrier wouldn't keep you out forever. I just needed you and Miss Swan gone long enough for me to execute my plan."

"So again, I ask, what did you do?"

Gold's lips formed into a faint smile. It was a telling gesture, one that triggered worry in Regina. She was accustomed to having the upper hand, but now her current situation was leaving her
vulnerable. After all, she was not the only one who now had her powers back. Every muscle in her body tensed, ready to defend herself if it would come to that. She didn't think Gold would outright cast a spell of his own upon her (at least not yet) but she was alert nonetheless.

"Nothing too drastic," Gold replied as he walked alongside the counter tapping his fingers on the glass as if he were composing a symphony. "You're still mayor of this town. Emma remains sheriff, not that you care much for her."

"You're right about that," she nodded, walking to where Gold had stopped. His attention was not on Regina, but rather on a globe that was spinning gently off his fingertips. "What else?"

"Mayor Mills, if I told you my designs that would defeat the purpose. I don't know about you, but I like a small bit of mystery to remain in this town."

"If I'm still mayor I have power over you… still," Regina stressed with raised brows. Her voice was confident even though deep down she was not completely sure of herself.

"We shall see about that," he whispered, halting the spinning globe with his palm.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Let's just say I wouldn't want my son wandering around Storybrooke anytime soon; so many dark and terrible things roaming about these nights."

Gold knew he didn't have to resort to magic in order to beat Regina down. She stumbled back as if struck by an invisible blow. Fear seized her nerves causing her whole body to stiffen. For all the magic she may have had, she forgot it entirely in that moment. All that was left was a fragile, protective mother, or what her own mother would describe as weakness. Anger rose to the surface. It boiled over and covered the weakness like lava. She concealed it, just like she was taught.

"When you make threats on my son's life there are consequences. I am mayor of this town which means I can also do many terrible things. As far as I'm concerned nothing has changed. Nothing will change, not until I say it does. If the curse is broken or my son is put in danger I know exactly where responsibility lies." With her chin thrust forward she finished in a low voice, "And you will pay for it."

***

Emma Swan was dreaming of dark and terrible things; faceless, disgusting creatures that appeared in shadow and vanished like rolling smoke at their detection. They scoured the forest, swarmed the streets and invaded homes. When encountered, there was only pain and darkness. The terror felt so real to Emma it seeped into her skin and invaded her heart. Emma Swan was held hostage by fear. She would not become the savior. She would need someone to save her this time.

The slam of a door woke Emma. She had collapsed in exhaustion into an armoire and dozed off after cleaning up after Henry and putting the den back into its original pristine condition. She sat up and rubbed the fatigue from her eyes. The sound of heels clicking signaled her to Regina's arrival as Emma hurried to the foyer. The mayor appeared equally worn-out as the circles under her eyes indicated. Before the blonde could get a word in edgewise she was interrupted by Regina.

"Is he here?"

"Yeah, I put him to bed about an hour ago," Emma said, checking her watch. When she looked up Regina had already ripped off her heels and was halfway up the stairs running to Henry's bedroom. Emma didn't stop her. Even after all that she had learned in the past 24 hours she could not deny
that there was some part of Regina that could love. Not the obsessive, selfish kind of love, but the one that could turn the hardest of hearts into a true and self-sacrificing one. That was the person Emma had seen staring wide eyed at her in the foyer just then. It was the mother she witnessed rushing up the steps to her son, frantic to see him alive and in her arms.

Five minutes had passed and Emma still waited patiently. She leaned against the wall staring at her reflection in the mirror across the hallway. After a few tormenting seconds she looked away from her weary twin and stole a glance up the stairs. Silence. Uneasiness grew within her, so she decided to check on Regina and Henry. The boy's door was open a crack. Emma stuck her head in and found a small lump covered by a Star Wars comforter; a head of brown hair peeked out from the end. Then her ears picked up a choking sound that was coming from the room at the end of the hall. Emma closed Henry's door and made her way to the noise. The choking turned to gasping. She knocked and gingerly entered the dim room. "Regina?"

The huddled form sitting on the bed started at the voice. Regina raised her head revealing red eyes and tear stained cheeks. Another sob wracked her body but she suppressed the worst of it. She rose on shaky legs whipping her cheek. The blonde could almost hear the woman's breath quiver and hitch as she walked passed her and out into the hall. Emma followed quietly down the stairs not saying a word.

"Thank you for seeing that Henry was home," Regina spoke almost in a whisper. They faced each other at their usual spot in the middle of the foyer. The woman's generosity would have been surprising if it hadn't been for the urgency with which she gave her instructions to the blonde. Making sure Henry was safe was a shared priority; that had been evident. Emma almost took a step towards the brunette, but she shoved her hands in the back pockets of her dirty jeans stopping herself from doing so.

"I'm just glad Henry is alright," said Emma. The brunette nodded in agreement. "So what did Gold have to say?"

"Not much. I never did get a straight answer out of him, however, I gather from the way the town hasn't changed that the curse still remains intact." Regina waited for the blonde to chastise her for the pleased tone in which she spoke. None came.

"I certainly hope you gave him one of your notorious verbal beat downs. I'm actually kind of jealous. I myself wanted to give him a piece of my mind… or my fist."

"I'm sure you would have," Regina said with a smile on her lips. "But then you wouldn't be as lucky as I in escaping him."

"So you fought him?"

"No, it never came to that," Regina laughed a little at Emma's question. "He wouldn't dare use his magic directly against me."

"How can you be so sure? I mean, he created the barrier to keep us out. What would stop him from attacking you directly?"

"Me," the mayor replied with a cavalier delivery. Emma was silenced. "Now, if you are finished with your interrogation I would like to put an end to this long day. You are free to leave." Regina opened the front door for the blonde.

"Hold on," Emma approached the woman and closed the door. "You haven't told me what our next move is."
Regina, surprised at being commanded in such a way, frowned and shot back, "Our next move?"

"Yeah, do you not remember the alliance we struck? I know you were not thrilled at the idea, neither was I. But considering what we're dealing with here, Gold and his magic, I'm you're only ally, and from what you told me in the forest you are seriously lacking in friends."

"Miss Swan, you are not my friend, nor will you ever be," Regina countered spitefully.

"You need to cut that out," Emma stared the brunette down, hands on her hips. "Can we just accept that we don't like each other and move on? For Henry's sake? Isn't that what we decided before I left Storybrooke?"

"Things have changed if you haven't already noticed."

"You're damn right things have changed! I found out today that my biological parents are Snow White and Prince Charming!" Emma screeched. Regina winced under her fury. The blonde then thought of the sleeping boy upstairs and lowered her voice to a whisper. "I just talked to my mom who I've been living with for months and have been calling my friend."

"You can't tell any of them who they really are. The curse prevents them from remembering and would not have them understand even if they were told." The mayor cocked her head. "The situation is much more complex than you think, Miss Swan, and you will do well to leave it alone."

"Well, Henry already knows. I can at least let him know that I now believe. I owe him that."

Regina's heart leapt. She'll be damned if this woman not only screwed up everything she worked for, but put Henry in harm's way in the process. "You will leave my son out of this. As far as he is concerned the curse is nothing more than a bedtime story. I can't have him involved in this, not anymore."

"Then you have to let me in," Emma said softly and stepped forward closing what little space was left between them. They had never been this close, not since she had attacked the mayor in the forest, and before that, their standoff in the motel room. She felt the familiar jump her heart gave that morning. The corner of her mouth twitched at the memory causing her palms to clam up. "We both want to get back at the same person. By working together to stop Gold Henry stays safe. It's win-win." She held Regina's gaze hoping she would see reason. The brunette continued to be held under the stare, not blinking, standing motionless, considering.

"I am a reasonable person, you know," Regina finally replied. Emma raised her brow. "I'm willing to put my animosity aside in light of Gold's threats. I can be civil."

"As an orange," Emma chortled, quoting one of her favorite lines from theater. Even a disheveled, nonconformist like Emma was literate. Regina squinted, not catching the reference. Emma rephrased knowing the mayor wouldn't know the difference, "Yes, I'm sure you can be."

Regina lifted her head, comprehending. "Well then. I will call the Sheriff's office tomorrow morning to discuss the details of our arrangement."

"Alliance," Emma corrected.

Regina paused, holding a stiff smile. "Yes."

Emma, finally satisfied, paid the mayor a good night and grabbed the door knob letting herself out. Once they heard the slam both women gave out an exasperated sigh behind the closed door.
Stakeout

Two months later

The banana yellow VW was tucked in a shadowy corner of the Storybrooke hospital parking lot. It was a slow night, no car accidents or gunshot victims; then again this was Storybrooke, not downtown Boston or New York. Emma kept her eyes peeled, scouting for anything unusual or out of the ordinary, although just what constituted as "ordinary" the sheriff didn't know anymore. Munching on a granola bar and sitting cross-legged in the front seat Emma peered through her new Bushnell binoculars (a gadget she treated herself to thanks to the department's new budget raise). The high tech device went for a hefty price, but the additional features made up for that. The Bushnell Fusion Rangefinder 3000 boasted 10 x magnification, a 16 yard laser, fully multi-coated optics; it was rainproof and fogproof; and the coup de grâce: a 21.1 megapixel digital camera. It was the James Bond of binoculars. If Emma was honest with herself she didn't need all of those extra features, but still, it was cool. Naturally, Regina would blow a fuse if she found out, so Emma kept a damper on her excitement.

After scanning the hospital entrance for the dozenth time that night the sheriff put down the priceless binoculars and reclined back with her coffee. This had been her third night out on watch and Emma was starting to get used to the sedentary lifestyle that came with stakeouts (coffee and protein bars were her new diet). Regina had let Emma assist the investigation into Gold's mysterious plan, although when Emma thought about it she was the one doing the heavy lifting (or prolonged sitting) as she was the one out there on the front lines. Regina seemed to enjoy keeping an even lower profile or as Emma would put it, the "chicken's strategy." She didn't share this alternate term with Regina, of course.

Though since the day their alliance was struck the Mayor had kept her promise in toning down her obvious revulsion for the blonde. She even allowed her to pick Henry up from school and spend a sufficient amount of time with him, and by "sufficient" Regina meant an hour. Emma was disappointed with the allotted period but took what time she was given with her son. Henry was his usual wily self, cherishing every second he had with Emma. He asked her questions about her life in Boston, if she had friends or members of her foster family she still spoke to, what her favorite ice cream was, her favorite movie… the questions came one after the other. The fairytale book and the curse never came up in conversation. It was strange to be with Henry and not talk about a topic that had once dominated the majority of their discussions. Things grew even odder when a few weeks ago Emma received an invitation from Regina to have dinner with her and Henry. It was another sign of her ability to be reasonable, she had explained, another peace offering. It was suspicious behavior, but Emma took the invitation and was glad she did for twice a week the three of them would enjoy a very ordinary supper talking about very ordinary things. It resembled, Emma ventured, a family dinner.

As much as she liked spending time with Henry - and at rare times with Regina - the investigation was priority one. That was why Emma was stretched out in her car at five o'clock in the afternoon on stakeout. Her stomach grumbled loudly reminding her how long it had been since her last decent meal. She tipped back the last bit of strong coffee to settle her appetite. Just as the lid left her lips she spotted someone out of the corner of her eye: Gold walking across the parking lot with a large tote bag in his grip. She had seen him enter the hospital with the same bag on two other occasions and both times she followed him from his shop to the hospital and back. What occurred between entering and leaving the building Emma had no idea, but this time she would find out exactly why this place in particular held Gold's interest.
After snapping a few photos with her binoculars Emma slid out of her VW and followed the pawnbroker while keeping a safe distance behind. She tailed him all the way up to the third floor where she was delayed by a herd of nurses walking down the narrow hallway. She halted to let them pass her and caught a few words, "I don't know what it could possibly be," and "I've never seen it before." Emma also heard, "strange" and "not ordinary." Bingo. Emma took a deep breath and let it out, not sure if she was relieved or disappointed that she was in the right place. Turning the corner the sheriff came to a hallway with a few empty gurneys along the wall and a doctor standing with a clipboard making notes. No Gold in sight. "Damn it," she cursed.

Emma checked almost every occupied room on the floor. The rooms smelled of disinfectant which Emma found nauseating. The squeaky clean floors and surfaces also made the blonde feel uncomfortable and nostalgic for the messy VW she'd grown accustomed to sitting in. Whatever the sheriff might have expected to find did not materialize. Taking a glance into each room all she came across were sleeping patients tucked neatly in their beds, no visitors, no doctors, and no nurses to be found. Something didn't feel right, she thought.

"Sheriff Swan?"

Emma jumped at the voice and spun to see Dr. Whale.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. Is there something I can do for you, Sheriff?"

"Yes, in fact there is. Have you seen Mr. Gold around here lately?"

"Of course, he stops by every so often to drop off toys for our young patients. He always was good with the children."

I somehow find that hard to believe, Emma thought. "Have these visits been happening more frequently? Say, the past two months?"

Dr. Whale was about to speak and then paused. "Well, now that you mention it he has been stopping by quite often, but that might just be because of the sick patients."

Emma remembered what she had overheard from the nurses upon entering the wing. "What sick patients?"

The sandy haired man pulled his lips into a thin line and then finally opened them to explain. "About a month ago we started having patients go into fits of confusion… delirium." He shook his head still trying to grasp the peculiar symptoms. "Then after a few hours they succumbed to a coma-like state."

"Coma-like state? What exactly does that mean?" Emma asked, confused.

"Here, let me show you," the doctor directed her to the room across from them. Opening the door he led her to the bedside of a 26 year-old male. He had short brown hair, thick eyebrows, and a lanky build. After a few seconds Emma recognized him as Jim, Henry's school gym teacher. She remembered questioning him the night of Kathryn's disappearance after he found her car abandoned at the side of the road. He was a kind man who spoke truthfully and, as sheriff, Emma appreciated that.

"Darkness," he murmured in his sleep.

"He's talking!" Emma noted to Dr. Whale, astonished.

"Yes, he's been speaking like that for a while." He was then interrupted by more mumbling.
"Save him… solid… trapped." Jim's fists were clenched and held tight against his sides. Beads of sweat poured down his forehead. His head jerked suddenly and then stilled.

"Nothing he says makes much sense, of course. He doesn't respond to outside stimuli, so it would seem impossible that he could wake up with medical assistance. A few of our patients have similar symptoms: delirium, confusion, and then they enter an undisturbed sleep and mutter nonsense."

"How many patients are a few?"

"Seven."

"Seven?" Emma spun on the man with a mixture of anger and appall. "And you didn't think it appropriate to contact the Sheriff's office?"

"To be honest I didn't think the sheriff had the ability or the authority to do anything," he said with spite. Emma gave him a resentful frown. "I apologize. These cases seem to be getting the better of me. What I mean to say is there didn't seem to be any sign of foul play involved. The patients affected were admitted with minor illness: congestion, ear infection, allergies, high fever. There was no reason to call the Sheriff's department when no crime had been committed."

Emma sighed and then nodded. "I understand." She was disappointed that there didn't seem to be any real evidence against Gold. All she needed was a witness to testify to his appearance in one of the rooms doing whatever he was doing to these patients. Even better, for Emma to catch him in the act so she can give him the ass kicking of the century and have the satisfaction of throwing him in jail. She kept her suspicions to herself, though, because it would be risky when Gold probably had his own spies. If he found out that Emma was on to him he would find a way, yet again, to get two steps ahead of her.

"Sheriff Swan, do you think there is a connection between Mr. Gold's visits here and my sick patients?"

Without a doubt, Emma thought. "I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. You say he's good with children, how bad could the guy be?"

Dr. Whale nodded slowly and then shrugged, "You're right. Well, if you don't mind I had best be finishing up my rounds."

"Thank you for your help," she replied.

Once Dr. Whale exited the room Emma took one last look at Jim, hands clenching the bed sheet, mumbling. She wished she could piece together what he was saying so she could help him. There had to be a way of catching Gold before he struck again. At a loss for being able to translate the string of babbling Emma looked down, helpless, and then closed the door behind her.

Whatever Gold was doing there it wasn't giving children presents. He had a plan and the hospital had something to do with it. The sick patients and Gold's visits were related in some way, but how, Emma couldn't figure out. There was an obvious connection here that made the sheriff shiver. She had no idea what to expect from this Rumplestiltskin character. That was Regina's department.

All of a sudden Emma remembered her plans for the night. "Damn," she muttered, looking at the clock. "This is just not my day." Emma wound down the stairway cursing and made a beeline for her car.

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The doorbell chimed just as Regina pulled the roast chicken out of the oven. "Henry, can you go and see our guest in?" The boy closed his textbook with a grin and wasted no time in hopping off the kitchen stool to race for the front door. "Walk, please!" Regina warned.

As soon as Henry corralled the blonde into the dining room Regina instructed him to put his homework away and clean up. The two women were left alone.

"Late as usual," the brunette commented as she looked over Emma's wrinkled attire "And in such proper dress."

Emma had not only become used to these jibes but came to enjoy them. The mayor's less than flattering comments were harmless and the blonde took pleasure in occasionally one upping her in their bickering. Emma in turn gave Regina a blatant once over well aware of the mayor still watching her. The chocolate brown hair fell in its natural style about her shoulders, but the pearls around her neck and the outfit were new. The navy blue dress hugged every curve the woman owned. The neckline was conservative, but the sleeveless option drew attention to her petite shoulders. Emma's eyes trailed lower to where the dress stopped above the knees and continued her scrutiny down to the matching heels. There wasn't a tan line in sight. Emma could almost feel the warmth emanating from the woman's perfectly bronzed skin. She was possessed by utter fascination. When the blonde remembered the ability to speak she stated rather sluggishly, "I didn't realize I was attending a ball tonight." It was the only compliment she could craft without aggravating the other woman.

"There is no reason we can't sit for a meal in suitable clothing."

Or in very little clothing, Emma thought. She swallowed as she watched the brunette deliberately lean over the table to place the main dish down. Once she snapped out of it her eyes glazed over at the sight of the spread before her. There was a bowl of mixed greens, Jell-O salad, and at the table's center was a perfectly browned chicken with a slightly crispy skin and glistening in its own juices. The meat was garnished with rosemary and surrounded by roasted red potatoes, garlic cloves, and sliced apples. "You had time to make all this?"

"Certainly. Being a single parent and mayor of a town hones my ability to multitask." Regina wiped her hands on a dishtowel and Emma couldn't help but smile when the woman used it to wipe a smudge of grease off the main platter.

"Well, you're technically not a single parent anymore." Emma mused. She caught Regina's startled look and quickly stammered out, "N-not that we're together in that way. I meant that we're raising him... separately. We're both single still." Emma frowned at her own explanation and wished she had shut her mouth.

"Please do us both a favor, Sheriff, and quit while you are so ahead." Regina sighed and flashed Emma one of her prize-winning fake smiles. Turning around she shouted from the kitchen doorway, "Henry! Dinner!"

***

Supper was comparable to their previous gatherings which were pleasant and, at times, amusing. Henry talked about a new friend he had made at school and the sleepover they were planning out. He also drilled Emma with more questions about herself to which Regina glowered and chided, "We don't want to bother Miss Swan out of Storybrooke again now do we?" Emma couldn't tell if it was a joke or not, but once Henry laughed she just went along with it.

Once desert was finished they each fell into their designated stations in the assembly line Regina
created for cleaning dishes. Regina washed, Henry dried, and Emma (being the tallest) stowed away the dishes in their proper cabinets. That night they had broken their earlier record; Henry held up his stopwatch to both of them with the evidence. Regina commented that it wasn't speed, but the quality of cleanliness and organization that mattered. Emma and the boy shared identical eye rolls. Regina finally sent a protesting Henry to bed after promising to think over the sleepover.

Alone once again the two women proceeded into the mayor's home office. It was a routine they had become so accustomed to that neither had to give direction. Regina approached a table and set down a tray that consisted of milk, sugar, two ceramic cups, and a hot pot of coffee.

"Dinner was fantastic," praised Emma.

"Thank you. The apples were from my own tree." Regina sat down at her cherry wood desk and flipped the power switch on her computer.

"I bet they were." Emma smiled knowingly.

The computer chimed at startup and faded from its welcome screen to the desktop. The wallpaper was a photo of a smiling 4-year-old Henry sitting on a couch mushed between two pillows. He had a pop-up book in his tiny little hands with a finger pointing to the page as if it was the most fascinating thing he had ever seen. Emma wished she could have been there to experience Henry's early years. She was also curious to know what it would have looked like to see Regina reading to the toddler. She smiled and reminded herself to ask Regina for a copy of the picture one of those days.

"Okay Sheriff, what do you have for me?" Emma caught the mayor's usual 'let's get down to business' tone and extracted the memory card from her pocket. She put it in the woman's outstretched hand. The photos she had taken that afternoon appeared on the screen and Regina clicked through them methodically. "These are very high quality photos," the brunette added. She turned slightly in her chair to give Emma a surprised, if not impressed, raise of the eyebrows.

"Oh, I uh… just recently got a new camera. It was on sale, a real steal," Emma emphasized with a violent nod of the head.

"For which you paid out of your own pocket I hope?"

"Mm-hmm," Emma replied while trying not to avoid Regina's narrowed stare. Buyer's remorse was a bitch.

Somewhat content, the brunette's attention returned to the photos. While doing so, Emma briefed her on what took place during her stakeout; the gossiping nurses, the eerie silence permeating the hallway, the sick patients, and Dr. Whale's suspicions. Nothing was left out for she learned from previous meetings that Regina appreciated the details.

"So you didn't find out what Gold was doing there?" the mayor questioned. Emma shrugged weakly already feeling disappointed in herself. Regina let out a frustrated sigh and snapped, "How could you lose him like that? What have you been doing the past two months? You are supposed to be following him not spying on hospital nurses!"

The blonde tipped her head and raised her brow, a look Regina had been trained to heel upon command. She promised to be civil but every once and a while Emma had to remind her of that oath.

Regina face strained to prevent another outburst. She closed her eyes as fingers went to rub her
"Yeah, that's it." Emma hung her head in shame. After two months of tailing suspicious residents, spending hours sitting in her car drinking copious amounts of coffee and the late night meetings with Regina the sheriff was growing tired. She wanted things to go back to the way they were when she didn't have the pressure of saving a whole town on her shoulders or of possessing an earth shattering secret she couldn't reveal to anyone. Suddenly, she realized that if things went back to the time before Gold released magic then Emma wouldn't have the kind of relationship she had now with Henry and his adoptive mother. Things were good between them. She got to spend time with her son for one thing and the conversations the two women shared never ended in violent shoving or fist fights. Emma felt a sense of acceptance and respect when she was over at the mayor's mansion; she almost felt wanted. It was one hell of a deal breaker.

"We have to be missing something." Regina went back to the computer to scrutinize every detail in the photos. "What about the bag he's carrying? Could he be taking something in or bringing something out?"

"I don't know." Emma placed a hand on the mayor's chair and leaned in to get a better look. Neither of them seemed bothered by how close they were to each other. Emma was too curious about Gold's bag to notice the goosebumps along the mayor's arms and Regina was too absorbed in the computer screen to feel the blonde's hot breath on her shoulder. Emma pointed to the screen. "Zoom in there."

With a click of the mouse Regina focused in on Gold's duffle bag. At closer view there was a distinctive bulge about the luggage. "There's something in there," she noted and zoomed in on the next picture to confirm her statement. "Whatever it is, he must being using it on those patients, and some sort of magic must be involved…I don't know yet what kind."

"Do you have any idea what he could want with these patients?"

Regina shook her head. "I simply don't have enough to go on." She paused. "But I know who can find out more." The mayor stood up and paced in front of the desk. "Sidney."

The blonde's face fell. "No."

"Yes."

"Regina," Emma gave out an anguished groan. "You can't bring him into this!"

"That is not my intention. He has resources that will allow us to gain a better idea of what Gold is planning." She glanced distractedly at her desk. "I will admit he is not you, however --"

"Excuse me?"

The brunette sighed impatiently. "What I mean, Sheriff, is that he is a pest without the slightest shred of integrity. He is nothing more than expendable."

Emma paused. She wasn't sure she heard correctly and after processing the information was a bit startled by the veiled compliment. "Oh."

"Sidney will do anything I ask of him," she stated with a sour expression. "That is the only reason I keep him around. I will call him tomorrow and ask him to gather intel on Gold's recent deals around town. He should be able to do as much without a considerable explanation as to why. Does this suit you?"
"I guess. Just make sure you contact me as soon as he finds anything out. Dr. Whale doesn't know how long those patients are going to remain comatose, and there's no telling what will happen to them in the meantime. The sooner we nail Gold the better."

"I agree. This has gone on long enough." Regina went back to her computer and returned the memory card back to Emma.

As soon as they wrapped up the rest of the meeting and finished their coffee the two headed for the foyer. Emma turned on her heel to give Regina a smirk and said, "You know, I wouldn't have figured you for a Jell-O salad kind of girl."

"It's Henry's favorite," Regina said simply. After a moment she clasped her hands and continued. "I would like to thank you for coming to these dinners I put on. It makes Henry happy to see you."

"I'm glad. I like spending time with him… and you, when you're being nice to me." Emma finished pointedly.

"Yes, well, I try my best." Gazing elsewhere Regina absentmindedly smoothed a nonexistent wrinkle from her dress. Emma thought for a moment that the woman was hiding a blushing face but the sheriff brushed it off as a ridiculous assumption.

They passed the next awkward minute in silence until Emma motioned to the front door and spoke up, "I guess I better be off."

Regina touched her earing and then her eyebrow in a fleeting motion. "Uh-huh." She nodded and tucked in her chin as she followed the woman to the door. A shiver ran over her as she watched Emma slipping into her leather jacket, that stupid red thing she always wore… and wore very well, Regina thought. The source of the chill became known when she realized she had already pulled opened the door leaving a gap for the early autumn breeze. Emma snuck one last look at the dress and gave her a shy nod, stepping into the night.

"Drive safely, Sheriff."

Emma shouted from the pathway, "Always do."

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Emma said a prayer, hoping that her roommate would be asleep. She was always careful in entering quietly and sneaking away to her bedroom without being seen. She did not want to have to explain why she was coming in late from the mayor's and if the conversation ever came up (god forbid) Emma would certainly have a difficult time fabricating a reason. She arrived at the entrance and slid her key in the hole to unlock her apartment. Behind the door was a very much awake Mary Margaret sitting at their dining table. The schoolteacher looked up from her book with a curious expression on her face. "You were out late."

The blonde closed the door behind her. This was the first time she had caught Emma coming in after her meetings with Regina. Mary Margaret knew, of course, of the dinners held at the mansion and how much time Emma was spending with Henry, but she hadn't been told of the late nights the blonde was sharing with the mayor, alone. Mary Margaret may not hate Regina, but she certainly didn't approve of the way she went about certain things (how she treated Emma for one). It wouldn't do any good to reveal the truth because neither of them was ready for that and Emma didn't want to put Mary Margaret in danger of becoming Gold's leverage. The alternative was to lie, though, Emma was afraid to come up with a particular reason why the mansion had been so "inviting" in the evening hours of the night. The only option remaining was to say nothing and...
avoid her friend. Tension built between them those past two months as a result.

Emma heard the jingling of metal against metal and looked down to see her hands fingering the keys. "Henry wanted to watch a movie. It just happened to be two hours long."

"What movie?" Mary Margaret took a sip of her tea, staring over the mug at her friend.

"...Finding Nemo."

"Oh yeah, he's been trying to get me to show it in class as an end-of-the-year treat." She took her mug to the sink and then leaned against the counter behind her. "How was dinner?"

"Same as always. Henry is still asking me about my favorite color and what I like best in my coffee." Emma walked over to the kitchen and set her keys down. "He's made a new friend at school and wants to go on his first sleepover." Emma laughed to herself. "Everything is just rainbows and butterflies with this kid."

Mary Margaret smiled and replied, "Yeah, he's a bundle of joy that one." She crossed her arms. "And Regina? How is she?"

Emma knew what she was asking but couldn't help second guessing herself, wondering if there was an ulterior motive hidden up that sweater sleeve. Mary Margaret was not the devious type; then again, she thought, I don't really know her do I? "She's good. Things are good." Emma smiled reassuringly at the woman. Before the schoolteacher could inquire further, Emma interjected, "I'm kind of tired. I think I'm going to hit the sack."

"O-okay. Goodnight then."

Emma felt a pang of guilt at her friend's downcast expression. All Mary Margaret wanted to know was what was going on with her friend, to be there for her if she needed to be and Emma had responded by brushing her off. It was a tactic she had been perfecting, it would seem.

Without taking off her boots or any of her clothes Emma settled for collapsing onto her bed in exhaustion. It had been a long day and she didn't care to think about any of it. Her run in with Mary Margaret, however, would not let her sleep in peace.

She liked that Mary Margaret worried about her, but sometimes that just made things worse. Did the woman care because they were best friends or was it that she subconsciously yearned to protect her daughter? This question had been bothering Emma for two whole months.

Emma always wished to have what was never given to her: a true mother and close friends. When Mary Margaret came into her life she turned into the kind of friend that was always there to talk, to console, to be present. Then upon hearing that this woman was her biological mother, the one that abandoned her to a cruel and friendless world, it all weighed so heavy on her shoulders. It was confusing to live with someone you thought you had known. Mary Margaret may be her flesh and blood but she couldn't even remember giving birth to Emma. So although it would seem that a long lost child had finally found her mother it was still in part a fabrication. And Emma had lost a friend in the process, for how could she be that trustworthy friend Mary Margaret had been to her when Emma couldn't be honest in return? Emma was torn between a heart that desired motherly affection and a head that warned her to keep her distance. It was too much for her conscience to carry.

She thought back to a few weeks ago when she had considered moving out of their apartment. That day her bags were packed and her key was placed on the nightstand. She called Granny to inquire about a spare room, but was met with disappointment. Where else could she go? Emma considered
the mayor's mansion because at least Regina knew her situation with Mary Margaret and she could be just as close to Henry. She got as far as dialing the mayor's number before she hung up. Whether it was fear of crossing a line with Regina or being locked into some sort of commitment to Henry it didn't matter. Either way, she was doing what she swore she would never do again: run. So she bit the bullet and stayed.

Laying on her back the blonde closed her eyes. As disappointing and exhausting as the past 24 hours were there were some things about the day that produced a smile on Emma Swan's lips. She held in a deep breath and blew it out, forgetting her worries. Sleep soon came upon her and a particular navy blue dress dominated her dreams.
Law of Attraction

The inkwell wobbled and then steadied in midair. It drifted as if it were riding on an invisible cloud. Regina continued to raise her hand, directing the object to new heights and then down with a motion of her wrist. It continued to hang in midair, waiting for an additional command until the brunette dropped her finger. The dull clank the inkwell made on the clean marble desk echoed throughout her mayoral office. Regina slouched back in her chair with a sigh.

She had not expected this. She would never have thought that after 28 years without magic she would simply lose interest in it once it was returned to her. After all, there had never been reason for magic in Storybrooke, not since she was mayor of the town and had every one of its citizens wrapped around her finger. After so many years without it she had grown accustomed to a world without magic.

Now that her powers had returned Regina would tap into them every so often… igniting her office fireplace with a snap of her fingers, pouring coffee with a wave of the hand when Henry wasn't looking. It was a rush at first, but soon the excitement slipped away. It was shocking that something so familiar and natural could simply stop delivering that same comfort she once craved in Fairytale Land. Never before had raising objects and lighting fires seemed so trivial. She was growing bored and unimpressed with her abilities.

It also didn't help that her powers didn't work the same way they did in Fairytale Land. There were times that a snap of her fingers wouldn't create fire or a motion of a hand failed to levitate an object. Her powers were uncontrolled, and fickle, seemingly having a mind of their own. This surprising turn of events caused magic to turn into a subject of not only boredom but frustration for Regina.

But Regina realized she had not been living completely without magic those 28 years. Once Henry entered her life he became the magic in her world. It was a kind of power she had experienced before: love. It made her feel alive again as it did when she was a girl. Henry reminded her of what magic could feel like. It was a kind of magic that did not require special powers or skills. One did not have to have been born into a noble family or live in a lavish palace. It was a magic that anyone could experience. All one needed was a heart and someone to give it to, willingly. Regina had given her heart to Henry even though he hadn't given up his own. She rarely asked for anything in return. The only evidence of her wanting something was the silent wish she whispered every night before sleeping, praying that he would love her one day.

That day was growing nearer by the moment. Since Henry's promise to stop believing in the curse he had been remarkably patient with her. The times that were usually spent arguing about "Evil Queen this" and "Evil Queen that" were replaced with silence. He spoke when spoken to and answered every one of her questions. Regina was not fully satisfied with this indifferent behavior but she saw how much effort he was putting into keeping his promise, so she convinced herself to accept the present state of matters. This awkward stage had lasted up until the dinners with Emma. His biological mother brought out an energy in him Regina couldn't give. Henry began to come out of his shell when Emma was around, recounting his school day, talking about his new obsession with the Avengers comics, asking Regina for things like a new lunchbox, and requesting her to make certain meals he craved. He even made her laugh a few times which brought about a prickly sensation in her chest that threatened a dormant sob. He was talking to her about things she had never known before; things he loved, things he hated, what he was feeling. It was always small things, for Henry was still hesitant around her, but Regina took everything he had to say as significant. What was interesting to him was interesting to her. What he liked, she liked. What he loved, she loved.
A sharp knock at the door halted the mayor's thoughts. She realized that during her reverie the inkwell had rose again in midair. Her hand reached out to grasp the object and set it down. The knock came again, so she rose from the chair and reminded herself to keep her magic (and her emotions) in check around others.

She swung the door ajar to face a jumpy Sidney Glass.

"M-Madame Mayor," he stammered out, eyes wide. "Excuse my awkwardness, but… you don't usually answer your own door…"

"Come in Sidney," Regina rolled her eyes and made her way to the couch

He stared down briefly at his shoes, somewhat letdown at the callous invitation. "Ah, yes." He walked across the polished floor to sit beside her. Regina shifted to the side making more appropriate space between them, letting Sidney know that this was not that kind of meeting.

"Well?" she pressed. "You have information for me?"

A sly grinned formed on Sidney's lips and he leaned in. "Do I ever." He laughed haughtily as the brunette's eyes narrowed. "It seems that Mr. Gold has been a busy man, and not the kind of busy you think. He makes frequent visits to the hospital and drops off homemade gifts to the little ones –"

"I know this already," Regina interrupted. "What else?"

The reporter cleared his throat. "Mother Superior tells me Mr. Gold neglected to pick up last month's rent. I have even heard from a few others that he hasn't come for their rent either. Now, everyone in town knows what a stickler he is about his deals, so it would come to the surprise of many people that he has been disregarding a business he used to consider a vital asset to this town."

"So if he has not called upon his tenants where else has he been besides the hospital? And what exactly has he been doing with his time?"

"Buying," Sidney replied. "I have followed a paper trail that confirms Mr. Gold has been purchasing large quantities of wood from Marco the carpenter. He selects the merchandise in person and pays the same day. Once bought and paid for the wood is transported from Marco's garage to the storage shed behind his pawnshop."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Just about two months." Sidney saw the mayor frown. She was obviously thinking about something. He leaned in again with a raised brow to add, "Curious isn't it?"

Regina said slowly, "Yes. Yes it is."

"If you ask me he is obsessed. He spends all his time at the shop with his work. What work, I haven't figured out yet."

She regained her thoughts just as Sidney had finished his sentence. "That will not be necessary," Regina swiftly declared. She stood up, brushed down her skirt with a quick swipe and walked around the couch to her desk. "You have held up your end. I will finish any remaining work that needs to be done."

Sidney rose and approached the mayor. "I can still help. I'm more than willing to do additional work. I could talk to Mother Superior again. Maybe question Marco. Just cover my bases… tie up
any loose ends."

"And why would you need to do that?" the brunette asked in a raised voice. She liked to toy with the reporter. Making him feel small and unwanted was one of her favorite pastimes. "Did you fly through the investigation so quickly that you missed something?"

"No!" A horrified expression appeared on the man's face. "Madame Mayor, I take my job very seriously. I work with a quality and intent that none of your staff possess. You can trust me with any task and I would carry it out in a thorough manner. If there is more I can do to assist you in this investigation it would be a great honor. Anything, anything at all."

Regina grimaced at the man's desperate tone. It was a pathetic site to see Sidney flash those puppy dog eyes at her. If he really wanted to do something for me he would be on his knees begging, Regina thought, like a subject would for their queen. She stared him in the face and declared, "Thank you Sidney, that will be all."

Her tone was so sharp it cut into the reporter like a knife. Without a word Sidney slinked out of her office, tail between his legs.

"Typical," Regina muttered to herself once the door closed.

She returned to her chair and leaned back with arms resting comfortably on the armrests. The mayor was in a contemplative state. The information Sidney had delivered was certainly curious, however, she still had no idea what to make of it. Doubt and fear plagued her thoughts causing the woman to reconsider her next move. A part of her was tempted not to proceed with the original plan.

A hand lifted once more to facilitate the inkwell into a floating state. It made a few revolutions in midair until it was commanded back down onto the desk. After a few moments of thinking the mayor forced the doubt from her mind and reached for the phone, pushing speed dial.

"Sheriff, I think we have some hunting to do."

***

Emma was parked a short block away from Mr. Gold's pawnshop. The light shining from the window told her that Gold hadn't closed up shop yet. Her watch read 9:15. Regina was late. The blonde was growing more worried by the minute for if the pawnbroker decided to leave she didn't know whether to abide by the woman's instructions or follow Gold.

The sheriff propped her elbow against the side door to hold her head up. She was getting tired of these stakeouts. Real tired. Her hand snatched up the coffee Ruby made for her earlier that evening and just as she took a sip the VW passenger door swung open.

"Mother fu –" Emma caught her coffee cup in midair just before her head smacked the steering wheel (just missing the horn). A relaxed Regina gave out a sadistic chuckle as she slipped into the seat and closed the door.

"Careful dear, you don't want to blow our cover," she laughed again.

Emma gaped at her through watery eyes. Rubbing her forehead she squeaked out, "God, I little warning next time!" The other woman shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm assuming he's still there?" Regina gestured to the shop.
"He's been there all evening." Emma looked out the windshield at the entrance to the store. She returned the coffee back to its dash holder before patting down her damp jeans. "What took you so long?"

"The babysitter called in sick. I had to ask Kathryn Nolan over after fighting with Henry about how he was still not old enough to be alone in the house at night."

Emma's nerves tightened. She hated that he couldn't know why he needed a babysitter. Normally, Henry was responsible enough to be on his own but since matters with Gold had become increasingly complicated it wasn't safe to leave him home alone. Neither mom was willing to jeopardize their son's well-being; it was one of the few decisions they readily agreed upon. Emma gave out a dismal sigh. "How is he, otherwise?"

"He's doing well, considering." They both knew what that meant.

"No Evil Queen talk, curse and all?"

Regina shook her head in confirmation, still staring out at the deserted street. The sheriff noticed her stiff posture and the twitch at the corner of her mouth. The mayor was visibly uneasy with the conversation. It must have been hard on her, Emma thought, to love someone who believed you were an evil witch. She stuffed her hand under her thigh to avoid giving the woman a reassuring pat; the mayor would frown upon such contact, especially from someone she disliked.

Regina then noticed the state of her surroundings. The dash was caked with dust, two paper cups of coffee (hopefully empty) lay forgotten at her feet, and a few snack wrappers were stuffed between her seat and the middle console. Her body stiffened even more. "Please tell me I'm not sitting on a three-week-old coffee stained cushion. Please."

"I didn't exactly have time to Stanley Steem my car, Your Highness."

Regina winced at the title. "You are far from amusing." Her foot moved an inch to the right to get more distance from the garbage.

"Relax; it's not always like this." Emma glanced down at the wrappers on the floor. "Most of the time."

The two women (or at least Emma) settled in for the wait. After a few minutes of silence Emma spoke up hesitantly, "So, uh... how was your day?"

Regina withheld the usual sardonic reply and decided instead to humor the woman next to her. "It was filled with the usual tedious duties of being mayor. I held a city council meeting that did nothing to resolve our budget issues, I had to convince the fire chief to stop hailing the entire department whenever a cat gets stuck up a tree, and then there was Sidney and his glowing report. He sure put the sunshine in my day."

"That's sarcasm, right?" Emma said with a scrunched face. "I can never tell with you."

The brunette tipped her head towards Emma. "Yes dear, that was sarcasm." Emma nodded. "I do like to see him squirm, though."

"Who was he? In your world, I mean."

"He was my magic mirror," she replied. Regina purposely left out the part where he would spy on her enemies (Emma's own mother, for one).
"Convenient," Emma commented with shrug. She didn't know much about this Fairytale Land but she did know how much of a pest Sidney could be. Emma had no respect for sneaky, morally corrupt reporters. The man tricked her on more than one account and she was positively disgusted by his obsession with the mayor.

Regina agreed, "That's what I thought." She paused, gazing down at her hands to see a thumb fingering her ring. "There are many things I miss from my world. And then there are some things…"

"What?" Emma encouraged.

The brunette considered what she would say. There was a time when she wouldn't have thought twice about closing herself off to this woman. If they had been in the same situation two months ago Regina would have reinforced the wall around her with a sneer and a sharp remark. Nothing would have gotten past her defenses and the discussion would have ended before it even began. In yet, here she was in that ghastly mess of a car talking candidly with her mortal enemy. Is she still my enemy, though? Regina asked herself. Does two months of pursuing the same foe and sharing dinner twice a week, laughing and talking amiably together in front of Henry still make Emma the enemy? Have things really changed that quickly?

Regina wrapped her arms around her torso as if holding on to some last semblance of isolation. Before she could censor an explanation the words were already coming out. "I don't feel the same way about magic. Before, it was a source of comfort, of authority. I treated it like it was an absolute necessity. Now it just doesn't feel the same." Regina twisted the ring on her finger. Despite the apprehension in her voice she continued. "It is more difficult here in Storybrooke to control my abilities when they are so closely linked to my emotions. My powers… they are almost a nuisance."

Emma hung on her every word, her every syllable. Since finding out about the existence of magic and Fairytale Land she had never heard Regina talk about her powers, much less her feelings. She saw the woman staring down at her hands, short cropped hair hung down, blocking Emma from reading her face. From the sound of her voice and the way she held herself Emma didn't need to witness her expression. Somehow she knew how the woman felt.

Emma lowered her head to confirm her suspicion, but before she got far enough her periphery caught movement in the direction of the shop. "He's on the move." They both simultaneously exited the car.

Regina heard the sound of boots walking behind her so she turned and crossed her arms across her chest. "And where are you going?"

"I'm following you." Emma gave the brunette her best 'stating the obvious' look. "We're going to find out what Gold has been up to."

The mayor shook her head. "Someone has to stay behind and search the shop. That someone would be you, Sheriff Swan."

"Shouldn't I need a warrant?"

Regina cocked her head and gave the woman a look that shouted, 'Are you serious?' Emma had carried out some less than standard procedures in the past as sheriff. Breaking and entering should have been nothing new to her.

The mayor advised, "Search the pawnshop, his backroom, and the shed. If anything looks out of
"It's probably significant to the investigation," Emma finished. "Yeah, this isn't my first rodeo, Madame Mayor."

The other woman sucked in an impatient breath while giving a roll of her eyes. The sound of Gold's car halted Regina from replying to the sarcasm. It was time to go hunting. After giving Emma a brief nod she proceeded to her Mercedes.

"Be careful," Emma stated in a hushed tone before heading towards the vacant pawnshop.

Regina's fingers unclenched from their strained hold on her car keys, the breeze cooling her sweaty palm. She glanced back to see the back of Emma's head as the sheriff jogged across the street. Her mouth opened to speak, but nothing came out. With a furrowed brow the mayor tore her eyes from the blonde curls and got in her car.

***

Of all the places Regina thought Gold might go to she had not expected him to revisit the mystic well in the forest. She had followed the tail lights of his car to a trail leading into the woods. It was much too cold and far too dark to be out playing hide and seek, but Regina was driven by an insatiable need for revenge. A long awaited revenge that she would sate that night.

From behind a large tree she saw Gold extract an object from inside his suit jacket. It was brown in color and about the size of a drinking flask. Squinting, her eyes made out designs etched on the exterior, like carvings in wood. Wood. His hand tipped the flask over the open well releasing a translucent liquid. The fluid was silver in color and flowed down like heavy smog.

Regina considered her options. She could stay hidden from view like a coward and carry on this game of shadows, or she could catch her enemy in the act and confront him. A dark, beastly voice within her proposed another option. The temptation was not meant to be ignored. She had her powers back and Gold was right there. They were in the middle of the woods where no one could see or hear them. All she had to do was extend a hand and unleash her fury. The opportunity was ripe for the picking.

A laugh almost came out of her as she took in her helpless prey. It was going to be so very easy and satisfying. When the last of the substance was emptied the man capped the flask and returned it to his pocket. Now, Regina thought. Stepping into the moonlight she pulled back a heated fist. Then there was a cry.

The wolf's howl traveled throughout the forest, reverberating off every tree and rippling across every creek. Gold turned his ear, more alert than before. The woman retreated behind the tree as Gold backed away from the well to look around him. He smiled; not a wide smile, but a distinct curving of the mouth. He backed into the heavy foliage and disappeared from view. Regina slammed a now cooled fist into the bark of the tree and rested her forehead against it in defeat.

When alone and peering upon the desolate scene she moved from her hiding place to approach the well. For every step, her mind came up with half a dozen theories as to what lay down that hole. None of these ideas were good, nor did they bode well for the safety of her son. Peering over the ledge she came upon darkness. Gripping the sides for support she leaned in for a better look. Her head went below the lip of the well and as she squinted into the void something made her scream. The sound should have echoed down the hole, but instead, her scream was captured and pulled down like a helpless prisoner. All that remained was silence.
The woman stumbled back to put distance between herself and whatever she saw. Her cellphone was out and she dialed.

Emma answered on the other line, "Regina, is that you?" A burst of static emerged. "I can barely hear you. You must be somewhere with bad reception."

"Yes, it's me," the mayor breathed out, still recovering from the shock. "Did you find anything in the shop?"

"Nothing incriminating. I wouldn't expect..." More static. "... just lying around so I made a careful search of... was all these wood carvings... didn't find anything else..."

"Sheriff!" she shouted over the static. "Were these wood carvings in the shape of a drinking flask? Did it look like it could contain liquid?"

"Ah, yeah I guess it... What are you thinking?"

"Listen, Gold will be back in minutes! You have to get out of there!"

Regina managed to hear the woman confirm their rendezvous point before the line went dead. Not wasting another moment, she turned her back on the well without a last glance.

***

It was well past midnight when they sat across from each other on the pristine white couches of the den. Although eyes were drooping and backs were strained there was no time to brew coffee. Pleasantries were left at the door, tensions were high, and the two figures on the couches sat in distress. This was not business as usual, this was about survival.

"So you're sure it was the well that caused it and not the wolf?"

"Of course I'm sure!" Regina shouted out in frustration. She attempted to calm herself with a few deep breaths. "Whatever Gold put down that well morphed into something that had the power to practically knock me out. I have never felt pure terror as what I faced then."

The blonde moved to the edge of the couch and gestured with a hand. "It didn't knock you out, though. Maybe you're immune to the spell. Gold could have made a mistake."

Regina shook her head in disbelief. "The fear was almost incapacitating. It took every ounce of my strength to prevent it from consuming me."

"But you're powers are stronger than Gold's." Emma leaned forward and insisted. "You can defeat whatever is down there."

"We don't know that." Regina's eyes locked with Emma's. "Magic is more than flashy spells and fire. Gold is adept at making people do what they don't want to do. He can destroy your freewill just by looking at you." A shiver ran down her spine. "That is more powerful than any magic I possess."

"So who else is there?" Emma flew her hands up and shrugged. "Regina, if you know anyone else around here that can do what you and Gold are capable of then tell me now. We need all the help we can get."

"I can't," she whispered. With elbows resting on her knees Regina ran her fingers into limp hair. Her voice was so low Emma could hardly catch the words. "I still sense it, that horrible feeling.
Like all the hope had been sucked from the world.

Emma beheld the small form on the couch. It was not like Regina to give up so easily, to be forced into submission. Fortune was laughing at her and Regina was drawing back, almost paralyzed with fear. "You can't give up." Emma declared firmly. "Not when our son is in danger."

The woman's head lifted, lips parted slightly. "Henry," she whines fearfully.

"Henry," Emma confirms, "who is upstairs right now sleeping in his bed. Henry, who is only ten-years-old and whose only problems are what cereal he's going to have for breakfast or if he can sleep over at a friend's house. Henry, who has made far fewer mistakes than you or I have made and is giving us a chance to make up for them."

The crumpled form sat a little straighter. How it was possible for the sheriff to change her spirits so quickly, Regina couldn't figure out.

"You are going to stop this evil," the blonde fixed her green eyes on Regina's glistening orbs, "and I'm going to help you."

***

Henry Mills may be ten-years-old but he wasn't stupid, and he sure wasn't blind. After a year of disregarding his curfew and spying on unsuspecting individuals he was accomplished at knowing when something was up, and this something was going on right in his own home. He would have been surprised at not being caught, but recent events had a tendency to keep his mother preoccupied.

Henry let go of the bannister bars and sat up from his place on the stairs. He turned his ear to make sure his presence was not detected before making his way back to bed. As if he had been doing it for years, the boy tip toed to his room making sure to step over the top creaking step. He stealthily closed his door and slipped under the new Thor comforter his mother recently bought him.

There were changes coming, not the kind that Emma had brought with her to Storybrooke, but a string of approaching events he could barely comprehend. Regina and Emma were too busy to notice Henry's suspicions and that was exactly why he had them. He had kept his promise to both of them, but he feared he would soon have to break that promise.
Ridiculous

The pancakes came off the griddle hot and golden brown. The day was shaping up to be a marvelous one. The percolating coffee invigorated her groggy senses as she looked out the kitchen window. With the new season came welcoming changes. The leaves were turning in the cool autumn air, her apple tree was thriving, and Henry was warming up to her faster than she could have anticipated. She looked forward to the perfect breakfast they would soon be sharing as mother and son. It felt so wonderfully normal. It almost resembled a happy ending.

Regina expertly flipped three cakes onto a plate, serving it to the empty place at the kitchen island. "Henry! Breakfast!"

A moment later she cringed at the sound of size four shoes hitting the wood floors. "What have I told you about running in the house?" She glared at the boy who burst into the kitchen.

"Not to," Henry answered out of breath. "Sorry."

"Your pancakes are getting cold." They sat next to each other on high stools. Typically, they would eat their meals in the dining room, but lately mother and son have begun to enjoy their breakfasts in a more informal manner. The kitchen was where Regina felt most at home and to have her son eat with her there every morning was always a good start to her day.

After lightly buttering his pancakes Henry took a large bite. He chewed for a few seconds, brow furrowed in concentration, testing the fluffiness and the all-around flavor of his meal.

Regina sat at her untouched plate, waiting in anticipation. It was difficult to suppress a grin as she watched the boy take his breakfast so seriously as if he were a judge at a prestigious pancake tasting. She held her breath as she watched him swallow and then pause, looking intently across the island countertop. His eyes suddenly widened in surprise.

"Cinnamon!"

Beaming, Regina let the smile finally come to her lips. "Yes, someone told me how fond you are of cinnamon."

"Emma?"

"Mm-hm," she nodded. She squeezed his shoulder affectionately. "I'm glad you like it, Henry."

The syrup was passed and Henry flooded the side of his plate with a pool of the sticky maple sweetness. Regina started on her own pancakes just as Henry was shoveling in his second bite. After a few minutes of eating Henry slowed down. He twirled his fork anxiously between his fingers as he spied his mother under hooded lashes. He tried to sound unconcerned when he asked, "What do you and Emma talk about?"

Regina finished her mouthful and smiled sweetly at him. "You."

Henry rolled his eyes. "I mean, besides me what do you guys talk about? Emma always hangs out around here after I go to bed."

How does he know that? Regina asked herself, he is supposed to be sleeping! Her eyes left Henry's as she swallowed over a particularly dry bit of pancake. She shrugged and said, "Just business. The mayor and the sheriff have very closely related duties, so it is normal that Miss Swan and I will
have numerous one-on-one meetings."

"Oh," Henry said, a bit disappointed.

A chime hailed the end of the coffee machine's cycle. Relieved at the interruption, the brunette got off her stool to tend to her empty mug.

"Mom, can I ask you something?"

She tamped down on the exasperating sigh itching to come out. With her back to Henry she replied in a somewhat strained voice, "What is it, dear?"

There was a few seconds of awkward silence and then her son spoke, "Are you and Emma together?"

"I don't think I understand." Regina frowned as she took the coffee pot from its holder. "Together?"

"You know... a couple."

Regina's eyes widened in shock and then even wider when she felt a burning sensation on her hand. "Ouch!" she hissed in pain as the brown liquid spilled over her hand and onto the counter. The steam swirled in the air and seemingly hovered in slow motion. "Wh-what?!"

"I just figured because you and Emma are always hanging out."

"Henry… ehh." Regina was caught between mopping up the mess and coming up with a coherent reply to Henry's insinuation. She looks over her shoulder to meet her son's gaze directly, doing her best to put on that evil glare despite her son's childlike expression. "I don't know where you got that idea but it is absolutely ridiculous!"

Her tone came out unsure and frantic, but Henry couldn't tell if it was the coffee pooling on the counter or what he had asked her that had made her so agitated. He stared back innocently as if he simply asked about something as mundane as the weather.

With one flourishing swipe the mayor cleaned off the last of the coffee and threw the rag in the sink with a labored sigh. She turned on her son with hands on her hips, this time looking more put together. "Miss Swan and I work together, that is the extent of our relationship. There is nothing more to it and it is ridiculous of you, Henry, to think differently."

Henry just raised his brow at the second use of the word 'ridiculous' in the 60 seconds it took her to say it before.

"And how would you know that she is still here after dinner? You are supposed to be in bed sleeping." Regina took a sudden step forward and placed a hand on the counter. Her voice got higher when she demanded, "Have you been listening in on our conversations?"

"Noo," he said half-heartedly and put on his best puppy dog face.

"You know it is bad form to spy on other people's private time." The boy raised his brow even further at 'private time.' "That is a very serious offense and I don't allow it in my house. I thought I raised you better."

"So you're saying that you and Emma aren't a couple?"

"Have you not been listening to what I have been saying?" Regina became frantic again, waving
her arm to argue her point. "Miss Swan and I are not together!"

"Oookay," Henry said as he looked at his half-crazed mother. "I'm gonna get ready for school." He jumped down from his chair and skipped off.

Regina closed her eyes tightly in an effort to forget what had occurred. There were so many emotions running through her that she couldn't think straight; she could not come up with one valid reason why she responded so defensively to Henry the way she did. She rubbed her forehead in frustration and was surprised to feel a sheen of perspiration. "This is ridiculous," she muttered to herself, shaking her head.

Sitting down in a huff, Regina stared at her cold, half-eaten pancakes, wondering what just happened to her 'marvelous' day.

***

The drive to school was the most awkward one yet. It just so happened that neither of them knew what to say or how to act around each other, so they passed the time in silence, Henry fiddling with the zipper on his backpack and Regina concentrating on the road.

When they arrived at the school Regina walked him to the building. The boy sped up ahead of her. "Have a good day at school!" Henry turned and waved goodbye before running to his classmates.

Regina smiled as she saw her son converse with a friend. It has gotten easier for him to socialize with children his own age. Regina liked to chalk this change up to his getting over the curse business. The fairytale book used to take up so much of his time that he had isolated himself from his friends, or what few friends he had. Regina never fully knew this until he had stopped the routine.

These days Henry would stay after school to hang out with friends on the playground instead of doing so on his own (and without the book). He seemed much happier, Regina noticed; however, just because he looked like he had changed didn't mean he was changed. She knew how stubborn he was because it was a trait which he received from herself. The doubt would fester within her; doubt that Henry was lying to her, saying that he had given up his belief in the curse when he hadn't. Snow White had broken her promise, was it so impossible that her grandson broke his? For all she knew Emma could be in on it, too. They could very well be plotting the Evil Queen's demise while she remained naïve and sucker into believing that their attitude towards her had turned peaceable.

But then she would remember all the good times they had shared since she had convinced Emma to stay in Storybrooke; the ones where they sat down to dinner, smiling and making jokes. She recalled Henry's gleeful cheer when he was allowed to stay up with them to watch a movie and the quick kiss her cheek received at bedtime.

Her memories of Emma were just as convincing. Every time that animated smirk or a past sarcastic comment came to mind Regina couldn't help but think that the blonde wanted to spend time with her. For some reason unbeknownst to her she needed to believe it.

Out of the corner of her eye she spotted an ugly, cream colored sweater and blue leggings approach her. Mary Margaret.

"Good morning, Mayor Mills."

"Miss Blanchard," Regina stated.
The school teacher motioned at the group of kids ahead. "I see Henry has finally made some friends."

"Yes," she smiled, unable to hide her pride, "he has."

"Some people just have a bit of a rough start, getting to know others. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

A bit startled, Regina stared at the short woman, wondering who was the subject of the comment. Hopefully Mary Margaret wasn't as smart as she thought she looked and if she was Regina would have to resort to a sharp rebuttal.

"He really is great kid," Mary Margaret complimented. "You must be proud."

"Every day."

The teacher nodded with a smile. She then opened her mouth to speak while staring down at the ground. "How is Emma doing?" Her shy gaze lifted to Regina's astonished face.

"How would I know such things?" the mayor replied defensively. "She is your roommate."

Mary Margaret shrunk under the woman's harsh shadow. "I- I was just wondering because she's been spending more time at the mansion with Henry and- and... you."

"What concern is it of yours?"

"Emma is my friend," Mary Margaret indicated matter-of-factly.

The mayor's eyes narrowed deliciously into those of her prey. "Are you jealous that Miss Swan is spending time with Henry and I?"

Mary Margaret's laugh was not nearly as convincing as she wanted it to sound. "I am not jealous of anyone! Emma gets to spend time with her son and if that takes time away from our friendship then so be it. Henry is her first priority. I am more than happy for her."

"And are you content with Miss Swan and I spending time together?"

Mary Margaret frowned, speculating if it was a trick question. "You just work together. I assume that is all there is between you two. Unless-"

"Unless what?" Regina spat out quickly. That backfired quickly, she thought. Taking a threatening step towards the other woman she demanded, "Do the sheriff and I have a different relationship I am not aware of?"

"Mayor Mills, I had no intention of accusing you or Emma of... of..." Mary Margaret frantically searched for the appropriate term, "associating with one other."

The brunette was relieved to see her lifelong enemy frown at the likelihood. It was one thing for Henry to suspect that his mothers were in a relationship, but for Snow White to insinuate that Regina was cavorting with her and Charming's daughter made the mayor's blood boil. Not in a million years, she professed to herself.

"Emma is my friend," Mary Margaret repeated. "She has been so busy lately and when I happen to catch her there is this distance between us. I don't know why, but she seems to be avoiding me. I just want to know if she is okay."
The mayor is taken aback by the confession. It seemed like decades since the woman before her had been candid about her feelings. A most strange and familiar sensation coursed through her which at first was warm, almost comforting, but in mere seconds the feeling was extinguished; the memory of a broken promise stabbing into her heart once again.

"Did you not stop to think that you hardly see her because she wants it that way? Have you ever considered she might not think you care, so she avoids you?" She wanted this. After all those years of living under the shadow of precious Snow White, watching her friends and family shower her with love, Regina finally had the opportunity to throw it in her face. Mary Margaret may not remember her past, but her dear stepmother did. Now it was Regina who was at the center of attention while little Snow was left all alone.

"You keep calling her your friend, yet the fact that you are asking me of her well-being tells me you care nothing for her. If you did, we would not be having this conversation. If you did, you would know exactly how Emma is, where she has been, and what she has been doing." The mayor didn't stop there despite Mary Margaret's attempt to interrupt the tirade. "If that is how you treat your friends then I feel sorry for Miss Swan. She deserves better."

The accusation was a slap in the face of Mary Margaret, but the words that were spoken were harsher than any physical blow and left a bruising red mark on her conscience. It was evident that the schoolteacher believed that Emma deserved better; the epiphany gradually displayed on her round, pretty face.

Regina had been on a roll, but the last remark astounded even her as much as it did the other woman. It was difficult to evaluate whether she had said it out of spite or because she actually believed the words. Those words: Emma. Deserved. Better. Did I just defend Emma against her own mother? Regina asked herself in shock.

Mary Margaret's own expression of surprise had not disappeared when the mayor decided to end what was for sure to be a moment neither of them would forget.

"Good day, Miss Blanchard."

***

If he knew his mother at all, he understood that what she told him had been false. She had a tendency to hide unexpected emotions with anger; this morning was no exception. Regina may have been ticked off by his lack of propriety, but it was clear from her reaction that his misbehavior was not the bigger issue. No, something else was brewing and Regina pretending that she was set off by his question only made Henry doubt the lie even more.

In truth, he hadn't exactly been listening in on his mothers' late night conversations. All he ever heard from the stairs was the low muffled sound of talking. There were certainly clues, though, that suggested something different was going on. For one, Regina had made a peace with Emma that had lasted longer than anyone could have expected. Although they would engage in occasional bickering, those brutal fights of the past were nonexistent. She even allowed Henry and Emma more time together than usual which was not a gift so willingly given by Regina.

The dinners they shared were a fantastical event not because it was something new, but because of the warm and fuzzy feeling he experienced when it was the three of them, together. Over the years Henry would try to imagine how different his life would be if he had two parents living under his roof who raised him like any normal two parents would. Emma may not live at the mansion, but she certainly came there enough to lend a bit of truth to the boy's fantasy. Just as remarkable was how those two looked at and reacted to one another. There were times he spied the longing glances
the blonde gave when Regina wasn't looking or the genuine laugh the brunette elicited when Emma had failed to live up to the claim that she could work the Blu-ray player. If they were this easy going with each other in front of their son, Henry wondered how they acted when he wasn't around. Ew, he thought.

Becoming friendly with the Mayor of Storybrooke was not an easy feat, but if anyone could pull it off it was the Sheriff of Storybrooke. He also considered another possibility, one which he knew would not be popular with either of his parents: that the Evil Queen and the Savior were enemies no longer and becoming far more than friends, and that the curse was real; the curse that could be broken with true love's kiss.

Was it really possible?

***

Emma Swan was enjoying her grilled cheese sandwich when she heard the unmistakable click of heels from the hallway. The clicking was distinctly Gucci and the gap in between each step told her that the pace was swift, like that of a woman with a purpose. The blonde's munching lips formed a smile at the sound of her visitor.

Regina wasted no time with a greeting. "We need to talk."

"Hello to you, too," the sheriff said without breaking her smile.

"I don't know what has been going on between you and Miss Blanchard these past months but it is unacceptable of her to bring me into it."

Puzzled, Emma put down her sandwich to grab a napkin. "What are you talking about?"

"She seems to think that you are avoiding her, that you don't want to see or talk to her. Now, I can see the allure of ignoring that woman, however, I am somehow being punished for your actions. Miss Blanchard is asking *me* how *you* are."

"Oh." Emma looked slightly ashamed, yet deep down felt somewhat unapologetic for her recent behavior. "What did you tell her?"

"Why should I have to tell her anything? I don't even like being in the same room with her."

Emma disregarded the brutally honest statement. She was aware that there was some past feud between Regina and her mother though she wasn't given details. The desk chair slid back as the blonde hunched forward to ask timidly, "How is she?"

The brunette exaggerated a roll of the eyes before declaring, "I am the Mayor of Storybrooke, not your own personal messenger. If you are concerned about Miss Blanchard then ask her yourself."

Not making the mistake of testing the woman's patience, Emma left it alone. If there was one thing she learned from Gold it was to pick her battles when it came to Regina. Her looming priority at the moment was her growling stomach, so she made the wise decision to dive back into her lunch. That gooey grilled cheese was calling her and she was, after all, the Savior.

Regina stood on in revulsion to behold the sheriff in her element. If it weren't for the next serious subject of conversation she would have made a crack about the woman's food choices.

"There is... something else I am here about."
"Mm-hmm?" Emma managed around stringy cheese.

"Today Henry asked me something quite strange." Regina pulled her hands behind her back and lowered her gaze. Her tone was a bit higher than she expected it to be when she explained, "He asked me if you and I are seeing each other."

Emma drew a blank look that was eerily familiar to the one Regina had received earlier that day. "Like, a couple?"

"That is what 'seeing each other' means, does it not?"

Then the sheriff did something that completely threw Regina off: she laughed.

"You are laughing like this is some joke." The mayor cocked back her head in astonishment. "Why?"

The laughter was stifled by the back of a hand. Emma cleared her throat properly before saying, "Sorry, I guess it's just my way of dealing with surprising news." Regina raised a brow despite the innocent smile that was on display. "How did he draw that conclusion?"

"I'm glad you asked," the brunette drawled sarcastically, "because while you and I were in my house talking about curses and magic Henry has been eavesdropping. He knows you've been staying over after dinner."

"But he didn't mention our talks, right? He never actually heard anything?"

"No, thankfully he hasn't picked up on it. However, that doesn't make what he did acceptable." Regina shook her head and stared off into the distance. "That he would even assume such impossibility between us..."

"You want a fry?"

"What?" Regina panned back to Emma and then saw the limp piece of potato being offered. How the woman could be thinking about food when they were talking about something this serious was beyond her. She cringed. "No, that is quite alright."

Emma sighed and shrugged. "It's perfectly normal that he would ask that. I mean, think about it. We're two responsible, grown women raising a son together. We even get along." Emma paused and tipped her head jokingly, "when you're not acting like a –"

"I'm going to stop you right there, Miss Swan. I like to think that our progress these past two months hasn't been in vain. I would hate to see you revert back to your old, name calling ways."

"Come on Regina, I'm sure you've been called worse than 'pain in the ass.'" She smirked. "We both know you can take it. The point I'm trying to make is that there is nothing wrong with Henry's suspicion. We just tell him he's wrong. We all move on."

"You appear to be more than calm about this whole thing." A thought struck Regina and she stared down the sheriff. "Have you been putting ideas in his head? If you have been telling him these lies then so help me Miss Swan I will."

"Hang on, I haven't told him any such thing! Why would I?" She thankfully didn't get a response from the other woman. "Besides, don't you think you're blowing this just a bit out of proportion?"

Regina rounded the desk in an almost cat-like manner. "When my son thinks I am frolicking
around with the town's sheriff who just happens to be his…” she almost cannot bring herself to say it, but it is oddly becoming easier to swallow, "his biological mother I take it seriously. There is a time and a place for humorous accusations. This current incident is unquestionably not one of them."

"It doesn't mean anything unless– "Emma raised an eyebrow. "Wait, is that what's bothering you? The possibility that we could be…” she gestured with a finger waving from Regina to herself.

The mayor scowled, "Of course not. I am your superior."

Emma couldn't hold in the chuckle. "Knowing you, I don't think that would be our obstacle."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Emma blushed and gazed down at her desk. "Madame Mayor, I am well aware that nothing and nobody gets in the way of your goals. A simple title wouldn't stop you from getting what you want."

"Whoever said I wanted you?" Regina gaped.

"Apparently, Henry."

Regina pursed her lips at the prompt reminder. She could not believe how frustrating the day had turned out to be. "This is-"

"Ridiculous? Yeah it probably is. This is Henry we're talking about; he's nosy as hell, but he means well. He cares about you, that's why he asked."

Regina flinched at the remark. That Henry cared about her was an alien notion. It was not something she was often (if at all) told. "Just to be absolutely clear, I have never had nor ever will-"

"No need to explain." Emma held up a reassuring hand. "I understand your intentions are clear. You have nothing to worry about from my end."

A forced smile and then, "I am glad we see eye to eye on this, Miss Swan."

And that was all that needed to be said. In the most formal manner since their alliance was struck Regina bid the sheriff farewell with a nod and a curt smile.

Even in the mayor's absence Emma continued to ask herself if it all really was ridiculous.

***

City hall was eerily quiet that afternoon when the mayor returned to her office. Regina hated it when she didn't come back to a bustling workplace because that meant those civil servants were not doing their jobs. It was up to her to make sure that the government in addition to the town was run in a smooth and operational manner. If a mayor couldn't control her staff then they might as well declare a state of emergency. However, Regina was an above average mayor who possessed a knack for delegating lazy staff. There should have been no reason for scolding on her watch.

"Marcie! Where is everyone?"

The secretary jumped a foot out of her chair at the unexpected entrance of her boss. "Mayor Mills, you scared me! Um, everyone has been coming and going today. I guess it's just one of those slow
"There is no such thing as a slow day. Not in my office," Regina said flatly. "Do I have any messages?"

Marcie snatched up three pink slips of paper and read, "The governor called about a statewide reminder on voting procedures for the upcoming elections... Mr. Boss wants to know the status on gaining rights to the mines..."

"That will be the day," mumbled the brunette.

"And lastly, Mr. Gold stopped in."

Regina froze, the air in her lungs suspended. "What did you say?"

"He wanted to speak with you, didn't say about what. He left before I could schedule an appointment."

"That is all that happened? He didn't say or do anything else?"

"That was all. He seemed to be in a hurry."

"Was there anything strange about him? Did you notice anything out of the ordinary occur?"

Marcie tried to recall. "Not really, no." She saw the mayor's unraveled state. Concerned, she asked softly, "Mayor Mills, are you okay?"

A few seconds and then brunette locks whipped back to reveal the composed mayoral face Marcie knew so well. "Yes, I'm fine."

"Do you want me to call Mr. Gold to set up a meeting?"

"That won't be necessary."

Regina took the pink slips and stuffed them into her briefcase. Walking into her office she hung up her coat and set down her bag. Her empty office exuded the peace and tranquility she so desperately needed. Finally, she could put the past hours of her infuriating day behind her. Work would be the perfect distraction.

Removing her heels and sliding them under her desk she rose to eye level with something that was not supposed to be there.

"Marcie, has anyone been in my office?" she shouted, still crouched with a hand gripping the desk.

"No, I've been here since this morning."

"Are you absolutely sure?"

"I was the first one in the building. Your door has been closed all day."

The object rested ominously on the marble top. It was made of rust colored wood and the size of a drinking flask. Drawn in a flourishing design, the etchings dug deep into its surface. The size suggested it was not the same container Gold emptied into the well. This wooden flask was smaller. A name was etched into the wood, so Regina stood and leaned forward to get a better look. What she read turned her blood to ice.
Henry Mills.
Reach

The flask contained nothing but a threat, and a most personal threat at that. It was strange how something as small and insignificant as a wooden flask could reign in the urge to kill. There was no doubt that she wanted to kill him. Her thumbs were itching to squeeze the pulse point on his throat. The anger in her had roared with such ferocity that a small explosion of fire emitted from her office fireplace; a side effect of her returned powers and her inability to control them in Storybrooke.

When she rushed home that day she found an unharmed and jovial Henry. Regina tried hiding her fears when drilling him for answers for she did not want to frighten the boy. She gathered that Gold had not visited Henry or spoke a word to him. He had been at school the entire time. She was reassured by Emma that he was picked up immediately after classes and taken to Granny's to do homework before arriving home.

Her fears did not dissipate, though. There was no doubting that Gold was using Henry to get to her. He must have known she was following him that night in the forest. The flask was Gold's way of sending a message: stay away or she would lose the one she loves. If he had threatened her with any other person she would have gone straight to Gold and ripped his heart out. But this wasn't any other person, it was her Henry. The chance to punish Gold couldn't be taken because the boy's life was in danger once again. A cold shiver ran up her spine at the memory of Gold's previous threat.

"Let's just say I wouldn't want my son wandering around Storybrooke anytime soon; so many dark and terrible things roaming about these nights."

If anything happened to him, Regina wouldn't be able to go one. She had lost one too many people in her life to continue living alone. No mistakes could be made this time.

In light of the fact that she and Emma still had not solved the mystery surrounding the well and how unpredictable her control over magic had become there would be no confronting the threats and certainly no lashing out. This left her with one remaining option: back off the investigation and regroup. It was smarter to plan his demise if he didn't see it coming, and she couldn't let Gold know that he was getting to her. More importantly, she couldn't tell Emma. The woman had just as much a temper and was as protective of Henry as the mayor was. If Emma knew the threats Gold has been making there would no stopping her. Regina had to make the decision for the both of them. She had to let Gold win this round.

***

The forest was making its usual noises at night. Stray leaves flapped against one another as they hung precariously on naked branches. The wind carried a creepy hooting from bright pinpricks in the distance. The faint, flickering lights were watching her or watching over her, one of the two. Also, that constant chirping; Emma couldn't see the crickets but the annoying sound alerted her to their presence. As calm as the wind was the sheriff was not alone. There were things out there, surrounding her, and she couldn't see them. What made her even more uneasy was the danger lurking about.

Emma was on what she liked to call "Ruby Patrol." She and Regina had a suspicion that the magically inclined of Fairytale Land could have the same abilities in Storybrooke now that magic was present. That would mean her sweet, bubbly friend Ruby was able to shape shift into something far less cute and innocent. Then again, magic was unpredictable as Regina had warned so many times before. Who knew what she was capable of? The term "Ruby Patrol" made the circumstances a little less threatening and assured the blonde that the animal prowling beyond was
not just a savage predator, but also her friend. Still, the night sounds and the glowing full moon made the hair on her skin stand on end.

"A nice night for a walk would you not say?"

Emma spun, gun drawn in the direction of the voice. A man draped in some kind of animal skin (perhaps a bear) was hunched over and gazing curiously at her. His stringy, damp hair hung over an equally damp and dirty face. The shifty eyes made Emma tighten her hold around the gun grip.

"Well aren't you as jumpy as a cat? I bet you've seen quite a lot of strange things lately to be acting so spooked."

"Who the hell are you?"

The man noticed the gun pointed at his chest. "If you think a gun is going to stop a man-eating werewolf, then you were not the savior I thought you were."

"Huh?" The gun wavered, but Emma stood her ground. "How do you know about Ruby? And what do you know about me?"

"Ruby? Ah, you mean Red. Yes, I know much about what goes on in this forest and… elsewhere."

"Will you just answer my questions? I am the sheriff and I can arrest you right here and now if you don't start talking."

The stranger's tongue clicked, "I would bet you have more dangerous people to put to justice than a mere hoodlum like me, but let me reassure you by making a formal introduction." He skipped forward and bowed elaborately. "My name is Robin of Loxley. The woods are my home and the animals my friends. I steal from the greedy and give back to those needy. My hobbies include hiking, running with wolves, and strawberry picking. I am most humbled to meet your acquaintance, Savior."

Emma lowered her gun as he spoke. The weapon would not need to be used on this Robin, but a call to Dr. Hopper might be. She looked over his attire: the green tunic, dirty riding boots, and the bow slung behind his back. "You think you're Robin Hood."

"And you think I am not."

"I just said that."

The man waved a hand and shrugged. "Merely checking to see if you knew what you were saying."

Emma paused to turn that over in her mind.

"Why is it so difficult for you to believe my identity when you have believed far crazier approximations these past two months?" he asked.

"You seem to know things about me. That I'm the so-called Savior, that magic exists…"

"Is there a question in there somewhere?" Robin frowned, shaking his head. "I just can't make it out."

"Where are you getting you're information from?" she pressed. "Is it Gold? Are you working for him?"

"Oh, my Savior. You have the courage, but sadly lack the knowledge. I am not in line with…" His
palms faced the blonde, fingers dancing, "Mr. Dearie. No, contrary to what people may think I am afraid our association is less than savory."

Emma looked upon the haphazardly shaved face, searching for a lie. There was none to be found. "Just what is your purpose here?"

The crazed man slapped his hands together and shut his eyes as if in prayer. "Now that is the question I have been waiting for!" Emma flinched at each of the stressed words that were shouted at her. When his eyes finally flew open she jumped back in surprise. "I am here to warn you, Savior. There is an evil that existed in our old world; a selfish, ruthlessly efficient evil that has committed murderous crimes against me and my people." He licked his lips hurriedly, eyes round and wide. "This wicked creature is among us. It was transported to this new world when the curse was cast."

Emma's eyes widened with Robin's. "I think I know what you're talking about; the well and the fear... it was Gold's plan all along!"

Robin sputtered, "No! No, no, no, no! How can you not see it? No! You know it!"

The blonde frowned at the man stamping his foot like a rabbit. The man better start talking sense, Emma thought, or he's going to know something hard and fist shaped.

When he saw the blank look he continued. "This evil, it has systematically driven out everything good in this world and the old one. It has ripped away happiness, separated true loves, and taken lives. Even you have suffered and..." he cocked his head, "still you do not know?"

Emma ground her boot into the dirt in frustration. "If these crimes are true then someone needs to be brought to justice. As sheriff I can promise to carry it out myself, but who or what is this evil?"

His teeth shined between smiling lips before he intoned musically, "Queen Regina."

There must have been some switch inside her that prevented her from seeing it before, but once the name of the responsible party was uttered (the true name), that switch was activated. She wasn't entirely sure how to respond to the change. Her body seemed to know how to react, though, because she felt her jaw clench and her muscles tighten under flushed skin.

"She has taken everything from you: your world, your parents, the royal life you were meant to lead. She ran you out of your own crib! The son you gave up... she took him as her own. She killed your friend and partner. Do you not see the pattern? She drove out. She stole. She killed. She, she, she - !"

"Stop!" bellowed Emma. Shaking hands clung to her head to prevent them from lashing out at the babbling man. "Just stop it! I know what Regina has done. Enough!"

Robin narrowed his eyes and clasping his hands once again. "Then you know what you must do."

All Emma could do in that moment was focus on her breathing which was becoming heavy and rigid. Closing misty eyes the blonde blocked out the sound of more babbling and surrendered herself to the sounds of the night and a memory...

"Everyone needs you!"

"I don't want them to need me."

"Well that's too bad because we all do."


"You are saying that I am responsible for everyone's happiness? That is crap! I didn't ask for that, I don't want it!"

"Right now. A little while ago you didn't want Henry either, but then he came to you and now you are fighting like hell for him."

"For him! Because that is all I can handle right now and I'm not even doing a good job at that. And now you're telling me I have to save everyone? That is beyond ridiculous I don't want any of it!"

"Well that's too bad, Emma, because that doesn't change the truth. You're our only hope."

"Then you're all screwed."

Lids opened. Her voice was dangerously monotone. "You've done your job. I've been warned." She glared at Robin. "Now leave."

"You're the Savior who –"

"Now."

For a moment Robin looked like he didn't hear her, but then he pointed a finger in the blonde's direction as if to seal the urgency of his warning. He then twirled his animal cloak around his body and bowed back into the wilderness from whence he came.

***

The log was not comfortable. It was dry and cracking in all the wrong places as it dug into her back. Then again, it wasn't like there was a La-Z-Boy around those parts, so the rotting backrest would just have to do.

Emma was sitting against the fallen obstruction with her pounding head in her hands. She pressed herself further into the jaggedness behind her, the discomfort in her back gloriously stemming the pain she was feeling in her chest. It was an all too familiar state as she was once in this similar situation two months ago; however, things had become so much more complicated since that day she fell crying to the ground, clawing the dirt for security. Life had gotten better. People had changed. Feelings emerged. It was all going so well, so very unexpectedly well. She had no idea how they had gotten this far, but it had been certainly nothing to complain about.

Then that insane man – Robin Hood – drudged up everything Emma was trying to forget. Before Robin came along, Regina's past transgressions had almost become a distant memory; some foggy shadow of a woman she convinced herself didn't exist and maybe never had.

Her fingers threaded tightly into strands of limp blonde locks. Emma almost thought her brain would explode from the battle raging inside it. Neck muscles strained against sobs choking up her windpipe. There was a crushing weight pushing down somewhere beneath her breast. It hurt like hell, but not in the physical sense. The pain was throbbing and she didn't know where it was coming from anymore. Somewhere. Nowhere. Everywhere.

Leaves rustled and a twig snapped. The sheriff placed a hand to the gun on her belt. She stopped breathing (which was difficult in her condition). For a second Emma almost hoped it was the werewolf – or any wolf – so it would put her out of her misery. What she got instead was irony.

"Regina," she breathed out.

"So this is where you have been hiding?" the brunette spoke as she hopped over the fallen log. "I've
been looking everywhere for you."

Emma quickly wiped a stray tear and sat up. "I was just keeping a low profile." She attempted a masked chortle. "From what I read in Little Red Riding Hood the wolf likes to play sly with its prey."

The light of the full moon ignited puffy red eyes that were determined to hide something. Regina looked away as if she saw something she wasn't meant to see. A few leaves (she couldn't discern their color in the dark) lay under her feet so she turned them over absentmindedly, hands deep in her pockets.

The blonde finally got a better look at the woman through drier eyes and frowned. "What are you wearing?"

Regina was clothed in a black turtle neck (one Emma had seen on her before), black pants, dark boots, and an equally black trench coat tied at the waist that stretched down to her knees. Every single inch of her was clad head to toe in darkness.

"I thought I might dress for the occasion. Seeing as this is my first werewolf watch I wanted to come prepared." She finished with a firm nod, clearly pleased with herself. She then became self-conscious of the hat on her head. "Why? Is this not what one wears on stakeout?"

Emma couldn't hold in the laugh as she took in the attire and the serious question. The laughter instantly quelled the pain in her chest. It was an amazing thing, Emma thought, that the source of her pain could also numb it in the most pleasing way.

"For you, it's one bold fashion statement," Emma replied, "but I have faith that you can pull it off."

The woman in black waited.

"You look good," the blonde finally reassured.

Regina gave a small smile in return. The owl hooted knowingly in the darkness. "Have you seen or heard from our hungry resident tonight?"

"Not one howl," the sheriff shook her head. "Haven't even seen any red cloaks or had the chance to praise her sharp teeth or yellow eyes."

"She is out there," Regina stated, gazing at the moon above.

As if on cue, a high-pitched crying sounded from nearby.

"Shit! Really?!" Emma shouted incredulously at the howl. Her head whipped to the other woman. "You had to say that?"

"Keep your voice down!" Regina whispered.

They crouched behind the log, ears open to the slightest noise and eyes wide as they searched for movement.

"Of the times I've been out here during the full moon I haven't actually seen a wolf. You know that, right?" Emma was starting to get antsy under the very full wolf moon. "I was so not planning on meeting Ruby in her… hungry form tonight."

"This was your idea. You wanted to make sure she was not out killing the townspeople." Regina
pulled her shoulders in a mayoral way. "The sheriff doesn't back out of their job, especially if it concerns the protection of the people."

"I can't help it!" Emma screeched in a rasping voice. "All those grilled cheese sandwiches she served me... maybe she's always wanted something more than a tip in return. How about tasty Emma Swan?!"

"Pull yourself together, Sheriff!" Regina declared, looking the woman sternly in the eye. "That is not your friend out there howling at the moon. It is a vicious, bloodthirsty animal that will break your bones and tear you limb from limb without as much as a thought of your precious grilled cheese."

"If you are trying to raise my morale then can it with the visuals, please," Emma mumbled with her forehead resting against the log. Her stomach churned queasily so she took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. She continued more so to encourage herself than the mayor, "Okay, I'm good. I can do this."

"I'm glad to hear it because I think we are going to have to run."

"What?"

A low grumbling came from the other side of the log while the sound of paws, slow and steady, thumped nearer.

"Run!" Regina hissed and blonde locks were already dancing up ahead of her as they both pounded the dirt.

They ran for what seemed like miles. Emma could hear Regina's ragged breathing in sync with her own while she led them over streams, under branches and through thick greeneries. The growling told her the werewolf was just behind, though, it had not caught up with them, strangely enough. Perhaps it kept its distance so as to enjoy hunting its helpless prey, the sheriff thought.

The gloomy night prevented Emma from seeing the rough terrain ahead and she tumbled to the ground, scraping herself amid the sharp rocks.

"Get up, come on!"

Emma felt strong arms grab her from behind and haul her to her feet. A warm sensation tingled down her fingers. The blood ran slippery in her palm, but the snarling and the insistent hands convinced her to ignore it and continue forward. It was too late, though. The enormous animal had caught up with them.

A cluster of aspens loomed not far, so the brunette drove Emma into the protection of their cage-like formation. Ruby in wolf form emitted a guttural roar and sprinted in.

The attack seemed to occur longer than the seconds it actually lasted, but the blonde's focus was slowed down by an entirely different assault. Her attention was held by the firm arm encircling her and the breath coming warm and fast on her cheek. The woman in black was like a shield forming around the contours of Emma's body. She enveloped her like a cape, protecting her from physical or otherwise magical harm. The tree behind her was unyieldingly hard against her back, yet, the pressing in front was a welcome force.

There was a sharp crack followed by a thump. Claws scraped frantically at the dirt and then a dog-like whimper echoed loudly. The hulking animal raced off in the opposite direction of their fortification leaving the two women panting against each other in fright.
Eventually, Regina released the still shaken form to get space between them (far enough to get air, but close enough so that she could defend against another attack if necessary). There before them lay a thick branch, broken and charred at one end.

"What the hell happened?" Emma asked as she stared in awe at the claw marks left in the ground. She reluctantly let the brunette remove the lingering hand from her back.

Regina slipped out between the trees and kneeled before the smoking weapon, inspecting it with a keen eye. "I think I did this." She placed a hand to its blackened bark. It was searing hot.

Emma looked from the branch to the woman gazing in wonder at her very normal looking hand. "But you didn't know you were doing it," she caught on.

Regina just continued to stare at the hand that touched the charmed branch, this time with furrowed brows. The reverie was diverted to the scuffing of Emma's boots coming closer. "You are hurt," she stated as if in a dreamlike state.

"Oh?" Emma noticed the blood seeping from her injured palm. "Oh."

"Here, let me…"

She saw the hands reaching for her; the delicately thin fingers extended, palms open; the hands that have ripped away happiness, separated true loves, and taken lives. Much suffering has occurred under those hands. "No!" the blonde warned the woman rising to meet her. "I mean – it's fine, just a scrap."

Regina lowered the arms wishing to aid the blonde's suffering. Pulling her lips into a thin line she backed off. "You should come with me back to the mansion. Without proper care that cut will get infected. I am sure the extra paperwork will not suit you if it does."

Hesitant, the sheriff gave in to the plan. She promised herself not to stay long. Considering how her day went the last place she wanted to spend the night was in the palace of Queen Regina.

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"Ouch!" Emma barked out, groaning in pain. "Stop that, it hurts!"

Regina snatched the receding limb and got a firmer grip on the wrist. "Calm down. You are as bad as Henry." Another cotton ball soaked in hydrogen peroxide was picked up and hovering over the cut on the heel of Emma's palm. She ordered, "Hold still."

The blonde flinched before the solution was even applied. Regina raised her eye in amusement, then wiped deliberately at the area.

"Fuu-hmph." A string of muffled cursing escaped from clenched teeth.

"You should not need stiches, but I would not do anything strenuous for the next few days. Wash the area and change the bandage often. Any redness or swelling around the wound, increased pain, or fever would indicate an infection and you should immediately get yourself to the hospital."

Regina was focused intently on her work as she wrapped the palm with the precision of an experienced nurse. She treated with a remarkably gentle touch (the exception being the hydrogen peroxide episode) and this care Emma received made her envious of Henry. To have a parent there when you need them most, to help pick you up when you fall and clean up your scraps, for affection and a tender kiss to overcome the pain… it was all missing from Emma's childhood.
"Where's Henry?"

Regina secured the wrap with adhesive. "He is on a sleepover at Jacob's house. I allowed him just the one night despite his insistence that two would be 'more fun.'"

Emma got her hand back, flexing it to test the bandage job. She muttered her thanks. "It's so quiet here – without Henry, I mean."

Regina was screwing on the cap of the peroxide and stopped to listen. "Yes, it is." She laughed softly as she went back to her supplies. "Though now I'm wondering if the sleepover was a diversion and he is really spying on us from the stairway."

"I wouldn't put anything past that kid," Emma joked.

They shared a smile and then the silence returned. Emma looked around from her position on the couch. It was an empty room that consisted only of herself and the other woman. Her eyes darted back to the brunette busying herself with the first aid kit. She suddenly felt nervous. The den was becoming more like a fun house, wherein the walls were slowly moving closer towards her and distorting her spatial perspective. The fingers of Regina moved tactfully as she closed the case and gathered up the cotton balls. Her motions were fluid and purposeful. This was her palace and Emma felt trapped.

"I'm gonna go," the blonde declared, but she realized that her body was still molded into the couch, not desiring to leave just yet.

"Oh," Regina's face fell. "Uh, certainly. You must be very tired."

Emma watched the woman clasp her hands awkwardly. She was looking down at the coffee table, eyes dancing across nothing in particular. Not wanting to drag out the moment the blonde willed her legs to move.

Before she got to the door leading into the foyer she paused and inquired, "Are you sure you didn't intentionally use magic on that branch?"

Regina thought about it. "I can't really say for sure. My powers work differently here."

Turning around the blonde tried a different method. "But if you could control them like in your world, would you have done anything different tonight?"

"You mean would I have meant to save us?" Regina shook her head in an effort to grasp the woman's track. "Of course."

Emma crossed her arms defiantly and spread her legs shoulder width apart. "I'm talking about how you scared Ruby away. You could have really hurt her the way you tore that tree branch down on top of her."

The mayor shrugged. "A simple 'thank you' would suffice."

"You never think, do you?" Emma took a threatening step forward. "You never consider the consequences of your actions. That branch could have killed Ruby!"

"I was saving your life in case you have forgotten. There was no time to think of a safe way to take down the werewolf that happened to be chasing us!"

"So you admit that you wanted to hurt her?"
"My intention was to protect you." Regina waved a hand dismissing the whole thing. "You seem to be under the impression that I wanted this to happen. That I planned the whole thing."

Emma responded bluntly, "It wouldn't surprise me."

"Where is this coming from?"

"Don't pull that crap with me, Regina. Your excuses and diversions may work on some people but not me." The blonde pointed a finger out the door. "They may have forgotten what you've done, but I never will. I will not forget Graham."

The name flipped a switch in Regina and she sneered, "We're back to him again? I should have known how helplessly you fell for that animal."

"He was innocent! Just like all the other people you cursed."

"No one is innocent, not in my world and definitely not in this one. You should know that better than anyone. You could say I gave them a second chance in a better world, but I didn't do it for them. True power endures and this..." Regina held up her arms, gesturing around her, "... this is proof of my power. I did it for myself. I did it because I could. I never cared about him or anyone else in this town." Spittle was flying from between curling lips. She narrowed her eyes to get the message across. "And I certainly do not give a damn about you!"

As if she anticipated the response, the blonde was already racing to stand before the mayor. "You see? This is why you have no one. You push those close to you away until they're dead or can't hurt you back. And you know what you are left with? An empty mansion."

Emma drew closer to the other woman. The proximity was a faint memory of their meeting in the hotel room. It would have been a fond moment, perhaps even something that could be laughed about later down the road, but present circumstances called for a different tone.

"Is this your happy ending?" Emma demanded. The genuine curiosity with which she asked was an attempt to get answers but her voice was still icy. She stared deep into brown pools softening in the midst of their closing space. "Don't you want more?"

Regina asked herself the same question. What did those green eyes staring hopefully back at her want? What could Emma possible have to offer someone like herself? More importantly, what did she want from Emma? The brunette's lips parted to answer, but she was too late; her hesitation cost her.

"I'm done with you, Regina."

She saw Emma turn her back and walk out. It was something she had witnessed often: her mother, her father, Snow, even Daniel whose untimely death left her to marry a complete stranger. They had all deserted her in one way or another. She promised she would never experience it again. The promise was flawless because she made it that way, the curse reinforced it. And then Regina was underestimated by a beautiful loophole, one that she allowed to have feelings for. Whatever led her to it, whether it was loss of faith, failure to let go, or the inability to care, Emma had finally revealed her intentions.

Yet another was leaving her.

She looked down at fiercely clenched fists. They were closed so tightly the nails were digging into her palms. Slowly, finger by finger, she relaxed them to reveal the unexpected. She stared wide eyed at her glowing red palms and the residue of magic she had unleashed.
A groan came from her target just as the invisible grip was released. Emma crumpled to the floor choking to get the oxygen she had been denied. She gaped in terror at Regina. With one hand rubbing her swollen neck and the other gripping the floor she scooted backwards until she couldn't move any further.

"Emma…"

Realizing that the door behind her was the only thing impeding her escape, Emma took one last look at the woman whom she had once considered her friend. She ran.

Regina cursed everything that she ever was, her magic included. Stumbling forward, she reached out for those wavy strands of sunshine and strong, defiant shoulders.

"Emma!" she cried out.

She miscalculated her reach. Her tear-filled eyes had deceived her and Emma was farther away then she thought. The space that had been between them just moments ago, the space filled with hope and opportunity, was stretching. Regina could sense it and with that distance her happy ending fled.

Once again, Queen Regina was left alone in her empty palace.
Emma had trouble sleeping at night.

It had been several days since the attack and Emma's anger was just as fresh as the bruises on her body. All those nights she spent crying herself to sleep, not one of them was graced with a visit or an apology. It was apparently too much to ask from a woman who almost choked her to death and nearly crushed her body with invisible restraints.

Since that fateful night she had not seen or spoken to Regina and the thought of doing so made her sick. Every time she got the urge to go to the mansion and get some answers or give the woman a little taste of her own rage Emma's wounds stung. Her entire upper body was covered in bruises, leaving the area sensitive to the slightest contact. It hurt like hell but the disappointment blazed with more intensity. After all, she had been fantasizing about gasping for air in an entirely different context than the kind she was faced with that night. The disappointment gripping her insides had never been so consuming. She was upset with Regina for not trying harder and just as frustrated with herself for believing she could. Regina was capable of many things, but change was obviously not one of them.

Although Emma refused to see the mayor she had not abandoned her duty as a mother. She ensured every way possible to take care of her son without having to run into his adoptive mother, and Henry wasted no time in telling her how odd Regina had been acting (although Emma could care less). According to Henry, she had been avoiding him. Whenever it came time to leave for school she would send him off on the bus instead of driving him. She came home late every night not bothering to check on him and when she happened to speak to him it was in a snapping tone. Whatever love and affection that was present before was gone now. Henry was hurt and confused at this behavior. The boy actually thought he had done something wrong, so he went to Emma for an explanation.

He was let down.

Emma had attempted to give reasons for Regina's recent actions, but in the end there was nothing to defend. It was like Regina had returned to her old self again. And there was not a single thing there worthy of forgiveness.

Clearly nothing had sunk into that thick head of hers, Emma thought, or she wouldn't be pushing her son away.

She remembered back to what she had accused Regina of doing; pushing away the people that cared for her until they were dead or gone. It was predictable of her to close herself off when Henry and Emma had begun to care about her. It was predictable because Emma had been doing it all her life. The difference was Emma had learned her mistake. When she left Henry it was for his protection. She realized - after coming back to him and seeing him scared and upset - that it was her presence not her absence that made him safer. His happiness depended on her and, as a result, Emma made a promise to herself and her son that leaving would never again be an option. Regina was not learning from her mistake, though.

"Oh Emma, you're here," replied Mary Margaret happily.

Great, the blonde thought as she closed the apartment door behind her.

"Hi, Mary Margaret." Emma tried to mask her frustration with a cheerful tone. "I'm just here to
pick up Henry's textbook. He left it here the other day." Emma walked briskly to the couch, checking between cushions and behind pillows. "Have you seen it by chance?"

Mary Margaret didn't move from her place at the kitchen; she continued sipping her tea and watching Emma tear apart their living room. "You mean this book?" She lifted the math textbook and indicated with a raised brow. When she found it lying under the couch that morning she had a feeling Emma would return in search of it. Henry must have left the book behind in a hurry the other day and Mary Margaret had to wonder if there was an ulterior motive in doing so. Whatever the reason, she would have to thank the boy for giving her this window of opportunity.

"There it is," Emma said as she put the pillows back in their original position. When she got to the kitchen she made an attempt to grab the book but Mary Margaret held it back.

"We should talk," the teacher declared.

"I'm in kind of a rush. Can we do this later tonight?"

"I would say yes, but knowing you don't come home until after midnight when I'm already asleep… what would be the point?"

The tension that had existed between the two women seemed to hit Emma with tremendous force. She had encountered a discouraged Mary Margaret before but not when it was concerning their relationship.

Mary Margaret explained, "What I agree to is irrelevant as you will just avoid me at every turn."

"I'm not avoiding you," Emma countered. The frown she was receiving let her know that it was not an adequate lie. "Listen, I know we haven't talked just you and me in a while. I'm sorry about that, Mary Margaret, I really am, but I have to get to the station now." Emma wrested the textbook away.

"No." The reply was firm and had the tone of a mother reprimanding her child. Mary Margaret was afraid that it sounded too harsh, but when it made Emma stop in her tracks she gave herself a mental pat on the back. There was something strangely exciting about the way she was ordering Emma around. It felt right to go all parental on her, she thought, which is odd because I am far from Emma's mother. "No, you are not leaving until I know what is going."

"What makes you think something is going on?" pressed the blonde.

"Well, um," the short woman stuttered around her words as she was put on the spot, "you haven't exactly been very happy lately." Mary Margaret nodded surely as if that was all the evidence she needed. Emma continued to wait for more of an explanation. "Aaaand you've been working later hours at the station. I'm sure there's something there that needs explaining."

Emma snorted. "So I spend a few days overnight at the office and you think that is reason to call an intervention?"

"What about the fact that you haven't been speaking to Regina?"

"How did you know that?" Emma shot back.

"This is a small town if you hadn't noticed." Mary Margaret took a sip from her mug, slightly proud of her skills at weeding through the gossip that had been making the rounds. "Were you going to tell me?"
"What is there to tell?"

"That you and Regina have been fighting about Henry again. I know it's happened before, but I thought you two worked out a solution. It seemed to be working."

"Wait, you think this is about Henry?"

"So there is something going on?" Mary Margaret wasn't exactly relieved that there was a problem, in yet she couldn't help feeling pleased that her instincts were right.

"I didn't say that," Emma defended, suddenly getting anxious about where the conversation was moving, "but if there was something going on, what makes you think it's regarding Henry?"

"What else would it be about?" asked Mary Margaret. Then something struck her. "Were you and Regina arguing over –"

Emma interrupted hurriedly, "Absolutely n –"

"– your relationship?" the short woman finished, putting her mug down suddenly.

"God, why do people keep assuming Regina and I are together?" sighed the blonde. She sat down heavily into a chair at the dining table. The frustration was evident on her face for her eyes were darting across the floor as if searching for an answer.

Mary Margaret wasn't sorry for hitting that particular nerve because it was the only effective solution in getting her friend to stop running. She gave an encouraging smile and said softly, "It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"There is nothing going on between Regina and I," grumbled the blonde. A head was propped against her non-injured palm. She had been extra secretive about the wounds she had sustained; the turtlenecks and long sleeves were proof. The bandaged hand was explained away by a quick account of her run in with a particularly sharp letter opener (an unforeseen hazard of her job). "I can assure you there is no truth behind the gossip."

The school teacher studied her for a moment and moved to sit in the nearest chair. "But you want something to be there."

Emma bit her lip and looked up. "I used to. Not anymore."

"You don't sound very certain."

"It doesn't matter what I want," she sighed. "I've tried like hell to see the good in her. For a time it seemed like she had changed, but she won't give." The blonde massaged her upper arm. "There's nothing left to hold on to."

"That's not entirely true." Emma gave her a perplexed expression. If Regina ever finds out that I told Emma, the teacher warned herself, I am going to be on her bad side for eternity. She continued slowly, "Not long ago Regina and I got into an argument. It was about you."

"Uh-huh," Emma said, leaning forward. "Go on."

"Well, you hadn't been talking to me and I wanted to know how you were so I asked Regina. Knowing you two had, at the time, become uncommonly civil with one other I figured she might have some answers."
"I know about this. She came to me all in a huff because you were bothering her about the state of our friendship."

"I was asking her because I was worried about you. It just happened to be that she was right."

If Emma's interest wasn't peaked before it certainly was now. "Right about what?"

"Me." The woman looked down at her feet. "She said you deserved a better friend than me."

Emma sat back; shocked that Regina would have the audacity to accuse Mary Margaret of being so callous. She also couldn't help but feel floored that the brunette would come to her defense. "Mary Margaret…"

"No," The teacher waved her off, "Regina may hate my guts and I'm actually okay with that, but she spoke the truth. It hurts," she took in a breath and let it out, "but she was right."

"It's not your fault. I was the one ignoring you, pushing you out." Emma gaped at the irony of what she said. It was only minutes before that she was blaming Regina for pushing people away; now the blonde was admitting to the same error, again. Obviously, the mayor wasn't the only one incapable of change. "If anyone needs to apologize it's me. I started this mess. I put our friendship in jeopardy. You have every right to be angry with me."

"I just want to put this behind us and go back to the way things were."

Emma would agree with her, but the true nature behind her behavior the past few months was still not safe to reveal. The urge to expose their true familial connection was tempting. The whole conversation they were having resembled a mother/daughter bonding session. Emma's life was lacking in these moments and now that she had gotten a taste of some motherly advice she didn't want it to end. It was hard to admit, but lately Emma desperately needed a mother.

"As long as you are around I'm going to try to be a better friend." A warm hand was placed on Emma's. "You deserve so much, Emma."

The blonde heard the words her mother was saying. A tear escaped and she hid it with a swipe of her hand. She knew Mary Margaret would keep her promise. Emma squeezed the hand in hers. "We'll both try harder."

They exchanged a smile. Mary Margaret looked at the time and went for her school bag. Before leaving she advised, "Just remember, Emma, whatever happens between you and Regina will affect Henry. You might get away with avoiding me, but you cannot do so with the Mayor of Storybrooke, especially when she is the mother of your child."

The blonde nodded reluctantly. "But we both know she isn't very approachable."

She paused and added, "And I'm not ready to forgive her. I don't even know if that's possible."

"Then you have to find a way. You can't hate her forever. I know you, Emma."

At the close of the door the blonde let out a long sigh and slouched back in her chair. Her hand went to her blood-shot eyes to rub away the insomnia.

Motherly advice was a bitch.

She didn't like it but Mary Margaret was right about her not being able to hate the mayor forever. Emma now knew what she had to do. The plan wasn't ideal or expected, but if she wanted to know what was going on inside Regina's head there was only one person who had the answers. Extreme
measures would have to be taken, yet maybe, just maybe, Emma's pain could be healed in the process.

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Regina's restless state was abruptly interrupted by a knock at her door. The nights had been slumberless, causing the days to blend together and her mind and body to become out of sync. If she closed her eyes for too long violent images would disturb her into opening them again. For the first time in 28 years she had called in sick to the office so she could get some much needed shut eye.

The sunlight peeked behind closed curtains, beckoning her to wake. The knocking resumed and a startled mayor left her robe on the bed to see who was behind her bedroom door.

She had expected to see Henry, but was shocked to find her blonde sheriff standing with a closed fist in mid-knock. The woman was clothed informally in sweatpants and a tank top. Regina looked her up and down and noticed the injuries. The sleeveless shirt revealed muscular arms discolored in ugly yellow and black bruises. Her neck was encircled with a thick angry red strip much like a collar. Dark rings underlined once bright green eyes making her look sleep deprived. The battered figure before Regina appeared weary and desperate. I did this, she thought to herself as she took in the sight of her magic's work.

"W-what are you doing here?" She attempted to ask it in a firm tone, but it inevitably came out as broken and cracked as her own heart.

Emma's voice was equally fragmented. "I want you to heal me." Her eyes began to glisten. Tears illuminated red inflamed veins from lack of sleep.

The brunette reached forward without a thought and placed a hand on the injured shoulder. A gasp caught in both their throats as her thumb caressed a dark blemish. She tried to clear her mind and fixate on healing the spot.

"No, not like that," Emma whispered to a frowning Regina. "Heal me like this." And she kissed the confused face of the other woman.

Regina's lips let out a muffled groan of surprise and then opened at the moving of the blonde's own insistent lips. This was so wrong. The thought slipped from her mind like sand through a sieve. Even if she followed her judgment in saying 'no' there simply wasn't any room to because Emma's tongue was in the way. Regina's mouth became wholly compliant with Emma's as a tongue stroking languidly at her own. Leaning into the kiss Regina allowed the injured frame to press up against her own.

With mouths not leaving one other Emma dragged her to the edge of the bed. She took Regina by the scruff of her pajama collar and pulled them both down onto sleep-worn sheets.

"Emma," she said breathlessly into the desperate mouth. Regina pushed herself up and leaned back.

"Don't," Emma whined. She grabbed the mayor's wrists and placed the palms under the material covering her toned stomach. The tank rippled up at the pushing of hands. Applying pressure in the desired location Emma kept the palms under hers. "I need this."

Regina's breath hitched unexpectedly and before she knew what she was doing she felt her body press willingly against the bruised and broken form under her. She returned Emma's kiss with an equally long grazing of lips filled with apology and yearning.
Emma's hands directed Regina's up a heaving torso and climbed the steep hill of lace covered breasts. The brunette allowed her palms to be pressed generously against the valleys as her fingers curled up and over the edge of lace, feeling for entrance. Regina didn't seem to have any control over her body's response to the blonde beauty under her. The hands and fingers clearly knew what they wanted and never once faltered in carrying out what they desired, yet her mind didn't feel in sync with their movements. It was like Regina was experiencing the moment as a third party, gazing down on two writhing forms on her bed.

She squeezed her lids further shut and ruggedly exhaled into Emma's mouth. Dark nipples peaked under her sweaty, kneading grasp. Regina dragged a wet mouth away from red, kiss-worn lips to gaze upon her once enemy, her son's biological mother, her sheriff and confidante, her… What else? Regina asked herself, what is Emma to me now?

"Hey, don't do that. Don't stop." Irritation flashed across Emma's face. "I want you so bad. I've always wanted you this way. Didn't you know?" The younger woman reached out and crashed their lips together, tongue darting forcefully inside without warning.

The brunette felt hands brace her to grinding hips. A loud moan came from below. Regina pulled away again despite her body's trembling for more. Her voice was weathered with concern. "Emma, this isn't like you. Are you alright?"

The impatience that showed behind green orbs before was nothing compared to the anger that replaced it.

"Look at me!" Emma shouted. "Do I look alright?!"

Regina indeed looked at her and felt the shame burn so bright her chest pitched. Never in all the years of practicing magic did she regret using her powers. Not until that night. She had taken her anger out on the one person - the only person - who was trying to help her. She started, "I –"

"You need to heal me," the blonde demanded. Regina's wrists were grabbed a second time, but rougher. "God, just do it." Emma squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed against the brunette, letting out a frustrated groan. "Fuck me, Regina."

The brunette denied the forceful request by ripping her bruised wrists back with a grunt.

"You really are an evil witch," Emma snarled, pushing the woman back as if she were a sickness. A creeping shadow passed over the young woman's eyes, hooding her in darkness. "First you attack me, and then you refuse to help me. Who are you going to hurt next, Henry?"

Regina trembled in fear; whether it was a result of the accusation of hurting her son or the unrecognizable woman before her she couldn't know. "Emma –"

"Because you will! You will hurt him like you hurt countless others. Pain is the only gift you have to give. You are a disease." Emma's eyes filled like black pools and glared threateningly into Regina's. Her voice was no longer Emma's, but the voice of two speaking at once; it sounded gravelly and inhuman. "With his little heart beating bloody in your grasp the Evil Queen will crush it, squeezing till it beats no more."

"No!" Regina wailed.

Her body shot up from beneath the covers. In a panic, she took in her surroundings. Emma was nowhere in sight. Closing her eyes she took in a few deep breaths to calm her racing heart.

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The running faucet squeaked noisily as beads traveled down Regina's skin. A few splashes of water did nothing to cool her down for she would instantly break out into a clammy state. Glowering into the bathroom mirror she took in the sight of her flushed cheeks and the dark lines circling her eyes.

It was not the first time she experienced something of this nature. Not so long ago a dream brought an angry mob of townspeople to her door and Emma clutching her throat as she stood tied against her own tree. This recent dream, however, was recurrent and much more pervading; it haunted her day and night.

The nightmare first came to her the eve she attacked Emma. She woke up screaming and immediately went to Henry's room to find him gone. He was still on his sleepover, so there was no way she could have harmed him like Emma had foretold in the dream. She didn't know which was worse: rousing from her dream alone and frightened or Henry waking to her screams.

That was not the only occurrence of the nightmare and each time she woke up with a different reaction. Unlike the first dream the second one aroused her. It was no surprise for she was aware of the attraction between herself and Emma. From time to time she had imagined the taste of Emma's lips and the warmth of her skin. Her heart pounded every moment they were close to one another, so close that a caress could be exchanged if she so desired. And Regina desired to. Even before their alliance and subsequent friendship Regina wanted Emma Swan. She feared this desire, yet came to embrace it to a point where she never spoke of it. This realization struck her at the most inopportune time, though, for there had been no beautiful, blonde haired woman lying beside her to give relief from the nightmare.

The third occurrence of the nightmare brought on frustration. She woke with the same sinking fear and lusting desire, but this time it was taken with annoyance. Of all the fears that plagued her it was the thought of harming those closest to her that cut deepest. Like a broken knife leaving flesh, the dream left a small point that festered and spread uncertainty. The dread then proceeded to travel through her blood to a place she thought never existed: her heart.

Her gaze shifted away from the mirror. She ran a damp hand through tousled brown hair and wiped the sweat forming on her brow. Before returning to bed eyes went back to the image of her weak, miserable twin and asked a question she grew tired of hearing:

When was it going to stop?

***

"Emma! What a surprise."

The blonde gave Dr. Hopper a shy smile and walked in at the man's insistence.

"I apologize for not calling ahead, but it's kind of an emergency. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," Archie said. He gestured towards the couch. "Please sit down."

She crossed her legs after settling on the couch and then uncrossed them after a moment and placed her hands awkwardly on her thighs. Getting comfortable seemed to be a bit of a chore. The fact that she was willingly seeking out a shrink made her tense and the reason she was there in the first place caused her to be on edge all the more.

"I don't normally do this. Talk about stuff I mean."

"Stuff?" Archie inquired.
"Thoughts, feelings, things one would divulge to a total stranger."

"I can assure you, Emma, whatever you say here is in the strictest confidence."

"It's just that I've always had this aversion to therapy," she admitted. She tucked her hands under her thighs to prevent further fidgeting. "When I was in foster care I was sent to a few psychologists, and when I say 'sent' I mean 'forced against my will.'"

"Is that why you're here, about your childhood in the foster system?"

"No, not really. I'm here about…" Emma hesitated, "…about someone."

Archie adjusted his spectacles. "O-okay. Can you be more specific?"

"Right." She stared at Archie, trying to find the words. "I have this… friend. We didn't start out as friends; in fact, it was pretty much the opposite. Over time we became close – or as close as they allowed me."

"Go on," he encouraged, "you're doing fine."

Emma nodded and continued, "Our friendship has turned into something complicated. There may be feelings there, but that isn't the issue, not right now." Shaking her head she knew without a doubt that she did care for Regina. Ever since the mayor came to reveal Henry's suspicions over his parents' feelings for one another Emma had been turning the possibility in her mind. Ultimately, she wouldn't have been sitting in a shrink's office talking about Regina if those feelings didn't exist.

"You see, my friend has a very tortured past. I don't know what exactly happened, but it's starting to get in the way of – of our happiness?" Emma said it like it was a question. She was hesitant to call it that after what Regina did to her just days ago.

If happiness was what they had experienced the past two months, Emma thought, then Regina wouldn't have thrown it away so thoughtlessly.

"What do you mean by tortured past?" the man asked. "Has this friend revealed what happened to them?"

"I do know some things. Nothing specific enough to understand why they are acting this way."

Emma felt herself become tense again and the throbbing pain in her chest returned. "My friend has done some bad things. They've hurt a lot of people. Me included."

"I'm sorry," Archie spoke softly. "You must feel betrayed."

The worst betrayal of all, Emma thought to herself. "I thought they could change. Everyone told me it was a lost cause. I can't believe I'm saying this, but after everything we've been through I still want them to change." She looked up and fixed her gaze on the doctor. "Archie, is it possible for someone consumed by darkness to give it up no matter how tempting the alternative?"

The small man raised his brows at the mention of darkness. He thought for a moment, choosing his words carefully. "Temptation is a powerful weapon; a tool that can be used to hurt or help. It is how one faces temptation that determines if they are good or evil. I suppose to answer your question it would depend upon the extent of pain the person endured in their past."

Emma hated the past. It was not only Regina's past that was at fault, but her own as well. There were very few healthy relationships that Emma could boast of and even fewer moments of love. If she had the experience of loving someone and being loved in return then maybe things with Regina wouldn't have escalated. If the way she felt about Regina were not some novel feeling then maybe
she could have anticipated the pain.

That was not the reality of Emma's past, though. What she felt for the mayor was as real as the pain that had been inflicted upon her. The happiness she experienced mixed with the disappointment, making a toxic concoction. She was love-struck and blindsided all at the same time.

Why can't the past just stay where it damn well is? Emma asked herself.

"If this individual is truly your friend, if you care for them… perhaps love them, then you must have faith. Talk to them, let them know you are there. Remind your friend that sh – " Dr. Hopper stopped, reminding himself of his patient's confidentiality. "Remind them that they are not alone."

"Is it really that simple?" the blonde jested.

"Holding on to faith is never easy," Archie shook his head to get the sincerity of his words across. "If what you say is true – that you may have feelings for this person – you owe it not only to your friend, but to yourself to make an attempt. Because if you don't support them or you give up on the possibility that they could recover from this darkness you speak of…” he paused gravely, "that decision will weigh heavily on your conscience."

***

It was late at night and the mayor was locking up her office.

After the rough morning she experienced she thought it best to keep her mind occupied with work. Marcie complied with her request to hold all calls and visitors and never once intruded upon the mayor. Regina remained alone in her office the rest of the day to stare at meeting minutes and write sloppy briefings. The work did nothing to ease her mind, but then again neither did lying prostrate in bed.

Slipping the key from its lock she turned from the door and saw the silhouette of a lanky figure approaching. She let out a surprised yelp.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

Regina placed a hand on her heaving chest. She snapped, "Then don't go sneaking around in the dark of a deserted building!"

Emma let out halfhearted laugh that revealed slight uneasiness.

The mayor gripped the door knob at her back while the sheriff loomed. The sound of scuffing boots echoed as Emma dragged herself forward as if something was holding her back.

"Can we talk?"

Regina ignored the question and asked her own. "Where is Henry?"

"He's at home with the sitter. I told her to stay until you got back."

Regina nodded, putting an arm through her purse. She removed herself from the office door and quickly strode past the woman.

Emma backed up and held an arm in front of Regina, stopping her without the slightest contact. "Look at me."

Her eyes beheld the floor for a moment longer before clapping onto Emma's. It took a great deal of
effort to erase any sign of emotion from her face. The years of practice made it a bit easier. As soon as their eyes met the mask of bitter annoyance was in place and she was ready to give her performance.

"I need to ask you a question," Emma pressed gently.

"You have been interrogating me quite a bit lately," the mayor sneered. With a tilt of the head she continued, "If this is official business, Sheriff, you can make an appointment with my secretary. However, if this is one of your 'get to know me' schemes then I will have to put an end to what I'm sure would be a cozy conversation." Her lip curled around the spiteful words. She saw Emma back away slightly at the tone. "I've been cross-examined thoroughly enough, thank you."

Emma grabbed her arm to prevent another escape. Regina didn't shrug off the hand, but she would not allow herself to analyze the warm tingling sensation that was transferred by the contact. Instead, she gave the woman a stiff, threatening stare.

"Please, Regina."

The mayor could feel her body go limp, her hard expression slackening and muscles relaxing. How quickly her resolve faded before those soft, pleading eyes Regina never understood. She almost cursed the way the woman was making her feel, how submissive her body was reacting to the plea. Searching the face through grey shadows she looked for an ulterior motive. There was none, of course.

Without a word Regina led them into her office and turned back on the lights. Her keys and purse were dropped onto the desk while Emma made her way across the black and white polished floor. The mayor faced the woman and leaned against her desk. "You were saying?"

Emma's head rose at the question. Stuffing her hands in her back pockets she took a few seconds to gather her thoughts. "Remember when we were in my car that night and you told me about your magic and how different it felt here?" Regina's face didn't show any sign of recognition. Her shoulders shrugged with indifference. "I've been thinking about what you said, especially the way you said it, and I have to know... has it made you happy, having your powers back?"

"Yes," Regina replied defiantly, "it has."

The blonde swallowed over the lump in her throat. "Well I don't agree with you." The mayor narrowed her eyes and opened her mouth in reproach. Emma went on quickly, "Regina, I don't claim to know anything about magic. In all my life I have never believed in it because I've never felt it before. I mean," the shoulders beneath her jacket shrugged, "I never knew what it could have felt like. It could have hit me square in the face and I wouldn't have noticed or even cared. But now that it exists here I have felt it."

The mayor's forehead had begun to wrinkle in contemplation. It was obvious what magic Emma was referring to, though, she couldn't help second guessing the obvious. What kind of magic is she really talking about? Regina asked herself. The hope and opportunity she thought was once gone forever seemed to rise once again.

"I may not understand magic or curses, but I do know people – or at least people like me. I know you, Regina." Emma's eyes sparkled despite the sad expression on her face. "We are similar in a lot of ways. Our pasts constantly haunt us. They turn us into people we don't want to be and what is our solution? We run away, isolate ourselves, push away those who get too close." Taking a step she gestured with a hand to emphasize her point. "I've tried change, it's not easy or painless, but it's possible. I've met people here who were willing to help me. Things have been so much easier with
Henry and Mary Margaret in my life. Knowing that they were the only two people in the world who truly cared made me want to be a better person."

"What makes you think there are people who will do the same for me?" Regina inquired.

"Are you really that thick?" scoffed the blonde. "This piece of news might not seem obvious after you've been brushing him off the past couple of days..." Emma licked her lips a moment and went out with it, "you have a son that loves you unconditionally and he's been miserable without your attention." She stared hard at the mayor. "Henry knows that you raised him the best you could and he's grateful to have you for a mother. I know this because I've spent time with him, he's told me."

A choked sob came from Regina as she turned away to hold a hand under her nose. Tears were forming even though she begged them not to. She did not want anyone, much less the woman before her, to see her in such a state. Inhaling sharply, her shaky voice spoke before her brain could catch up. "And who else? Who would dare support someone like me?"

"I would," Emma stated firmly. "You're my friend, Regina, whether you like it or not."

"After what I did to you, how can you say something like that?"

"What happened was an accident. Magic works differently in Storybrooke, you told me so yourself." Emma cocked her head in sadness. "That night I upset you. I didn't believe you when you spoke the truth and I didn't have faith when I should have. What right do I have to place blame when I treated you so horribly?"

"But everything I took from you," pushed the brunette, fingers clinging to the edge of the desk. Eyes, red and brimming, gazed back in humiliation, "I don't deserve to be called your friend."

"We already were friends, don't you see? Let's not destroy what we've worked so hard to build. Our friendship means so much to me and not because we share a son. I don't want to go back to the way we were; that sick, twisted hatred we had for each other." Her blond hair waved back and forth with her shaking head. "We can do better than that. We deserve better."

Regina shut her eyes, not wanting to hear any more. Now that the opportunity had presented itself in true form she felt herself hesitating again. Uncontrollable anxiety caused her chest to constrict, and strained hands to perspire over cool marble. Her thumbs ground into the desk's surface as she took her lip between her teeth. Her heart was racing.

Emma declared, "The more you push me out the more I want to be here."

"You have said that before," the mayor pointed out, gazing at the blonde.

"And I mean every word, but unlike the first time I'm staying for different reasons."

"What reasons are those?"

The mayor was slouched against her desk with arms wrapped protectively around her stomach. Her eyes were puffy from the tears and her lower lip trembled. The sight was just as painful as the bruises coloring Emma's skin. They were both so damaged. So unlucky. So lost. Emma found herself thinking that she would gladly take more bruises if it meant saving this woman. Consequences be damned, Regina's happiness meant something to her.

Despite both their tear streaked faces Emma smirked. "You'll just have to stop pushing me away and find out."
Bewitchment

Regina's heart swelled as she watched Henry sprinkle chopped green pepper ever so delicately over the English muffin. His hands were steady and gentle during the whole process of topping the mini pizzas already coated in tomato sauce and shredded mozzarella. He must have known how tired she was coming home from work because he did not usually offer to help her with dinner. It was such a pleasant surprise that Regina forwent the usual go-to-meal of fish, rice, and vegetables and decided to prepare something her son would enjoy. Pizza was not her ideal dinner plan, but it was a kid pleaser and she most definitely wanted to please her son. Making Henry happy was always her number one priority and lately her effort had become two-fold.

It would seem that the teary conversation she had shared with Emma made an impact on her subconscious because the recurring nightmare had ceased to return. Unable to grasp the nature of magic in Storybrooke, she was still worried about harming her son and this caused her to keep her emotions in check around the clock. However, she failed to distance herself from him any further after hearing what Emma told her about the love Henry had for her.

On her drive home that night she made the decision to reconnect with Henry no matter how out of the realm of possibility it was, no matter how far away redemption lay. She had no idea what she would say or do to gain his forgiveness. The thought of facing him after the way she ignored and snapped at him almost made her turn the car around. In the end it was her desire to see him happy again that kept the wheel steady.

She arrived home that night to find Henry waiting for her. The apprehension had been there for days (ever since she started avoiding him), but there was something different about the way he looked at her that night. She sensed an aching need in those eyes – the eyes that looked so much like Emma’s – gazing at her with that injured puppy dog expression. Her heart almost broke in two as she witnessed how badly he had been hurt by her inexcusable behavior.

The heels she had spent painful hours in had not even been kicked off before she lunged into his arms; her keys and priceless Chanel handbag missing the table and dropping forgotten on the floor. She poured every ounce of remorse and plea for forgiveness into the hug as mascara colored tears streamed chaotically down her cheeks. Emma's voice rang in her head again and again as she held on to the boy like he was her only buoy keeping her afloat in the stormy seas called life.

"You have a son that loves you unconditionally... Henry knows that you raised him the best you could and he's grateful to have you for a mother."

She remembered how difficult it was to keep her body from shaking uncontrollably in that moment of utter realization that her son might love her. Her arms squeezed around him tightly in the hopes that he would realize her own love for him. If actions spoke louder than words then she wanted the hug to express everything she needed him to hear.

"Mom, you're crushing me," he had muffled against her shoulder.

Instead of releasing him she managed a reply. It was a response she had uttered many times. The first when he lay coddled in her arms with his tiny fists clenched and head buried to her breast, and all the instances since then: his birthdays in front of a homemade chocolate cake, Christmas mornings sitting by their ornamented tree, and every night as he slept underneath his Marvel themed blanket of the year. The words were always from the heart and spoken with a tenderness reserved only for him. This time, though, she said the words in a pleading manner in the hopes that they would finally mean something to him.
"I love you," she begged in a surprisingly clear voice.

Like he did with her so many times as a toddler when he was faced with something frightening or sad, Regina buried her drenched face into his little neck. With eyes squeezed shut she inhaled his boyish scent and gasped at the lively beat of his heart.

The small body in her arms stiffened and then Regina felt arms curl around her, embracing with equal ferocity. Those hands which once grasped her finger at their first meeting were now clutching at her with that same desperation.

No words were needed. She gladly took what was being offered and what was being given was more than she could have ever asked for. Regina knew she wasn't worthy of his forgiveness or his love, but if anyone was capable of seeing her through to redemption it was her brave son. He had such a big heart and over the years was so hesitant to let her into it that just the physical act of hugging her back was significant, almost life altering. It was enough for now.

"Henry, slow down there, that's too many olives," Regina advised meekly. "The muffin will be too soggy under all of those vegetables."

"But Emma likes black olives!" Henry declared while peppering the mini pizza in heaping amounts of the stuff.

Chuckling she replied, "Well I doubt that she likes them this much." Regina scraped the top off of the mound of sliced olives on Emma's English muffin (the muffins being a healthier option than a full-blown pizza).

The doorbell rang, signaling their guest.

Henry looked up at his mother and asked, "Can I go out now?"

Regina met the sly grin with one of her own. "Yes."

A gleeful cheer echoed throughout the kitchen and the boy made for the back door.

"Oh, and Henry?" Her son turned, eyebrows raised. "Away from my tree, is that clear?"

Having been reminded of the request practically every hour for the past two days he gave her an exasperated roll of the eyes and a final nod before exiting.

When Regina made it to the foyer she paused, hand hovering over the door knob. Her heart seemed to pound a little faster in anticipation of what (or who) waited on the other side. She knew she would not simply be opening the front door of her mansion, but opening a door to a clean slate; maybe not an entirely clean slate, nevertheless, something akin to a fresh start. The bridges in her life had been burned so many times – many of them consumed by her own matchsticks – and Regina Mills would be damned if she screwed it up this time.

Taking a deep breath, the hand grasped the handle and turned without a further trace of hesitation. She greeted stiffly, "Sheriff Swan."

"Madame Mayor," the blonde responded with equal severity.

Regina bowed her head and stepped aside to let the visitor enter.

Emma broke into a smirk and added as she passed the mayor, "Hi."
Something in Regina's chest fluttered at the changing atmosphere breezing over her and the tension seizing her muscles dissipated. Her lips instantly formed into a smile aimed away from the other woman who seemed to glide teasingly past.

"Hello," the brunette cordially answered, shutting the door.

Emma's chin rose, sniffing the air. "Something smells good."

"That would be the pumpkin muffins," Regina said pointedly. The sudden, faint smell of burning caused her eyes to widen. "… which should be done cooking!"

The blonde chuckled as her eyes watched the mayor scurry off in the general direction of the smoking kitchen. The bang of metal rang out just as Emma entered the smoke hazed room. Waving a hand through the fog, the air soon cleared to reveal Regina with a hand on her hip, glaring down at the searing pan like it had dishonored her.

Emma stepped up behind the brunette and looked over her shoulder. She shrugged. "That's okay, I like my muffins cooked well done." A finger pointed to one of the blackened objects. "And the scorching adds character."

Regina sighed and threw down the pot-holder. "It was supposed to be for Henry."

The blonde detected the slight trace of anger in her tone. A hand progressed towards the woman's lower back, but propriety restrained her in time. "Hey," she soothed, "they're just muffins."

"No, they are not just muffins!" Regina huffed. "This was supposed to make him happy. I'm his mother; I should be able to do that at least!"

"You are making him happy," pressed the blonde. "Henry doesn't need sweets to know how much someone cares. He's not superficial. You should know, you raised him that way."

Shutting her lids, Regina moved her head from side to side in dismissal. Her voice was so soft it was a whisper. "I don't want to fail."

"You won't." A blonde head tilted, the words voiced in firm testament. "I'm not letting you."

Breathing out in something similar to relief, the brunette's shoulders relaxed. Emma was still beside her, back stiff and hands fixed to her sides like she was holding something back. Regina wondered what the woman would do if she didn't hold back. The images flashed before her; of a pressing, heated body, of entwined limbs, pink lips gliding on her… – Regina inhaled sharply at the pictures moving at a dizzying pace through her mind. She blinked away the fantasy and patted a spontaneously perspiring palm down on the pot-holder. She cleared her throat.

"Henry is waiting outside," the mayor breathed. "He has a surprise for you."

Emma waited until brown eyes finally met her and when she was satisfied that Regina had gotten over the charred desert she turned to the back door.

***

"Hey, Emma! Think fast!"

The blonde hadn't gone a foot from the house before she spotted a white blur speeding at her. A hand shot out to halt its bearing towards her face. "Whoa!"
"Sorry!"

Emma eyed the brand new baseball in her grasp. "Better watch where you're pitching this thing or your mom's gonna have both our heads."

The red-faced boy caught the underhanded ball as he sprinted to her side. "I was hoping you might want to play catch with me. Here," Henry handed over a spare glove, "this one is yours."

"This looks brand new." Emma eyed the glossy leather and looked curiously down at the boy. "Doesn't your mom play with you?"

Henry shrugged and shook his head. "This really isn't Mom's thing. She pushed me in academics, not sports."

Emma punched his shoulder lightly. "Nothing wrong with being book smart." She hesitated. "What about Graham? Didn't he ever play with you?"

"I didn't see him a whole lot." He looked down at his shoes. "He was always busy at the station."

And getting busy in Regina's bed, Emma recollected. Before she knew it images of the couple floated through her mind. Her cheeks flushed in anger at the thought of Graham and Regina... *together* like that. Graham's feelings towards the mayor were less than amiable, that much Emma knew. What she didn't know (and desperately wished she did) was whether Regina had any feelings at all for Graham. Was she using him the whole time, Emma asked herself, or had the mayor harbored some small shred of affection for the deceased, former sheriff?

Emma hid her jealousy with a smile and accepted the baseball glove. Henry grinned back.

"Alright." Emma ruffled his hair before getting space between them to play. She smacked her fist into the glove a few times. "Come on, Smoky Joe."

"Huh?"

"'Smoky Joe' Wood? The Sox?" Henry's perplexed expression remained and Emma almost choked in shock. "I can't believe you don't know one of the greatest pitchers in Red Sox history! That's it, kid. You're getting a crash course in baseball 101."

Minding the windows and Regina's tree they passed the ball back and forth while Emma lectured Henry in sports rivalries and modern day curses.

"Hey, Emma, can I ask you something?"

The blonde laughed at the question. She loved how inquisitive he was; so curious and interested in everything. Including me, Emma thought fondly. "Ask away."

Henry's glove reached high to catch the ball flying in his direction. "Did you ever get to do this with anyone? When you were my age?"

"Um," Emma fell silent, biting her lip, "I kind of kept to myself as a kid. Making friends wasn't my strong suit."

"Oh."

"I learned to entertain myself, though. If my foster siblings didn't want to play bouncing a tennis ball against the wall was the next best thing," Emma smiled at the memory. "I'd hit that thing at
the wall so many times it drove my foster parents crazy. I practiced every day so I could make the baseball team by high school."

"Did you make the team?"

"… not really," Emma replied grimly. Her glove nicked the ball in midair, sending it hurling towards the house siding and connecting with a loud BANG! Emma and Henry cringed, knowing full well the next course of events.

"HENRY MILLS!"

"Emma!" the boy hissed.

Wide eyed, the blonde mouthed 'sorry' before retrieving the ball.

Mother and son went back to their game of catch. After a few less vigorous lobs Emma decided it was the right time to speak her mind. This better not backfire, Emma thought.

"Hey, ah… your mom told me about your little theory."

"Which one?"

Emma laughed at the question. Her son had a fantastical imagination that was not at all limited to the usual curse type problems. Just the other day he was speculating that Ruby would be next in line in taking over Granny's diner. Regina turned up her nose at the likelihood. And then there was Henry's insistence that Dr. Whale was secretly trying to gain access to the nunnery to which both his mothers inaudibly agreed.

"The one about her and I being in a romantic relationship," Emma answered. "You didn't think I would find out about something like that?"

"Of course she told you," Henry said with a knowing smile and a roll of the eyes. "You guys are dating."

"Kid, your mom told you we weren't together, right?"

"Yeah," he replied with a vacant expression.

"That means we are not dating."

Henry didn't reply. He caught the baseball and sent it sailing back.

This one is stubborn, Emma thought. She considered asking what had been on her mind for quite some time. It was risky, yet Emma had suffering under the weight and needed her son to ease her distress.

"Henry," she asked, hanging onto the ball for a moment. "What if – and this is a big 'if' – what if your mom and I were seeing each other. Would you have a problem with that?" The ball left her hand just as she stumbled out, "I mean, would that scar you for life or something?"

"Nah." The boy shook his head. "In fact, I have another theory if you wanna hear it."

"I'm all ears, kid."

"So I know I'm not supposed to be talking about the curse or anything, but now that you and mom have –"
Emma glared.

"... gotten close I know how you can break the curse."

"Henry…"

"No, Emma, let me finish!" The boy licked his lips hurriedly and didn't miss a beat. "The Evil Queen cast the curse to get her own happy ending, but she didn't really get it did she? Not until you came to town. You don't know what she was like before you showed up. You changed her. She's happy now, I can see it! You did that Emma!"

"You know we're not supposed to be talking about the curse thing. You promised to give it up."

Henry ignored her and continued. "It's the Savior's job to save everyone, including the Evil Queen. I know she's done a lot of bad things," he looked down to pick at a knot in his glove, "but she's still my mom. You can't give up on her."

I don't intend to, Emma promised herself.

"There's still true love's kiss."

Emma looked up at that. She opened her mouth to interject, but Henry got there first.

"It can break any curse! It worked with your parents so why wouldn't it work for you and my mom?"

With hands (one gloved) on her hips the blonde cocked her head at the likelihood. "Henry, that is impossible. Those things only happen in books. This is real life." Emma believed in the words she spoke. She might be able to accept that magic was real because she saw it happen and was even willing to stand by the fact that Prince Charming and Snow White were her parents. But true love? A kiss breaking curse? "It's not possible for people like your mom and I to have feelings for each other, much less be in love."

"Your parents didn't like each other when they first met. It took time for them to fall in love. The same will happen with you guys."

"Kid, love is a pretty strong word to be throwing around. I haven't known your mom long enough to know what I feel for her."

"But you love me and you've known me the same amount of time as my mom."

Emma stumbled back from the ball Henry hurled into her glove. She frowned at the logic of the boy's words. "Well, the love I have for you is different than the kind you think Regina and I share."

"It's okay, you just don't realize it yet. You will, in time."

"That's some pretty grown up advice to be giving for someone who hasn't even learned to drive a car."

Henry just shrugged like it wasn't his problem.

Regina's voice echoed from the kitchen. "Dinner!"

Emma closed her eyes in mock prayer and muttered, "Couldn't come soon enough."

Henry ran over, glove and ball in hand. He was caught up in a half-hug by Emma as they walked
towards the back door.

"Good game," Emma commented, ruffling his hair. Henry gave her a toothy grin.

Upon entering the house they were hit with the glorious smell of pizza. Henry inhaled deeply the smell of tomato sauce, cheese, and… pepperoni? He let out a pleasant sigh. It must have been an important occasion if his mom was willingly cooking any kind of grease producing meat.

"I hear you two managed to put a nice baseball sized dent in my house siding." The mayor stood tall and regal with hands on her hips. "Who shall I send the bill to?"

Henry gave a sheepish sideways glance to the blonde who was staring at Regina with an expression that screamed 'Are you for real?'

"Fine," the brunette shrugged. "If neither of you will admit to this heinous crime then you both will get dish washing duty." She whirled her back on them to tend to the oven. The dramatic sighs drew a smile to her lips.

Henry whispered to the woman still staring dumbly, "Can you imagine what she would do if we had hit her tree?"

"No," Emma moaned, "I'd rather not imagine."

"Wash your hands before you sit for supper," Regina commanded. "You too, Miss Swan."

The other two responded in unison, "Yes, mom."

***

When Regina had gone upstairs to tuck Henry in Emma kept herself busy by doing what she usually does: being nosy. It wasn't intentional, she just couldn't help her instincts. It had been over a year since she had the pleasure of hunting down morally compromised assholes and weeks since a good, long stakeout. In a way, she did miss her bail bondsman days. There was a sense of freedom that came along with the job. It never left her feeling tied down like the position of sheriff did. What was not missed were those boring surveillance jobs. It had been weeks since her VW had the pleasure of her extended company. There had been a lull in the Gold investigation as well as certain… developments in her personal life. Distractions, Emma thought, that's all they were. It was time to get back to business.

Her instincts were speaking to her - in what language, Emma didn't know. Something was up and it had to do with Gold. If Regina wouldn't tell her then the sheriff would have to break out the big guns. In Emma's case, the big guns were her rusty snooping skills of old.

Sneaking into Regina's home office, Emma went first for the file cabinet. It was locked. Could really use those skeleton keys right about now, the blonde thought to herself. Eyes panning the room she decided on the desk. Her hand grasped one of the drawer knobs just as a creak came from upstairs.

Emma stopped, face frozen in an 'Oh shit' appearance. Several possibilities flew through Emma's mind, one of which was more prominent than the others.

"Oh, Miss Swan, this is NOT appropriate."

An entirely cringe worthy possibility that should have every intention have becoming a reality. If I feel this guilty, Emma thought, then I deserve to get caught. When nothing followed the creak she
exhaled with a sigh of relief.

The drawers didn't hold anything suspicious – a few files and memos, a heavily dog-eared copy of Maine's constitution in book form, and, to Emma's surprise, a set of pillar candles. Apparently our mayor likes to set the mood when doing paperwork, she mused with a smile.

All in all, the desk held nothing of importance, not unless she was looking for evidence of political scandal which Emma had long ago gave up on. She would rather not revisit that particular embarrassing confrontation. The whole "or what, punish me?" tactic did not work out so well the first time and Emma feared the consequences of a second go-around. That wasn't to say she didn't like sparring with the mayor, Emma would just rather go about it in a different context that didn't have them front and center at a town hall meeting.

"Focus, Emma," she muttered.

There was one drawer that had not been opened. Emma saved that one for last because it gave her a weird vibe. Not a bad vibe, just… not your average vibe.

Tucked in the back of the drawer she found a thick, leather bound book. Clearly not the kind of tome a politician would keep wedged inside their office desk. Unless they had a secret to hide. The sheriff said a prayer and pried the cover open.

"Well I'll be damned." The words fell from Emma's mouth as her eyes found something entirely off her radar.

Numerous photos and documents slipped out of the pages into Emma outstretched hand. Henry's bright, boyish smile highlighted every single one. They were all there: pictures of his first steps, first Christmas, first day of school, riding a bike, ten birthdays of chocolate cake and elaborately wrapped gifts. Henry's birth certificate was also there along with the glowing school report cards. With the exception of a few self-taken photos of mother and son and one showing a hand cutting into the frame to grasp a wobbly nine-month-old Henry, Regina was not featured in the book. Emma had to wonder if that was because there had been no one else around to capture them.

A solitary photo caught Emma's eye and it was one of the few of Regina. In it, Regina's eyes were fixed on a bundle held tightly in her arms. She did not look any younger than how Emma knew her, yet there was a youthful glow to the brunette that was surprising. There wasn't a trace of malice or deceit in those eyes. What was present on the face was unadulterated serenity. It was joy that brightened Regina Mills' face. Photos were an amazing thing, Emma thought, they kept precious moments like these frozen in time.

Emma couldn't seem to tear her eyes away even though a sense of jealousy spurned her to. Every smile and wonder-filled gaze she had wanted to give Henry on the day of his birth shown on Regina's face. The feelings of jealousy were quickly dampened by happiness. If Henry couldn't receive that reaction from his own birth mother then the picture glued to the page was proof that he had gotten it from Regina. Where Emma wasn't present to hold him, Regina was. Where Emma couldn't kiss his forehead or whisper her affections, Regina was.

Staring at the photo, it hit Emma. She finally knew: Henry ended up in a good home with a loving parent. He was provided for, doted on, and given every chance his real mother never had. It was all Emma ever wanted to know for the past ten years. She felt at peace.

Realizing that the first page was stuck to the cover, Emma peeled it back with care. The page was not organized in pictures like the ones following it. Instead, there in the center was inscribed
flowing letters Emma recognized as written in the hand of Storybrooke's mayor. Just two words and bad ass beautiful handwriting – that was all it took for Emma's heart to leap up into her throat.

*For Emma.*

The sheriff bit back something approaching a gasp and blinked away a tickle in her eye. The hands had formed a death grip on the scrapbook as the mind was slowly losing its own grip on reality. The book was for her. It was created *for* Emma and it was *from* Regina – a gift which spoke volumes from a woman who could not seem to speak them herself.

Emma knew close to nothing about scrapbooking or the amount of work that went into it, but the book in her hands indicated how much time and effort went into its construction. The pictures were meticulously placed and organized into a page turning timeline. This book was pieced together with the care of Regina's own hands, and it was all done for Emma.

Emma never even asked for it. Now that she thought about it Emma hadn't even gotten around to asking Regina for a copy of the picture of the four-year-old boy that filled her computer screen. Emma hadn't asked for that one solitary memento much less a scrapbook full of Henry's life in photos.

The blonde intruder jumped at the sound of a door closing.

"Shit."

In one quick motion the photos were pushed back inside the closing cover and shoved back into the drawer.

Emma would just have to act surprised when she was given the finished product.

***

The mayor entered her den, heels clicking against the wood floor. Wholly prepared to give the usual cute, mocking address she looked around the empty room. The slouched young woman was not in sight. There was no smirk or sarcastic comment to greet her. The familiar cold feeling of loneliness seized her.

"Miss Swan?" Her voice lacked the usual confident, mayoral tone. The name came out small and bordered on frightened. There was a scraping of heeled boots behind her.

"Yeah?"

Emma came from the foyer, making her way into the room. Her cheeks were flushed and she looked slightly out of breath.

"Oh," Regina breathed. The feeling that had taken over her chilled bones began to loosen its grip.

"You all right?"

"I'm just a bit cold, that's all."

"Do you want my jacket?" Emma blurted it out before thinking.

Chivalry was not dead in this world after all, Regina thought, a trait she no doubt received from her charming father. Regina eyed the leather jacket. It was not the insufferable red one the sheriff couldn't seem to separate herself from, but the brown one. It fit the woman in all the right places;
every curve of the breast and shoulder and dip of the waist was molded by the slick leather. Regina felt warmer just looking at the jacket-clad woman. "Thank you," Regina chortled, "but I will survive."

Emma swallowed. "'kay."

There was a clinking of glass as Regina poured amber colored liquid into a pair of tumblers.
"Mm, I see we're graduating from coffee to hard cider. Special occasion?"
"Miss Swan, I am surprised. It sounds as if you do not approve."

Emma cocked her head. "You can stop 'Miss Swaning' me. It's not like this is a town hall meeting. When we're alone my first name will do just fine."

Regina grimaced to hide her true reaction. She trembled at the thought of being alone with Emma – truly alone. And then there was the name thing. Emma. Regina's tongue seemed to have a will of its own, arching to the roof of her mouth behind clenched teeth. In order to complete the cycle her lips were needed to intone the m's but she would not allow it. Her brain spoke the two syllables while her mouth remained firmly shut. Inhaling sharply, Regina responded, "But you must be so used to it by now. Otherwise, how would you detect my condescension?"

The sheriff snorted. "Point taken."

They sat across from each other and sipped their drinks in silence. After a few awkward glances Regina spoke up.
"This is not necessary, you know."
"What do you mean?"
"You staying here. I allow these after dinner conversations for the sake of work. There have been no developments in the investigation, so there is no reason you should linger." Regina swallowed over her own disappointment. "Is there?"

Emma set her drink down and shrugged. "Yet here I am drinking alcohol in your den; alcohol that you offered me no less." Regina shifted uncomfortably. "I told you before, I want to be here," Emma replied sternly. She then settled further into the couch. A strange expression Regina couldn't discern flashed across her face. "And I want you to tell me a story."

"Oh? Getting a little old for bedtime stories are we not?"

"About my parents."

The smile left Regina just as fast as it had formed. Her face contorted into a mixture of pain and confusion. "What?"

"I want you to tell me how they met."

"Of all the things to ask me, why that? Why now?"

"You had to have known this subject would come up. It's been two months and I'm still trying to grasp the fact that I hail from a fairytale world. I want to know where I came from, where Henry comes from."

Regina flinched at the mention of Henry. Sometimes it slipped her mind that her son did indeed
came from a world of magic. She spent those 10 years under the belief that he was spawned from, well, someone who was not a 'savior.' He had been a bright and beautiful distraction from her cruel, careless land. Regina still held onto the notion, regardless of semantics. Henry was still her son, no matter what realm he came from or what bloodline he shared.

"I'm the last person you should be asking." The mayor fidgeted with the coaster under her drink.

"But you're the only one I can talk to about this." The couch creaked as Emma leaned forward. "Please, Regina."

She focused on her drink which was being meticulously centered on the coaster. Her refusal was about to be vocalized until she made the mistake of lifting her head. It was a battle she never had a chance of winning. The sight broke every last pitiless bone in her body. Regina knew what desperation looked like and with one look into those evergreen eyes her resolve fell in shambles.

"Alright," murmured Regina, "but I am going to need a refill."

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Several glassfuls of hard cider later the real story of Snow White and her charming prince was told. For the most part the tale was comprehensive despite Regina's predisposition to skip over the painful parts. Emma could tell by the way she wrung her hands and spoke in a low, disdainful voice when there was a particular distasteful portion being recounted. It was clearly taking every last ounce of her strength to relive the moments. Emma was starting to realize that real fairytales were not the Disney versions she grew up with. There was about as much pain and loss in Fairytale Land as there was in the cruel world Emma grew up in.

"After all they went through… they still haven't found each other," Emma said to no one in particular. The woman across from her stiffened.

"I always thought the curse would endure. I sacrificed much to ensure that it would."

"Then I came along," Emma offered.

"Yes, dear. That you did." Regina hands twisted. "You will be happy to know it is only a matter of time before the curse is broken and your parents find each other."

"What will happen to you?"

"I have cursed and killed, Miss Swan." Anger boiled to the surface, reddening the mayor's face. "When the town regains their memories they will remember my crimes not only from the old world, but the new one as well. What do you think will happen to me?"

Emma's jaw dropped. She never thought about it that way. When Henry talked of breaking the curse she assumed it would all be butterflies and happy reunions from then on. She envisioned what it would be like to truly meet her parents – and how awkward it would be. It was also the look on Henry's face that sprung to her mind - when he would be proven right with the breaking of a curse only he had believed in. It never seemed to enter her mind that all those angry, tortured people would want to punish the woman responsible.

"There's got to be some sort of justice system in your world. Maybe they'll grant leniency in light of your helping me."

"It is unwise to think so. Hope for my case is a glorified perception."
Emma slammed her drink down on the table causing the other woman to flinch. Her mind was racing with all the things she wanted to say to counter the argument. The wise advice of Archie Hopper came to the forefront, but Emma knew the woman would roll her eyes at the mentioning of ‘faith’ and mushy, courage talk. Regina wouldn't listen to that sound advice, not so early in the redemption process, so instead the blonde chose something a bit more straightforward. "They're not gonna lay a finger on you. I won't let' em."

"That is very heroic of you," the corner of her mouth twitched. One of the truest smiles Regina Mills ever had the occasion of giving lay dormant, "and very unnecessary."

"Sometimes we don't get to pick the ones who save us."

Regina sighed, frustrated. "Your ability to create such heavy conversation is remarkable, Miss Swan. Might I suggest you change the course of this discussion?"

Not wanting to push the subject, Emma fell silent. Her hand went for the drink and emptied the last of its contents between pink lips. Her tongue swirled around the fermented juice as she pondered what to say next.

"Do you believe in true love?"

"You do not seem to grasp the concept of a 'heavy conversation,' do you?"

"And you're avoiding the question," Emma drawled slyly.

The nerve of this woman, Regina thought. She shifted uncomfortably on the couch. "Contrary to my charming reputation… yes," her voice grew content, "I do believe in true love."

"I actually trust that you do."

"And I am sure you are going to tell me why."

Emma could tell the woman was beginning to take an interest in where the conversation was going, even if she wasn't blatantly showing it. It was rare for Regina to take a curiosity in what Emma did or said (that is, if it had nothing to do with Henry). Emma stole the gem of an opportunity to take the wheel and drive the conversation to where she wanted it. It was going to be a bumpy ride, this peeling back of the many layers of Mayor Mills.

"On the outside you don't seem to be the romantic type. The condescension and 'Miss Swaning' are just a front. There is something underneath that hard exterior, Madame Mayor, which you don't want to reveal."

"Your powers of observation astound me." Regina's eyes widened excitedly, almost mockingly. "Please continue. I am quite amused."

Emma could see that she was entertaining the mayor, so she continued. "You used to be an idealist, but something happened that changed the way you express your emotions. Maybe it was a case of unrequited love that left you pining away for years. Or perhaps you lost someone you loved. I mean, you created a curse for god's sake! No one does that unless they suffered some form of emotional abandonment!"

Emma saw the falling face and knew she hit her mark. Her analysis affected Regina in a way she wish hadn't. As soon as she said the words she wanted to take them back. It was honestly not her intention to provoke. It was frustration that got the best of her. She just wanted answers. She just wanted to understand. If it opened even the slightest access to Regina's soul, Emma thought, were
my tactics not justified?

Regina was in a trance like daze. Her reply was but a whisper. "It was the second one."

"Pardon?"

Her eyes focused back on Emma's. "Your second allegation as to…" the brunette indicated to herself with a weak gesture, "… why I am like this."

"You lost someone." Emma saw the woman's eyes leave her. The brunette swallowed and tucked her chin down. Emma took it as confirmation. "I'm so sorry, Regina."

A laugh that was more of a shaky gasp reverberated around the den. "That is the first time anyone has said that to me. Not many know of his death much less his existence."

Emma suddenly felt very out of place. Just moments ago she thought she had the woman before her figured out. Now the wall was coming down to reveal a complete stranger. The blonde recovered from the bombshell with what she did best: sarcasm.

"So what's your stance on people having more than one true love?"

"Oh, Miss Swan," the question sparked a glow in Regina that came in the form of a haughty laugh, "you seem to think you stand a chance with the Evil Queen."

"Can't blame a girl for trying," Emma announced, shrugging animatedly.

Indeed, Regina thought as she stared with an entirely new opinion of the bashful woman across from her. A warmth spread to her chest when she considered the possibility – of an Evil Queen and a Savior. Then there was a tightness that clutched her at the chances of it happening and the consequences that would result.

Emma's attention was held by the empty tumbler being rolled on its bottom edge. The glass fogged around her fingers. Eyes still focused on the hypnotic movement she said without the slightest trace of sarcasm, "I'm sure you'll find someone worthy enough."

Regina detected the conviction in her voice, but it was the sadness with which she declared it that took the mayor aback. Her arms reached across the coffee table.

Like the discovery of the scrapbook, Emma was surprised a second time that night. Just like the book inscribed with those meaningful words, the brunette let her actions do the talking. Emma's first thought when she felt Regina's lips was their son's theory on breaking the curse: true love's kiss. That thought brought on panic which quickly transformed into nothingness. The pleasant pressure of the mayor's mouth on hers made the mind blank and the ears hum a sweet melody. Giving in to what she wanted most, Emma threw caution to the wind and kissed her back – with gusto.

Their mouths moved as one, wetting each other with longing strokes and needy pressure. Whatever fears that had consumed Regina's thoughts before were banished by the feel of the woman's breath on her own, rejuvenating her, giving her new life. Regina sucked on her bottom lip, savoring it with abandon because it was her Emma, not some devilish woman from her nightmares.

Regina dragged her fingers lazily through blonde strands, loving every inch of the lose curls she wanted so desperately strewn across her bed. For a brief, passionate moment she felt the brushing of Emma's tongue along her upper lip. The moist touch sent her tingling from head to toe. Just as her hands descended to pull on the leather shoulders Emma pulled back suddenly.
"No," said Emma.

The brunette cocked her head back in confusion. "What?"

"We shouldn't… I'm not… I mean… it was nice," the blonde couldn't hide a smile, "and I don't mean to say I didn't want to. It's just…"

There was a playful chuckle. "You're rambling, dear." Regina leaned in again with heavy lids and parted lips.

"Regina."

The voice breathed in warning on her mouth and Regina stopped, eyes searching the blonde's. The look of regret caused the enchantment to disappear. Her arms felt the grasp of Emma's hands. The gesture did nothing to calm her any more than the grave voice that spoke.

"When I said we deserve better I… I didn't mean –"

"You don't have to explain yourself." Regina drew back and stood. Her tone was as icy as the night frost on the windows. "It was foolish of me to assume you felt differently."

"Goddamnit, Regina!" The blonde rose and caught the fleeing woman by the hand. "Will you just let me finish?"

Eyes widened. The sharp order startled the mayor almost as much as the movement of hands clasping in hers. It was a steady grip born not only of frustration, but of passion. The blonde stared wildly into Regina making her shiver and blaze afire all at the same time. If a tsunami happened to wash in Emma would still be holding on for dear life, fixated onto her brown eyes like a crazy person – all in the process of saving her. It would seem Emma Swan was just as enamored with her as she was with the sheriff.

"Don't you ever mistake my feelings for you. I care more than that messed up head of yours knows." Emma meant it as a term of endearment, but the brunette flinched at the remark. She squeezed the hands in hers. "I like that messed up head. It's on top of a really beautiful woman who gets her kicks from ordering around her sheriff."

This elicited a tearful laugh from the other woman. Emma reveled at the smile.

Regina turned serious then. "But?"

"There is a lot of crazy stuff going on right now. Gold still has this town under his thumb, my parents are trapped by the curse," Regina winced slightly, "and Henry thinks I've given up on my journey to be the Savior. I'm not sure I'm ready to dive into something so new."

"No, you are right." The mayor hung her head. "I, too, have to work on my own issues."

The blonde gave a reassuring smile and nodded. "I know you have some things to tell me – things about your past – and I'm here when you're ready to talk. I won't push you."

Regina was touched by the generosity. When Daniel died she thought she would never again receive such kindness. No one had ever dared believe in her like he did. She remembered the way his heart moved under hand, how strong and true it beat to her own. The minute it was crushed hers stopped beating. It hung stagnate in her chest waiting for nothing and no one. It didn't beat again until her hands were taken into Emma's.
"So are you going to order me out of your house now?" Emma grimaced, only half-kidding.

"Well I am the mayor," Regina stated, raising a brow, "and you are my underling."

The blonde corrected, "Sheriff."

"Same thing."

"Was that a joke?" Emma asked, astounded. A smug look drew across her face at the possibility that the mayor was changing her evil ways.

Regina sighed in mock frustration as she led the sheriff to the foyer.

"Thank you for dinner," Emma stuffed hands in her front pockets, "and the drink – erm, drinks."

The mayor nodded. "You're welcome."

The sheriff rocked back on her heels, searching for the words. When they persisted in staying hidden she settled on a simple nod and went to cross the threshold.

"Emma?"

The blonde turned so fast she had to steady herself by grasping the door knob. The door swung open a little faster than Emma anticipated and she had to grab the door frame to prevent a spill. Her eyebrows knit together in eagerness. "Mm?"

Regina let out an evil giggle at the devastating effect the use of the name had her. "Thank you for playing with Henry today. It meant a lot to him."

"It was a pleasure."

When the mayor had nothing further to add Emma peeled her hand from the knob and stepped outside. Boots were dragged along the walkway as the blonde made her way sluggishly to the VW. Emma felt her heart skip to the beat of a lovely tune she had never heard before. Lizzie's got nothing on Regina freaking Mills, Emma thought, that woman has bewitched me body and soul.

Regina hadn't closed the door yet, but settled for leaning against the door as the sheriff had done. Eyes were following the wobbly figure of a brown jacket-clad female shuffling to her car. She licked her lips, tasting the spot that the blonde had ran her tongue against, burning the flavor in her memory in case it was the last kiss she would ever get out of that stubborn woman.
The visitor did not wait for an invitation before invading the mayor's office. Yes, there was a knock but it was made in passing. The sheriff clung to this particular formality in spite of her proclivity to break every single one of the mayor's rules. In truth, it was more or less an attempt to get a rise out of the woman.

"By all means, barge into my office unannounced."

Attempt successful.

"Barge? I thought my entrance was quite graceful."

The mayor's eyes finally lifted to stare in confusion at the blonde. "I did not know 'grace' and 'Emma Swan' could be used in the same sentence." She thought the girl was having a seizure from the way Emma's eyes rolled up and over. In fact, it was one of many Emma Swan expressions she was finding more and more attractive. It bothered Regina that her harsh comments had lost their punch, though. The smirk seemed to let her know that. The sheriff was enjoying this. Little, naïve Emma Swan, Regina mused, always taking to (and lusting after) what wasn't good for her.

It had been two days since Regina beheld those green eyes with unrestrained longing. She could think of nothing but the kiss they had shared and how abruptly it ended. But Regina Mills did not daydream, or at least that was what she assured herself. The many hours she spent at her desk thinking about Rapunzel-like hair and a deliciously sarcastic mouth was proof that the Mayor of Storybrooke was simply kidding herself. She found herself thinking it was cruel how good a kiss with Emma could feel when they promised each other it wouldn't happen again, not until their respective duties were fulfilled: Emma breaking the curse and Regina overthrowing the darkness within her. Redemption was looking sweeter with every thought of Emma, but then the road to this goal seemed so very long and out of reach. To make peace with the fact that they might never share something as intimate as that, not just the kiss but the exchanging of feelings almost crippled Regina. Expressing emotions did not come easy, but when the blonde had been close to her – close enough to touch and be touched – it became as easy as breathing. There were so few moments like that in her life and she wanted to experience it not just once more, but all day every day, and with Emma.

There were still appearances to keep up, though, and seeing Emma for the first time in 52 hours did not make it acceptable to gawk and sigh blissfully in her presence. This was her office, the mayor's office, and Emma was the sheriff. Regina would not gawk.

The sheriff ambled forward until her thighs met the marble desk. Regina examined how the edge of the desk dug into the legs and created ripples in the super, sexy, skinny jeans. She saw how the thighs bumped playfully against the marble; just a few innocent bumps, but enough to awaken a low growl in the brunette's chest. The pen in the mayor's hand almost cracked under the pressure being exerted from her grip.

A book dropped heavily onto the mayor's paperwork. Regina jumped in her chair at the sound which successfully snapped her out of her ogling. She raised her brow at the familiar book title. "Just what is this thing doing on my desk?"
With both hands on the desk Emma leaned over giving the woman her best shit-eating grin. "I've solved the mystery." Regina just raised her brow further and looked back down at the book like it was a cancer. "Well, sort of. I still haven't figured out the why but that's not important now." Emma waved a hand in dismissal. "Anyway, I thought there might be a clue in here that would help us so I paged through it and found something I think is pretty significant."

"Miss Swan, you would find a fry sticking to your grilled cheese sandwich and think it significant. Can you please get to the point?"

"Turn to the page I marked," Emma indicated, pointing to the yellow Post-it sticking out of the book.

After displaying her frustration with an impatient sigh Regina did as she was told. Her hand smoothed over the marked page and read, "'The Boy Who Left Home to Learn about Fear.'"

"Anything about that ring a Fairytale Land bell?"

"No," Regina answered.

Emma didn't have to use her superpower to know the former Evil Queen was telling the truth, yet she was disappointed in the answer. "I still think there's something to this story. It fits perfectly with what Gold has been up to. There can be no coincidence here."

"Miss Swan, this is just a story —"

"Like the story of Snow White and Prince Charming? Like Pinocchio or Hansel and Gretel?"

The deep breath Regina inhaled brought on a sharp pain in her chest. "Not everything in this book is accurate. Some of these stories are no different than those skewed films that that Mr. Disney came up with."

"Okay, first of all, don't say 'Mr. Disney' it makes you sound old and let's be honest you're already pretty old." Regina gave out a slighted huff but was shushed down. "Second, just indulge my ignorant Spidey sense okay?" While Regina frowned at the reference Emma tapped the page in earnest. "Read. It's real short."

Before she could be offended a second time the mayor grated out, "Fine." She crossed her arms deliberately and settled them on the desk. Leaning over the book she read.

Once upon a time there was a man who had two sons. The boys were complete opposites in that the older was smart and responsible while the younger was senseless and lazy. Though the youngest possessed arrogance he was vastly more courageous than his older brother who refused to collect wood alone during the night or complete any chore that led him down a spooky trail. Their father, however, held the traits of responsibility and hard work well above those of bravery and heroism.

The father would scold his youngest, "Look at your brother. He does his chores every day without complaint. What will you do to support yourself when you haven't developed the skills or learned what hard work means? You are nothing but a lost cause."

"But father," the boy said, "I would very much like to learn a trade. If only I can learn to get the creeps."

"My brother really is stupid," the oldest son replied. "You will never be worthy as any blacksmith, baker, or laundry maid."
The father decided to give his youngest son a chance to get the creeps so that he would go back to learning a real trade. He asked his neighbor to help him in this quest. The neighbor, a sexton, hired the boy to ring the bell at the top of the belfry each night.

During the first watch, the bell was rung successfully. Staying after the last chime the boy heard the creaking of wood and turned to see a white sheeted figure approaching.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, unafraid. "This place is restricted, you must leave."

When the figure refused to move or speak the boy repeated, "You can't be here. If you don't go I will push you out."

The intruder stayed still so the boy pushed him down the stairs.

Angry from the way he had been treated the injured sexton sent the boy back to his father. Too horrified to look at his son the father banished the boy.

Undeterred, the exiled son continued his pursuit of the creeps. He came across many strangers who offered their own strategy in getting terrified. Each and every one of the attempts ended in failure. The boy remained fearless and just as frustrated.

One day the older son came to his brother and told him of a way to get the creeps. He took his courageous brother to a well in the forest not far from their home.

The older brother said, "This well will teach you about those creeps you want so much to learn."

Overtaken by jealousy, he pushed his brother over the edge. Once he was satisfied that the boy would soon get the creeps he left his brother behind.

The boy at the bottom of the well knew there was nothing to fear from his place in the dark, wet cave. Nevertheless, every hour he spent sitting in that desolate pit the chilling sensation creeping over his skin spread. By dawn the isolation was so pervading that there was nothing at the bottom of the well but a babbling, empty shell of a boy who searched and found fear.

"What fine reading for my ten-year-old son," Regina replied grimly, having finished the tale.

"That's probably not the worst of it."

The voice came from beside her. Regina hadn't noticed Emma rounding the desk while she was reading and she craned her neck to find Emma leaning with the back of her very shapely thighs against the desk.

Emma finished, "Whatever happened at the bottom of that well might have spawned an evil that terrorized the village along with the boy's father and that awful brother of his." The blonde sat on the edge of the marble just inches from Regina's hand. She crossed her arms, waiting for a response.

Normally, the mayor would have ripped the heart out of any cretin who dared sit on her desk in such a manner. She took one glance at the well-proportioned rump improving her desk and thought better of it. "So you are suggesting that this malevolent spirit from the story is causing fear-induced comas in Storybrooke?"

"It might seem like a stretch but it's our only lead. I've been thinking about that flask you saw Gold empty in the forest. Maybe that stuff in the container didn't morph into something, but was feeding something?" Emma's eyebrows rose as the realization struck her. "Gold is extracting the fear of those patients leaving them paralyzed in some state of shock. He's bottling their fear in order to
"Feed it to that monster!"

"Monster?" The brunette smiled, amused. "I think you have been watching one too many horror films, Miss Swan."

"And what, you never came across ogres and giants in your land? It's entirely possible to get that kind of crazy stuff now that Gold brought magic to this place. Case in point: our resident werewolf, Ruby." Emma stared out the window, lost in thought. "I still can't figure out why he would do such a thing. The bringing back magic part I can understand, power is all he thinks about, but putting the town in danger? It seems a bit excessive, even for Gold."

"Do not underestimate him," Regina said firmly as if she were talking down to a child. Then her voice grew softer, smaller "it will get you killed."

Emma tore her eyes from the window to find Regina looking down at the book. That the woman had openly displayed concern for her was shocking. The sentiment almost sounded like it was made in affection, but Emma knew better. Regina meant to deliver it with a hard tone and in the words of one who knew what they were dealing with. Emma didn't care how it was said, just that it was put out there. The only other time Regina had showed concern for her was when she had shielded her from wolf Ruby's attack. Protection was not something the blonde came across often and the few times that it had she remained closed off to the gift. Though, when Regina offered it Emma found herself gladly embracing it and almost wishing for dangerous situations that would have her accepting it again.

Regina's scrutiny held the book for a second longer before looking up. "Anyway, I have given up trying to understand his motivations. I have learned that they are almost always not in my best interests... or anyone else's. His plans are for his own selfish reasons and, frankly, I don't care to know them."

"Well that better not stop you from letting me punch him in the face. He must know how to reverse the coma and if he doesn't I'm gonna beat it out of him." Emma stood up from her place on the desk and turned to leave.

Regina remembered the flask with Henry's name etched on it, the gift that was not so much a gift as it was a threat. Her pulse quickened at what might happen if Emma confronted Gold at the wrong time. "No!" She grabbed the blonde's wrist.

"What?" Emma's face contorted in confusion. "Regina, we've waited long enough. That well monster has been growing stronger by the day all because of those poor people lying comatose in the hospital." She jabbed a finger in the direction of the open book. "That story has been our only clue in days. You know Gold is to blame for this. This has to end before anyone else gets hurt."

"I know Gold is responsible, but just because some story in a book seems true does not mean you have to go gallivanting on some quest to destroy a great evil." Regina paused to consider the irony of her words. It was the Evil Queen who was supposed to be on the receiving end of the Savior's wrath, yet here Emma was, aligned with Regina and hell bent on destroying an entirely different threat. "Your recklessness will put people in danger. I know you think it is the right thing to do but now is not the time for vengeance. Gold is more powerful than you can imagine and you will need my help in apprehending him."

Emma pulled on the mayor's wrist in turn, standing her up. "Then let's end this together. Come on!"

Regina shook her head. "How do we even know the well from this tale is the same as the one in Storybrooke? Just because I felt terrified when I looked down there does not mean... it does not
A memory of a great fear came to mind. She pulled her hands into shaking fists. "That story might not be true."

"Regina," Emma took hold of her shoulders. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you. We're just going to see Gold. You don't ever have to go near that well."

"I can't."

"If it's the fear thing -"

"No," the older woman shook her fists to emphasize her disagreement, "it's not just that. My powers, I'm still weak and have yet to master complete control over them."

Emma fell silent. The desperation on the brunette's face was telling her to tread carefully. She was begging her to listen. Emma was becoming a world class expert on the many expressions of Regina Mills and this one in particular only took seconds to read. Swallowing her urgency she asked gently, "How much time do you need?"

Regina's shoulders gave a noncommittal shrug under Emma's hands. "I don't know." Without thinking, she cradled the woman's elbows. She needed to feel some part of the woman in order to get her next point across. "You have to promise me you won't confront Gold alone, not until I am strong enough. Tell me you will not do something thoughtless."

"How about this: I won't give in to my reckless ways if you don't let that stupid fear stuff consume you. Deal?"

Regina held the woman's intense gaze and then nodded.

Emma returned the gesture and flashed that dopey grin Regina was taking a liking to. "Okay, enough of this serious business. I'm sure I interrupted some important mayor thing when I barged in here. I will leave you to it."

"You didn't barge," Regina said delicately, almost apologetically.

"And you're getting soft," Emma countered as she walked away from the desk and added, "Madame Mayor."

Regina narrowed her eyes, but the curving of Emma's lips caused her to fail in completing the usual wicked guise.

"Oh, and I'm inviting you over for dinner tonight so bring your A game," Emma threw over a shoulder.

The mayor did a double take. "Excuse me?"

"Yeah," the blonde chuckled, taking pleasure in having finally taken the mayor off guard, "I expect you and Henry over by six. I've got half a mind to beat you two at Monopoly."

***

"She's not going to know we're here unless one of us knocks."

Regina looked to her son who was sporting an air of smart assery. "Yes," she replied tightly, gripping the hand in hers, "I am aware of that, dear."

A series of loud bangs echoed from the other side of the apartment door Regina and Henry were
standing before. It seemed like pots and pan were being juggled – and unsuccessfully at that.

"It sounds like a circus act in there." Regina stared at the door blankly like she could see through to the devastation on the other side.

"I bet she's just nervous. This is the first time you're over for dinner."

"We, Henry, this is the first time we have been here for dinner."

"Yeah," the boy replied obediently with a grin. He then knocked on the door before Regina could stop him.

There was a muffled expletive and another clatter of metal. Regina rolled her eyes.

"Mom," warned Henry.

The brunette didn't seem to hear. Her body was in a war with her nerves as she was making a failed attempt to stand tall. A nail tapped absentmindedly against the plastic container she was holding.

A little louder, "Mom!"

Regina was startled out of her blank state. "Yes?" Small eyes burned into hers, warning her to be on her best behavior. She pledged with a vague "Mm-hmm" and went back to staring at the door while the nail resumed its anxious rhythm.

Emma, dressed in slacks and a wool sweater, greeted them hurriedly and took their coats. Her guests were surprised to enter into a completely changed apartment. The floor was devoid of clutter, cushions were fluffed to excess, hard surfaces dusted, and the china sparkled. It seemed as if Emma Swan had let out her inner clean freak and unleashed it upon the once disorderly flat.

"What's that?" Emma asked the open mouthed woman.

Regina halted the examination of her surroundings. She realized the dessert was still in her vice-like grip. Looking down dumbly at it and then up at Emma she stumbled out, "I – I made lemon bars. Henry said you were fond of them."

Emma's eyes dropped to the container and then slowly crawled their way back to Regina. She sashayed forward and took hold of the plastic. "I'm fond of many things," she whispered deeply.

A finger grazed Regina's hand as it was taken from her. A not so subtle tingling sensation shot up her arm. Passing out seemed like a very probable response to the brunette, so she swallowed hard and released the dessert before any further eye contact – or grazing of fingers for that matter – could be made. What the hell was that? Regina asked herself as the blonde went back to her small kitchen.

"Hey, cool!" Henry shouted from the living room. "We're playing Monopoly!"

"Henry, these walls are far too thin to be shouting."

"Don't worry about it!" Emma shouted from the bowels of the oven. "My neighbors seem to be half-deaf already."

"And where would Miss Blanchard be?"

A blonde head popped up from the kitchen island. "Out having drinks with Ruby and Ashley. She won't be back until late."
Regina couldn't help herself. "Well, let us hope she didn't take her car. I am sure the town's tax dollars will not go towards yet another night in jail for that woman."

Interrupting at precisely the opportune time, Henry called out, "Mom, come help set the game up!"

"Please?"

"Please," he added.

The aroma of garlic and toasted bread traveled to the living room making Henry's mouth water. "Emma, when is dinner?"

"Just about ready."

"Here, pick your game piece," the boy instructed to his mother sitting beside him. "I'll be right back." He raced off towards the kitchen leaving the pieces to be held under the strict inspection of the mayor.

Henry scooted next to the now flustered cook and whispered, "How is it really going?"

She gave her son a scolding glare at his lack of faith in her. The harsh look disappeared just as soon as her attention went back to the confounding pot boiling over. "It could be going better," she whined.

Henry's eyes widened at the stove top. "No wonder! You didn't use a large enough pot… and the temperature is too high…" the boy pushed in front of her to hit a series of dials and buttons, "… and the sauce is supposed to be stirred every five minutes."

Impressed by his culinary determination, Emma stepped back to let the boy do his thing. Minutes later he had the linguine al dente and the sauce simmering at a perfect rate.

From behind, Emma clapped him on his shoulders and whispered in his ear, "Thanks, kid. You really saved my life."

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"I must commend you on your culinary skills, Miss Swan. This meal is surprisingly passable."

A particular dry bit of garlic bread lodged itself in Emma's throat. Henry slapped her back a few times (maybe little harder than the blonde anticipated).

"Are you alright?" Regina asked worriedly, sitting on the couch across from the two conspirators.

"Ahem, I'm fine." Emma took a sip of water.

"Although the food is tasteful I cannot say the same about where we are eating," Regina grated out.

Emma made a face. "You were just saying a minute ago how nice this place looked."

"I do not think it appropriate to eat on the couch, nor while playing a game."

"But Mom how can you complain?" their son piped up. "You have four hotels, three houses, and almost all of the railroad properties!"

"I will admit my years as mayor of a town is superb preparation for excelling in this game."
"You went to jail three times!" scolded Emma.

"Yes, and I can still boast of a shorter prison sentence than your real one, dear."

Emma was not at all offended by the slight to her juvenile record. It had long since been a topic of argument between the two. "Oh, it is so on, sister." She turned her shoulder threateningly towards the prideful brunette. "I will do everything in my power to stop you from getting that B&O railroad."

Eyes widened to the threat. Showing that she wasn't intimidated Regina hovered menacingly over the board game, leering at her opponent. "Miss Swan, I do believe you have no idea what I am capable of."

"Hey, time out!" Henry waved an arm between them. "We play fair or we don't play at all."

The two sparing women looked at Henry and back at each other. They played out a quick staring contest that persisted to a spoken accord. "Fine" they said in unison. Regina held her frown until Emma's broke into a wide grin. Their eyes sparkled unknowingly at one other.

"Hellooo?"

The interference cut their moment like a hot knife through butter. The star struck pair looked away – Regina abruptly placed her fork on the plate while Emma ran a hand idly through her blonde locks.

"Can we have dessert now?" Henry asked hopefully.

"Yeah, of course," replied Emma. The empty plates clattered into her hands. "Let me just clean off these dishes."

"I'll help." Regina shot up from the couch despite there being no more china to clear and followed the woman into the kitchen.

"You would," the boy muttered to himself as he rolled his eyes to the apartment ceiling in flawless Emma Swan style.

***

Emma's hands dived into the sudsy water in search of a ladle. After a few blind pats to the bottom sink her fingers hit metal. A wave of water came up with the spoon, saturating the mayor's blouse.

"Aw, crap, sorry!" Emma tensed, ready for the worst.

"No harm done." Regina plucked at the damp material before brushing it with her drying towel. "It's just a little water."

Emma gaped at the flippant comment. She then closed her jaw and lathed the cooking spoon before wordlessly handing it over to Regina.

The brunette looked around the kitchen for a proper location to return the dry spoon. "Where do you store the serving utensils?"

"Ahh, you can just slide it in the drawer over there," Emma instructed, pointing underneath the counter with a wet finger.

There was disgruntled tsk, tsk and a rustling of metal before the drawer slid closed. The two
women went back to washing and drying in silence.

Regina didn't know why she was there. She could have been spending time with her son on the couch rather than getting a spray down by the sheriff. Regina realized how the second part sounded and almost dropped the plate in her hand. Goddamnit, Regina cursed herself, what am I doing here? Whether the question was concerning her present position or that she had accepted the dinner invitation to begin with she couldn't figure out. It wasn't that being in Emma and her mother's apartment was uncomfortable. In fact, she felt quite at home. The blonde had been surprisingly hospitable, even when Regina had been expecting the worst. Nevertheless, if it wasn't her pristine surroundings what was it that had the mayor on edge?

The brunette looked down at the plate she had been drying fervently for all of two minutes. With a heavy sigh she put it away with the others.

The way Emma had been looking at her must have something to do with the nerves assaulting the mayor's once composed nature. Hungry eyes – that was what Emma had for her. Regina had prepared herself for a quick dinner at casa de Charming and found that spaghetti was simply the hors d'oeuvre. Regina was the main course, the pièce de résistance. Though there was a carnal persistence about those stares, it didn't leave her feeling gawked at from behind a cage. Regina felt worshiped, she felt like a queen again. Not an evil queen, but Emma's queen. Regina had never been the subject of such intense fixation as that and never felt so conflicted under those intense green orbs.

Emma wordlessly handed over a dripping plate. The brunette accepted it and started buffing. Her world (this world) had been changing so rapidly the past few days it had her head spinning. From an excitable finger graze to the exchanging of electrically charged gazes, the friendship she shared with the younger woman was blossoming into something… charming. Complicatedly charming, that is. As lovely as the thought was, being with Emma confused the hell out of the mayor. That wasn't to say she regretting kissing her; it had been so long since she had experienced an honest moment like that with a human being. However, Regina feared – yes, feared – the shape of things to come. After all, the next time they kissed it would not simply end there. From the second their lips reunited the simple kiss would inevitably progress to fondling, confiscated dress, hours upon hours of rapturous sex, and what then? What consequences would follow?

"I want to kiss you."

A plate slipped and clattered to the counter. Regina snatched it up (along with her racing heart) before it could make any more noise. Checking to see that Henry wasn't eavesdropping, she forced her gaping expression upon the other woman.

Emma, staring wide eyed into the sea of suds and dishes, seemed equally shocked at what came from her mouth. Her head turned to display a face twisted in embarrassment and disbelief. "I'm sorry," she whispered, "it just slipped out." Emma attempted to hide her rosy red cheeks by ducking her head, yet the shame was amplified more from her profile. "I don't know why I said that."

Only seconds earlier Regina had been reprimanding herself for the feelings she was allowing herself to dote on. What was occurring between them was wrong. It didn't feel wrong, although experience told her it should be anything but right. Then Emma screwed it all up by voicing exactly what both of them wanted. An agreement had been made, damn it, and there Regina stood cheated (and not in the robbing of B&O kind of cheated).

"We agreed that could not happen again," Regina hissed, cheeks flushed with anger. "You told me
you were not ready to 'dive into something so new.' Those were your words!"

"Geez, keep your voice down!" Emma double checked the living room to see Henry sneaking an orange banknote from Regina's stash. "And don't you think you're overreacting just a bit? In any case, it was you who made the first move."

"Don't do that," Regina warned.

Hands on her hips, Emma asked, "Do what?"

"Do not look at me like that," her voice almost cracked under her failing resolve. She recovered by throwing the metaphorical (and literal) towel down. "You have been doing that all night and it is making me uncomfortable."

"Then what would make you comfortable, hmm?" Emma closed the space between them. She was becoming more frustrated by the minute. "What exactly do you want from me, Regina?"

The mayor had two options: slap the woman or kiss the hungry look off her face. She stood her ground while her conscience battled for a decision. She was suddenly very thankful for the padded bra underneath her wet shirt.

"What are you guys doing?" Henry chimed from the living room, another interference slicing definitively through the thickness.

"Cleaning," Regina called out quickly. "Coming to help?"

"Nope." The boy spun back to the game (and to sneaking properties).

"Can we just forget about this? I don't want to fight."

Regina was relieved at the suggestion. Exchanging regrettable insults was not how she wanted to end the night. More than anything, she didn't want to say something that would hurt Emma.

"I don't want to fight, either."

Making peace used to be so much harder.

***

Dessert ceased to be enjoyable when Regina realized how short her money balance had become. Henry denied the accusations and argued that she was already winning. "Why not spread the wealth?" he had asked innocently. Both mothers reamed the boy out for his unjust behavior. Henry didn't talk for the rest of the game. The permanent look of remorse spurned Emma to slip him an extra lemon bar on his way out.

"Henry, why don't you wait in the car?" Emma instructed after her guests slipped on their coats. "I would like to speak to your mom in private." She could have sworn she saw the boy wink at her as he turned to leave.

Regina's purse hung from her clasped hands. Timid was not a word the mayor was familiar with, yet she seemed to be experiencing a vaguely similar emotion. "Yes?"

The blonde caught a lip between her teeth and hid her hands in the pockets of her slacks. "I was thinking earlier today that I never did thank you. That time in the forest when we were running from Ruby – wolf Ruby – you saved my life. It's probably too late to express my gratitude, but I
"It's not too late," Regina found herself saying. I would have done it again in a heartbeat, she thought silently. "Your gratitude is appreciated." Damn, she thought, why am I being so nice? Say something she would expect! "But not accepted. Saviors should not be in the position of being saved."

The weight on Emma's nerves subsided. Her mouth turned up into a half-smile. "That's more like it." She bounced giddily on the balls of her feet, enjoying however many seconds remained of their night. It would be an understatement to say she didn't want it to end.

"Thank you for dinner and the entertainment, Miss Swan," Regina said politely.

The soft smile and all the charisma that came with it made Emma's knees wobble. She mumbled vacantly, "I'm glad you liked my noodles."

"Yes," the brunette swept the tip of her tongue at a top lip and then broke into a chuckle, "they were simply mouthwatering."

Emma's eyes widened. "Uh, yeah, that's probably because of the Bolognese sauce. It's... uh... really good." She was unable to register what was coming from her own mouth due to the rose tinted one stealing her attention. Those lips opened to emit another giggle and then pursed. Emma had to squint because it seemed like the rosy red mouth was looming closer. Emma froze as cold and still as an ice sculpture. Their cheeks met and the wide crease told Emma the brunette was smiling. A puff of air came in the form of a deep whisper.

"Any ten-year-old can make spaghetti, dear."

Regina lingered half a second to inhale the scent of Emma's hair before placing her lips on a heated cheek. She receded as the swan ice sculpture melted into a puddle on the floor.

A good five minutes after her last guest departed and her molecules were reassembled the sheriff's brain caught up with the mayor's comment.

"Damn it!"

That Regina doubted she was hero material was embarrassing enough, now they must add Emma's inadequate cooking skills to the list. Just one more ability in the long list of things a savior had to live up to.

She slammed the door closed and marched off to the kitchen. Picking up the last remaining utensils she washed and patting them dry. When the appropriate drawer was laid open Emma stumbled back in surprise. The contents inside were organized in a meticulous fashion, metal utensils on the left and plastic to the right. Emma rolled out the next drawer to find all the forks, knives, and spoons crowded in their just and proper places. Regina must have let her inner Martha Stewart out when Emma was in the living room serving dessert. What a bizarre, yet pleasant outcome it was.

Just when Emma was about to throw patience right out the window the woman would do something completely unexpected like that. It was all in a month's work for Regina Mills: saving the sheriff from a wolf, devoting a scrapbook in Emma's name, kissing her from across a couch, kissing her on the cheek, and last but not least rearranging her kitchen drawers to Food Network standards.

Emma was sure that it had not always been like this. The niceties and small bouts of affection might not have been a common theme between them, but the past was starting to become hazy in
light of present matters. She wanted nights like tonight to happen all the time. An easy warmth spread through her body at the memory of the three of them eating, laughing, and playing. And the two of them, her and the enigmatic Regina Mills, cheek to cheek. She remembered how soft the woman's face was, how innocently it brushed with hers.

Emma brought a hand to where contact was made. She smiled at her fortune.

There was a word that could explain this feeling. It was never used to describe any one of her foster arrangements and when she finally found her real parents she wavered at using the word in their presence. It was not until recently that Emma had the courage to face it. *Family* became a bearable sentiment when she was with Henry and his adoptive mother. Fitting in with them was like solving a five-piece child's puzzle. It was so easy, so obvious. It seemed natural that they were her family as much as she was theirs.

But it might not stay that way forever. Her family was in danger. Dark forces lurking in the forest were threatening her son. An incomprehensible fear invaded the heart of the woman she cared about. And Mr. Gold was the one responsible for these menacing events.

Something clicked. With a fire in her eyes and vengeance in her heart she grabbed a jacket and ran out the door.

Emma was going to protect her family.

***

It had been a little over a year since the boy had last allowed his mother to tuck him in. After brushing his teeth he approached her home office where she was working diligently with the pages of some book. He had shuffled his feet nervously, fearing he had outgrown the right to be asking what he wanted most. It took a few seconds for the request to register before she finally agreed to it with a motherly smile.

That night he lay comfortably on his back and placed his hands on his stomach as the woman brought up the many layers of bedclothes.

"It's going to get cold tonight so don't kick off your comforter in the middle of the night."

"Okay."

"And leave the sheets tucked in at the end of the bed, otherwise all the cold air will drift in."

"Okay, Mom."

"Just don't hesitate to ask for another blanket. I –"

"I got it, Mom," Henry said decisively.

Regina stopped, realizing her mistake. She was controlling her son. Hovering. But isn't that what mothers are supposed to do? she asked herself, hover over and protect their children? Resuming the comforter's journey to meet the boy's chin she snugged it tightly around his body. Her eyes avoided his the whole time. "I just want you to be comfortable."

"You try too hard," he said casually. His arms wiggled out of his mummified state and were placed back over his stomach.

Regina remained focused on her task. She responded defensively, "I'm working on that, Henry."
He stared up at the ceiling in silence.

Once she was assured that no drafts could penetrate the boy her eyes met his face. "You need a haircut." She brushed the bangs obscuring his view of the wall. He didn't pull away. Regretfully, she stood up to leave.

"Mom?"

She sat beside him. "Yes?" Regina asked, leaning over him and supporting herself with a hand on the other side of his body.

Henry's face contorted in frustration. There was a sigh and then he looked expectantly at his mother. "Why didn't you ever get married?"

A frown came to the brunette's face. The shocking nature of the question made her stutter. "I – I don't know."

Henry sighed again. He heard the lie in her voice. It was about self-preservation and (from what he was beginning to learn) for his own protection. "Didn't you want me to have a father? Didn't you want us to be a normal family?"

"I thought you were happy with the way things were."

"You thought I was happy a lot when I wasn't."

Regina flinched and straightened her back. She deserved that. "Is that what you want, a father?"

For a moment the boy believed she would make it happen if he wished it. "I want to know what you want."

"I want you to be happy." Regina squeezed his leg in earnest, hoping he could feel her honesty through the layers of blankets. "That is all that has ever mattered to me, Henry." She could feel his body relaxing under her hand.

They stayed like that for a few minutes, Regina pressing affectionately at his limb while Henry let her. He didn't allow it because of the tears in her eyes or the way she looked desperate and distant all at the same time. He allowed her to cling to him because it gave them both comfort.

"I liked tonight," Henry told her, eyes drooping under impending sleep.

Regina's smile was a mixture of sadness and joy, she couldn't decide on which. "I liked it, too."

***

It was too late for any business in Storybrooke to be open on such a cold night. One lonely shop in particular remained alive, spilling its light through frosted windows onto the deserted street. Not one for greetings, Emma Swan ripped open the shop's door and stomped inside.

"I do hope you're not going to break my little bell."

The sheriff halted, fists clenched. "You know what I think of your bell?" Spinning around she retraced her steps, tore the bell from its place over the door and chucked it at a wall. The delicate thing resonated pathetically amongst some dolls on a shelf.

Gold stood passively from behind the counter like a spectator. He gave a disappointed grunt and waited patiently for the woman's rage to fall.
Emma stood in front of him with legs shoulder-length apart and arms crossed. "Before I arrest your sorry ass you're going to do something for me."

"I am more than willing to cooperate, Sheriff Swan," he responded pleasantly.

"You listen to me and you listen well. Whatever you've been doing behind my back is going to stop. You are going to tell me how to destroy what is in that well and then you are going to fix those patients so they go back to the way they were."

"Return them back to what exactly? Cursed?"

Not one for patience either the sheriff placed her hands none too softly on the counter and huffed out, "I will not play games with you, Gold."

"But you are already playing the game. Don't you see, Miss Swan?"

"Spell it out for me then."

Gold took his time. He held the woman's fiery gaze which bordered on confusion, reveling in her ignorance. Then he began, "Magic has existed in our little town for how long? Almost three months now? Dear me, that seems quite a long time for a savior to stand idly by." He jabbed the point of a finger gently to the glass counter. He cocked his head in mock concentration. "As far as I can tell the citizens of Storybrooke are still living under the assumption that their lives are their own. No curses have been broken, no tearful family reunions, and certainly not a fairytale happy ending in sight." Gold clicked his tongue in disappointment. "And where is our hero?" He then shrugged as if none of it concerned him. The next sentence was delivered as a passing observation. "I do suppose good intentions fade..." he leaned in, lips bent in a smirk, "...when the Savior is playing house with the Evil Queen."

An arm lashed out to seize a red tie and yanked back. Emma didn't dwell on the source of his information. All she felt was the urge to protect what she held dear. Gold grunted as his upper body was forced halfway over the counter, but that wasn't enough for Emma. Rage encouraged her to free her firearm and bring the muzzle to the outstretched neck. "Give me a reason."

Unflinching, he stated, "You can't touch me."

"Oh really?" Emma drew back and discharged a warning shot an inch past his head. There was a distinct 'pop' but no 'kick.' The gun was jammed.

Gold leered, "Sounds like the mayor's been skimping on the local law enforcement budget."

Perplexed, the sheriff stared at the gun, yet still found strength to keep the pawnbroker within her grip.

"You really didn't think I would allow just anyone to enter my domain with a functional weapon, do you?" Gold waved his fingers before the woman, demonstrating his abilities with a flourish of blue light.

The blonde sheriff saw the trick and released him to take a step back. Angling her body away from the grinning imp she tipped her shoulder and dug her heals into the wood floor, making herself a smaller target if it came to that. Her posture was defensive, her voice hard. "What the hell do you want?"

"Nothing that has to do with you, dearie." Gold smoothed down his suit and glanced up innocently. "No, I'm saving my magic for someone a bit higher up in the ranks of this town's dictatorship."
"Bastard!"

"Ah, ah." Gold froze the attack with a wave. His glowing finger fixated on the livid sheriff.

"Don't go anywhere near her!" Emma barked. Her arms struggled against the blue fog enveloping her.

"Just as protective as Regina, I see." He was delighted by the interest he sparked in the woman. "Oh ho, ho, she never told you?" The sheriff stopped thrashing, but continued to glare. "I can't imagine how upsetting it must be for you to hear this from little old me."

"I don't care what you have to say," she spat out. "Anything out of your mouth is a lie."

"That is a very wise thing to say, Miss Swan, but do you want to take that chance when it is regarding your son?"

"Don't you dare bring Henry into this!"

"But he's already in it." The staccato of the last words caused the blonde to recoil. "I sent Regina a friendly reminder not long ago. It seems children are very effective bargaining chips. One little threat and our queen is as docile as a lamb."

The sheriff bit back a retort in the face of intimidation. Fury would not get the best of her even though it would be well placed. She had made many rash decisions in her life, but she would be damned if she was bullied into doing something foolish when precious lives hung in the balance. Having to stand down was almost as infuriating as the realization that Regina deceived her once again, had not trusted her or provided the courtesy of informing her that their son was in mortal danger. Emma felt her breathing become shallow. Tears happened to blur her vision.

"I could have approached you, but knowing your disposition..." the pawnbroker shrugged. "Regina is much more sedate these days, don't you think? I wonder if it has anything to do with those performance issues afflicting her."

Emma may have hated the brunette in that moment, but the veiled threat Gold had made did not prevent her distress. The thought of Regina in any kind of pain, physical or otherwise, made the blonde squirm. Before she knew it the possibilities were invading her mind: of tearing flesh, crunching bones, blood red tears spilling into a congealed puddle, and cries to stop the pain. Emma shook her head, but the screaming persisted. Her name. She was screaming Emma's name. A whimper ripped free from the back of the sheriff's throat. "Stop it!"

"Doesn't look pleasant does it?"

Regina cried out to her for what seemed like the hundredth time. The voice was that of a woman barely lucid, hardly connected to the here and now, on the tipping point between life and death. Every ounce of suffering was poured into the scream, begging for relief that wouldn't come. The blood stained and the shrieking echoed. It was so real it chilled Emma's spine and penetrated her skin, standing her hairs on end.

Gold snapped his fingers, ending the nightmare and the binding enchantment. The woman inhaled shakily, chest painfully restraining the sobs.

"Now that I have your attention I wish to make a deal." He didn't wait for a response even though the blonde didn't seem capable of forming one in her distressed state. "I will leave Henry unharmed. He shall not be used, threatened, or approached by me. In return, you must promise to break the queen's curse... in good time."
When Emma's legs found the strength to extend herself upright she reclaimed the mask of rage that was brought in with her. "No more deals."

"Come now, Miss Swan." The man extended a hand. "One good turn deserves another."

Emma's chin lowered in grave determination. She spoke with steely conviction, "If you touch her or my son I will end you. That is a promise."

She didn't bother to read the pawnbroker's expression or wait for a response before leaving. Patience and precaution were in short supply to the sheriff. She departed the shop with a slam of the door.

Absent was the high chime of a bell.

Chapter End Notes

The story Regina reads from Henry's book is my own variation of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's A Fairy Tale about a Boy Who Left Home to Learn about Fear.
What the Queen Wants Most

The question rattled around in her mind. She took it with surprise, but most of all disappointment. She never thought he would ask. The timing of it distressed her more than the actual question. Why ask her now? Had something changed that made him ask her those things? No matter how hard she wracked her brain those answers never came to her. All that persisted were questions.

"Why didn't you ever get married?"

"Didn't you want me to have a father?"

"Didn't you want us to be a normal family?"

Regina had been up for hours replaying the conversation in her mind. She cleaned the kitchen, wiped the fogging windows, and rearranged the pillows on her couch several times before giving up. No amount of housework would chase away the questions plaguing her conscience.

Collapsing in an armchair she closed her eyes and pulled back the veil to her past. She remembered when Daniel had proposed to her in the stables all those years ago. He put the simple gold band on her finger, clasping his hand in hers. Regina smiled at the memory. They kissed. It was a chaste brushing of lips, but to 18-year-old Regina it was most passionate. Then Snow came and following that wretched promise, Cora. She didn't cry. Regina had not shed a single tear over her true love in what seemed like ages. She couldn't place when the crying had stopped, but the pain of his loss still left a mark. Still, there were no tears.

She fell back under the veil and relived her wedding night. It was not at all what she had expected. At first, Leopold was gentle and romantic, asking and giving her any comfort she so wanted. As per her mother's instructions Regina was a compliant wife only seeking the comfort and desires of her king, but she was not his true wife. He made that abundantly clear; in private cursing her for her inadequate upbringing and himself for his choice of bride; in public, humiliating her with the memory of his true love, the 'People's Queen' he still called her.

And in bed. The first few attempts ended in failure. Regina didn't know what she was doing or what her husband wanted because he never spoke to her. No one had spoken to her about lying with a man. Any wrong move in pleasing Leopold was met with abuse of the worst kind. He had never caused bodily harm then, but the vindictiveness in his voice hurt more than the spiteful things her mother had slung at her. From then on they shared a bed solely on anniversaries and during nights of drunken festivities. That was when he was rough. She remembered him twisting her arm, ripping off her clothes, and driving into her with reckless force. She remembered how it didn't matter that he couldn't come when they were together. It didn't matter because the husband was just as trapped as the wife. All he desired was to inflict pain. On her. On him. And young Regina, who still wanted to be good for her mother, to be obedient and queenly, let him. Regina's nails clawed angrily into the arm of her couch. She had learned what it meant to be wife to a husband. To be a queen to her king.

"Didn't you want me to have a father?"

Didn't she? It was her curse after all. If she could choose whoever came to Storybrooke then she could certainly have had her pick of any man in Fairytale Land. Graham could have been a candidate. He had not spent much time around Henry to begin with, but his kind and caring nature told Regina he would have guided the boy to be just the same. He would have taught him about the great outdoors and the many 'precious' animals roaming it. He and Henry could have gone fishing,
played catch, watched sports games, and sooner or later taught him to shave (even though Graham didn't seem to know much about that). For a fleeting moment Regina even considered David Nolan and his charming qualities. That certainly would have wounded Mary Margaret to the core. Regina didn't have to be happy with a husband, he just would have been that second parent Henry needed, a father figure he never had.

"Didn't you want us to be a normal family?"

What was normal? What did Henry see as normal? She had resided in this world for 28 years and it still never made sense to her. Of course, being stuck in a small town never to leave didn't help her to grasp the new world and its customs. Emma was underage when she got pregnant with Henry. She was homeless, in poverty, and slumming it every night in her car and the occasional jail cell. Every instinct in Regina convinced her that Emma's decision to put Henry up for adoption was for the best. The choice had given her a reason to love again. It gave her a baby. It gave her Henry. She wondered, though, what events would have taken place if that choice had not been made. After spending time with Emma it was evident that she would have been just as capable of loving young Henry as Regina was. The destitute young Emma wouldn't have been able to adequately provide for Henry, but she could have been happy with him. That's not the choice that was made, though. Emma gave up her own chance at motherhood and happiness for the well-being and happiness of her newborn son.

Regina asked herself if marriage would have been an option 10 years ago if she knew then what she knew now. Would Regina have traded in her own happiness for her son's? If Emma could do it why couldn't she? As long as Henry felt safe and happy with a normal family did it really matter who Regina shared her bed with?

Maybe she was blowing it all out of proportion. Henry didn't seem to mind living in a home without a father, and not once in the barrage of questions did he express his desire for one. All he wanted to know was what Regina wanted, what she thought was best for him. Regina thought about their night at Emma's. Henry said he liked it, she had too. Nevertheless, what exactly did he like about it? Was it spending time with his biological mother? That had always been the case when she was with them. Could it be that he enjoyed being around both of them at the same time? In the same room, being more than nice to each other? What if tonight left him feeling a part of family? A normal family?

Regina's head rested lazily against the back of her chair. The future of a happy family of three sprung to mind. She allowed herself to think of laughter, of love, of normalcy. She sighed at the thought while the corner of her mouth twitched and grew into a smile.

The mansion's door was knocked on loudly. Regina's eyes flung open. Faster than the speed of light her train of thought went to none other than Emma Swan.

After the string of inquiries she tried and failed to dispel from her mind the interruption was a welcome distraction no matter how unwanted the visitor. Privately, Regina was hoping for a more desirable one in particular.

Another hurried knock came. She got to the door and opened her home to the chilly night and her eager guest.

Regina felt a gust of cold air before setting her eyes in front of her. It hit her like a ton of bricks, the weight knocking the wind from her. The blonde woman standing on her doorstep was the answer to all the questions.
"What the fuck, Regina?!"

The mayor's wide smile turned down with the help of her falling jaw. "Excuse me?"

Emma didn't answer. Her knuckles cracked into fists as she approached like a storm, uninvited. With each deliberate step forward the brunette cowered back. The retreating woman was the only one who jumped at the violent slam of her door.

"Miss Swan?" she asked, suddenly fearing for her life. The woman walking slowly up to her was not the same one she had flirted with just hours earlier. She was not the gentle, infuriatingly sarcastic blonde girl who had wanted to kiss her tonight. This woman backing her into a corner possessed an eerie similarity to the devilish one that had once haunted her dreams.

Emma jerked the stiff body against the wall, causing the mayor to let out a startled "Oomph."

"Stop playing the victim," the sheriff spat. "It doesn't become you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Gold told me what you did. Or should I say, didn't do?" Emma tightened the hold around the woman's upper arms, bracing them to her body. "How could you, Regina? He's our son!"

Regina's eyes widened. She struggled to lean forward, but was pushed roughly back into the wall. "You saw Gold? I specifically asked you not to!"

"I confronted him because it was the right thing to do. And I'm glad I did, otherwise I wouldn't have known about the threat made on Henry's life." Emma didn't feel any sympathy for the woman heaving under the burden of her secret. She would not waste any further compassion on a person who continually deceived her. "Gold is dangerous and I went there to protect my family." Her nails dug hard into the mayor's blouse as thumbs bruised to excess. "I hardly think you can say the same."

"There's a reason why he is dangerous. You don't know what you have done," Regina declared, shaking her head. Desperation showed in her glistening eyes and anger in her worrying brows.

"What I've done? What I've done?!" Emma repeated, gaping appallingly. "I did what any mother should have done! When someone's child is threatened it's expected that they should fight back… take the bastard out… anything! But you…" she couldn't look into those teary, brown eyes when she said it. It didn't matter where she looked, though, because her own eyes were filling with tears, obscuring her vision. Her unrelenting grip jolted the woman. Emma shook the body as if she wanted it to do something, to defend itself, to fight back, to do anything that would stop her from completing the next words. She concluded, choking over her words, "... you did nothing!"

Regina didn't fight back. She couldn't. Her body hung limp while being chained upright by an iron grasp. Any strength left in her was put into keeping her eyes on angry green ones. Shrinking in on herself she thought her body would implode from the disappointment staring her in the face. Her arms were aching from the discomfort being exerted by rage-enforced fingers. "Emma," she exhaled in a soft whimper, "you're hurting me."

Hands flexed tightly in response, and then the younger woman's strength faltered as the shroud of anger dropped, allowing Emma to see the mayor shrinking in fear of her. Nails receded from flesh, yet fingers remained to keep a steady hold. Emma was almost sickened by her own actions. Hurting was not her intention. She was desperate for an explanation and more than that she wanted confirmation that the woman she was falling for wasn't the evil bitch Henry's book alleged she
Emma brought a palm to the woman's cheek. "How could you not tell me?" she whispered solemnly. "I thought we were in this together. I thought this…” she glanced down vaguely down at the mayor's shirt collar and withdrew a hand from her cheek to clench it, "… I thought we were okay." Her eyes went back to brown ones, burning their way in. The collar was being tugged to her demands. "Why can't you trust me? Why can't we work?"

"Because I'm scared!" cried Regina. "Because everything good in my life has been ripped away from me. I can't lose my son, too! I will not let you take him away!"

"What makes you think I would take him from you? That is the last thing on my mind." Emma was starting to forget why they were fighting in the first place. Why was it so imperative that she had to resort to manhandling the poor woman against a wall? She looked deep into Regina's eyes, so deep she thought they would pull her from cold disappointment and into warm promise. She wanted to curl up in that warmth like it was a shelter and never have reason to leave. "God, I know you're afraid. You should never have gone through what happened to you. But I'm here. I'm right here and there is nothing that will make me leave or take Henry away."

"Don't promise me that." Regina lost all measure of strength and ripped her eyes from Emma's beautiful, compassionate face. She pulled her chin to her shoulder as her lids squeezed shut. "Just don't." The tugging stopped and so did the grip around her arm. Blinded by the darkness of closed lids Regina felt the heat of a body leave her. There was a dull scraping of boots against wood. In that moment she realized something; she had ripped so many hearts from heaving chests over the years and not once did she wonder how it must feel, how painful the process was, and the barren void that remained after. With the next plea she finally felt what so many of her victims experienced at her hand. Her shoulders quaked as she extracted the beating organ with the words, "Just leave us alone."

Regina heard more scraping of booted heels and then a strangled gasp. She finally opened her eyes to find Emma standing a cold ten feet away from her. Regina recognized the warped look from a distance. Her lips were parted as lines formed around a downcast mouth. Eyes fell lifelessly with a slight furrow between them and a solitary brow arched. It was unparalleled sadness and inescapable confliction. Emma was on the tipping point of a sorrow both of them knew so well. She was experiencing the conflict of whether to drop everything and run or stay put to endure the pain. She hated to see this Emma so wracked with responsibility. The fact that Regina caused it made her hurt more than the bruises on her arms. Were these the options laid before them? To stay, hurting each other until the scars became infected with regret? Or do they go their separate ways, sinking back into that familiar isolation where no one understood them? Either way both of them lost. Regina wondered if they were eternally fated to make each other suffer.

Emma's chin quivered. Her voice was broken and hoarse. "Is that what you want?"

She felt 18 again. She was in the stables. There was nothing there to keep her company but perpetual loss and an unwanted destiny. It was a sense of déjà vu, though, there was something different about the scene. There was a choice being laid before her, a choice that no one had ever given her before. The answer was written all over Regina's face. Not again. Not ever again.

The blonde's expression did not change as she unstuck her heels from the floor to close in on the mayor. Regina squeezed her eyes shut, shoulders tense, ready to absorb the impending blow. Emma's body made sudden impact with Regina's, sending her once again into the wall.

Her shoulder blades made contact with the hard surface knocking the breath out of her and into the mouth clamping onto hers. She heard their teeth collide as soft lips swept over hers with
everlasting need. Emma's kiss was passionate and with it the heart Regina had extracted just seconds earlier was returned. This one was different, though. The former queen felt a rapid thumping beneath her chest that filled the vacancy with every lively beat. Each pulsation was as resilient as the one before, blood pumping hard and strong to keep up with her body's impassioned state. This new heart would be indestructible.

Emma was not letting up. She kept her insatiable mouth moving on Regina's, using her hands to keep a rosy face in place. When fingers threaded themselves within blonde curls the sheriff exhaled loudly, relishing the tug at her roots.

Regina took the opportunity to suck in a lungful of air and let it out in a hasty response. "We said we wouldn't."

Their lips pressed together again, this time smacking hurriedly as if it was their last night on earth. "Emma…" she managed between kisses. It could have been a plea to stop or to never stop, Regina's brain was too foggy to distinguish which. Their mouths detached, but remained ever so close, prepared to lose themselves again in carnivorous delight.

As if foreseeing the moment, the blonde responded in a flurry, "I'm sick of waiting for a time that will never come. Our lives are going to be in a constant state of complication. There will always be some villain to put away or some spell to reverse." Emma's forehead kissed Regina's. Her eyes drifted closed and her heart spoke through swollen lips, "I know who you are and I want that, every piece of you Regina. I want it so bad I can taste it." Emma leaned in blindly to kiss Regina.

"There are things you have no idea…" Regina said between demanding pecks before pulling back to finish, "you don't know everything about me."

"Then show me. Show me who you are." Emma's thumbs smoothed over shapely cheek bones, fighting the urge to pull her closer. No matter how much she craved the woman before her she wanted her undying permission more and her willingness to proceed into unexplored territory. So Emma held back.

Regina thought on the words momentarily. She saw the patience on the blonde's face and knew that if this wasn't what Regina wanted that Emma would let her go without a struggle. She also witnessed the unmistakable air of devotion. Green eyes smoldered with want so great Regina could feel the heat enveloping her like a flame. It was cushiony warmth that seemed to tether them. It was the lasting sensation of protection, freely dedicated. That if she were to fall, she would fall in the arms of her knight and float together on through sunshine or stormy weather.

When she understood what Emma was asking of her she closed her mouth tenderly on patient pink lips and began to disclose everything that she was.
How She Got Her Groove Back

There was a biting chill sweeping its way through Storybrooke. Naked tree trunks bent to and fro, moaning in the wind. A damp haze came in contact with the cold panes, condensing into uneven, lazy droplets. If stillness were a sound it would have been found at this time of night. There was a majestic silence, yet a backdrop of death crept across every street, sidewalk, and backyard. It roamed in this stillness, searching for its purpose. Its victim.

Particles of moisture evaporated on the windows of Mayor Mills' residence. In one room a boy slept soundlessly, snuggled beneath a sea of blankets (at the foot of his bed the sheets remained tucked in). Unknown to the sleeping child and all of Storybrooke, two individuals in particular endured just as warmly, but in a startlingly wakeful state. A slippery sweat permeated the panes of the master bedroom, obscuring the view of soft amber light and curling shadows. The exquisite song of sighs and exhalations were kept by the glass plates and thick walls.

They made love for hours, each taking turn in prompting the other's release. It was as if they were making up for lost time, time they had spent fighting about Henry, the curse, and insignificant squabbles like the election for sheriff or some other business. With every passing hour they persisted in the belief that in joining their bodies the past would disappear. For every judgmental comment Emma had thrown at the mayor a kiss was placed in the hollow of Regina's neck, and all acts of corruption made against the sheriff were banished with a steady stroking between Emma's thighs. This exchanging of misdeeds for pleasure was not so much made in apology as it was an attempt to heal. Mending old wounds was a nasty business, but when it was done out of passion – done creating a warmth between two bodies – the process could be rewarding.

They only stopped to gain oxygen or until strength returned to their overworked muscles. During these moments one would look upon the other's expanse of gleaming curves, speaking their insatiable demands through lustful eyes. They were naked to one another not only in body but in spirit, giving all they could in the dark of the bedroom and sharing in the discovery of inner psyches so long hidden from others.

Regina had never done this before. She was familiar with sex (something she found could be quite thrilling one minute and then banal the next) but what she was doing with Emma was more than physical. She didn't necessarily want anything from the woman or hope to gain some control over her; the only struggle for power was in who would end up on top (a struggle that was won more often than not by the sheriff). She had offered her body to Emma as a complete show of trust, allowing herself to be kissed and touched in such an intimate way she never believed possible. Opening her body and offering herself was more complicated than she thought, but there was Emma, talking to her and responding to her every touch. In the heat of passion Regina would pick up breathy whispers of where to put her hands and how hard, fast, or deep to apply them. They told each other what they wanted and every single request was obeyed. By the nth round every detail down to the last bend, dip, and key to release was known. They were honest with each other and unselfish, too.

It wasn't until Emma had Regina in her third fit of passion that things took a dramatic turn. Making soft concentric circles around her clit Emma praised the raw flesh with her tongue while running hands up and down the sides of a long torso. The sheets wrinkled in clenched toes and fists as Regina lay there none too patiently, taking in the sound and feel of a lapping tongue. The blonde could hardly keep up with the hips that were jutting eagerly from the bed, causing her breath to come out in uneven pants against the throbbing wetness meeting her lips.
"God!" Regina groaned impatiently, "Hurry, please..." She clawed at the sheets trying to express her desire for things to move along. She continued to thrash wantonly on the mattress (haphazard as it was becoming) as her center was fully penetrated and worked methodically by long fingers. Intent on watching the woman's imminent orgasm Emma lifted her gaze, but was immediately distracted by a flicker of light. She stopped her tongue's ministrations and peered over a thigh to witness a most unexpected occurrence.

"Whoa!"

The candles had been pooling in their own heat causing wax to run down the sides in droplets. It was Regina's idea to light them in their hurried journey to the bed. Emma accused her of being sentimental while Regina reminded her that this was the perfect time to change the sheriff's hassled, intolerant ways. Yet when Emma peered from between slender legs she saw that the candles had not remained where they were lit. Instead, they hovered several inches above their place and only continued to rise. Emma's head whipped across the room to find those candles escalating as well, their flames dancing in flight.

"Regina..." She tried to keep her voice even and calm but their recent activities lent itself to a galloping heart rate.

The woman gave out a rough sigh at the defined pressure leaving where she needed it most. Committed on reprimanding the sheriff she pushed up on elbows to gaze over a heaving chest. By mid-glare the charmed candles came into view. Her face fell tragically. "No..." The wax pillars wavered and spilled hot liquid over their sides but continued to levitate. The last time she felt shame like this was when her mother had scolded her for making the unfortunate mistake of talking back in anger. Just the memory of Cora's punishment sent Regina into overwhelming sobs. The tipsy candles upset her, but it wasn't this lack of control over her powers that left her distraught. The tears came flowing down for the happiness she was experiencing. She realized that this moment with Emma might be her last and she cried because at any second it could all be taken away from her. Whether it would end at her hand, Emma's, or someone else's, the thought of losing what (or whom) she never had before made her newly given heart weep.

"Hey," Emma crawled up to cup a rosy cheek. "It's okay, shhh," she soothed, kissing her other cheek softly. The heady moisture from her lips mixed with tears as she took in each salty drop. Regina lent herself over to the blonde and breaking down further at the kindness being shown her. When the mournful shaking ceased and tears had been affectionately licked up Emma nudged the woman's chin up with a finger. "Look at me," she encouraged delicately.

Another sob threatened to unleash itself when she saw the woman bent over her. Still droopy and glazed over with that familiar guise of hunger the young woman's eyes made immovable contact with hers. Their blissful adventures had taken their toll on blonde hair tangled in sweat and once pale pink lips, but Emma Swan was beautiful just the same. She looked away again not wanting to see pity even though deep down she knew it was anything but.

Emma said, "Look into my eyes, Regina,"

She shook her head at the soft request. It was mild embarrassment that kept her eyes closed, but absolute trust that pried them opened. And when she did look into those verdant green orbs the world around them disintegrated. The floating candles burned out and all fear and doubt crumbled into ash leaving only two warm bodies curled up into each other. There was only her and Emma. There was only their deserved happiness. Despite the weight of her sprawling lover Regina began to feel lighter. As breathing came easier she felt her senses waking up from a long sleep. She could smell everything: the smoking wicks, the sweat, a strong hint of what was between both their legs.
Distinct sounds traveled to her ears in the ticking of a broken central heating system and the scraping of branches on glass panes. An intended laugh that turned into broken wheezes came out and she brought a hand to stifle them, to gain some sort of control over her own emotional outbursts. She felt like crying again, crying in triumph. It was all coming back and it was all possible because of the mesmerizing woman she once called her sworn enemy.

To express her gratitude she encircled an arm around the increasingly confused blonde's neck bringing her down into a kiss. The tender praise instantly became all tongue and teeth, nipping and stroking till both groaned out their contentment. Happy enough to return where their progress had so abruptly left off, Emma slipped a hand down the woman's chest to her stomach and the mound between earnestly spread legs. With her mouth still on red lips she used a thumb to tease the sensitive flesh above the woman's clit which earned her a surprised gasp and ten nail thin scratches down her back. After one last sweeping tongue across a scar and quick flick against an erect bundle of nerves she dove into dripping heat so ready and so willing to take her in.

Regina keened to the efforts made by agile fingers and sought anchor with wispy blonde locks she tugged and pulled on. "Oh… Emma."

Ducking down she outlined a pebbled nipple with her tongue, kissing and licking the salty perspiration. Moaning at the taste, Emma smiled at the fact that she was dining on the uptight mayor of Storybrooke and milking her pleasure all at the same time. What thrilled her even more was that this was not just the mayor coiling around Emma's spearing assaults but the woman she would lay down her life for, the woman who had captured her heart and numbed her thoughts with one simple kiss on the cheek. She encapsulated a nipple in her mouth and sucked hard, heightening the quivering woman's pleasure. The loud expletive emitting from red lips told Emma how much it was appreciated so she gave similar treatment to the other delicate peak, receiving a comeback in the form of a deep groan.

Regina pulled the sucking mouth on hers in a hurried, obsessive kiss that turned to the partaking of great gasps. Their slick bodies moved rapidly against one another creating a friction that kept the cold night air at bay. A hand planted itself to the bed's shaking back board as Regina gave her entire body and soul over to the other woman coaxing the wild, throaty moans from her lips. As a great white explosion occurred behind closed lids she came hard and wet to the dancing fingers inside her. "Emmmaaa!"

The sharp pulling at her roots did not prevent Emma from gifting the mayor several more orgasms with the twist of her digits. She had to cover the open mouth with her own to stifle the liberating wails while shamelessly bucking her hips to the sweet sound.

When all was silent but the huffing of two satisfied lovers Emma buried herself in a neck glistening in sweat. They lay wrapped in jumbled sheets and limbs, elated and readily awaiting the next round.

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One hour later…

"You know, if you don't stop coming those candles are going to become a major fire hazard… if they aren't already."

On her back, panting, the brunette strained to get view of her latest trick and laughed at the new color the flames had taken on. "I will stop coming when you stop making me," she spoke in a sultry post-coital voice.
"Then I guess we should install a few fire extinguishers because I will never stop," Emma scoffed as if she had just been asked to do the impossible.

"Why bother with those silly contraptions when I have my magic?"

"Oh, that's right," Emma spoke from the foot of the bed. She lay spent and gratified as she absently massaged the muscles of Regina's calf. "I forgot, all that pent up magic juju is in gear now that I jumped your circuits."

"Dear, I was not a broken car," Regina said over the sound of breathy chuckling.

"… and when I put my key in your ignition —"

"Em-ma!"

The blonde caught a pillow in the face, but that didn't stop both of them from laughing uncontrollably. "And then I flushed your transmission fluid…"

Regina pounced on her then, pinning her arms above her head with laced fingers and shutting her up with a grinning mouth. "You are impossible."

The blonde's lips drifted skilfully down to tickle the outstretched neck with feather light kisses. "I'm your magical conductor," she muffled against the vibrating throat. "Hop on board this train is leaving the station."

Regina cocked her head and smirked. "All out of car innuendos?"

"Not a chance, in fact, I was going to mention how nice your rear bumper is but I didn't want to eat another pillow."

Regina saw the flickering red glow play across the woman's features. "You will be surprised to know I would have taken that as a compliment. "The mayor smiled and teased the blonde back with a hot tongue and puckered lips on a rising pulse point. Emma squirmed in delight under her amorous caresses and ran hands over the brunette's shoulder blades and trailed down to the small of her back.

After a delectable midnight snack on the sheriff's earlobe Regina playfully blew once more into the ear and drew back to take in the woman below her. The flushed pink chest rose up and down as Emma was trying to catch her breath from the assortment of groans and giggles that had been a result of the mayor's nibbles. She had never seen the woman so happy and Regina's breath hitched at the realization that she was the cause of it. Basking in the truth that she was actually capable of eliciting such delightful sounds from the blonde Regina felt a right of possession over her. A growing jealousy bubbled at the thought of anyone touching Emma like she had the past several hours. Of their own accord, her arms curled tighter around the muscular frame below as another set of arms did the same to her.

"Have I lived up to your expectations… now that I have shown you who I am?"

Emma's brow furrowed. Pushing up her mouth captured Regina's in a soft, modest press of lips. "You always will."

A sigh escaped as Regina reveled not only in the breathless manner Emma's lips swept with hers but amidst the faith being entrusted in her. "And have I shown you all that you desire?"

Emma bit her lip in thought. "The details are a bit hazy. I think you should show me one more
time. The mayor has this rule about her sheriff staying on top of the latest scuttlebutt." Emma shrugged with a smile. "I don't want to disappoint the Madame Mayor."

Regina fell back to her side of the bed with a smile. "Miss Swan, if we keep this up you will soon make an honest woman out of me."

Emma laughed haughtily. "Well sound the alarm." And she crawled slowly up the mayor who was reaching out to her.

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_Fifteen minutes later…_

"Emma?"

There was an excitable moan. "Yeah?" Emma whimpered, trying to wrench open clamped down lids.

Regina studied Emma who was riding her thigh with abandon, teetering on climax. If the mayor's breath wasn't knocked out of her before it was now after soaking in the sight of the glowing blonde galloping up a vastly rewarding peak. Like a great golden mare, courageous and intelligent with hair hanging about carelessly, Emma appeared free and unburdened. She had been this way ever since Regina had known her. Charging through the world with a strong heart and a free spirit, she could be anywhere in the world at this very moment, but it was here in the mayor's bed where she wanted to be.

"Regina?" The blonde breathed out. Pupils dilated as she continued to swell over and around the thigh but at a slower pace.

She realized Emma was still waiting to hear whatever statement that had been swimming in her head. Regina shook her head. "Nothing."

Asserting her thigh up into the woman to prevent any further conversation she then brought Emma into a kiss that lasted for whatever remained of their night.

***

Should she stay or should she go? To continue huddled around a warm, half naked body or hit the road in the dead of cold morning, that is the question. The indecision was killing Emma. It was all doomed to failure anyway. Why carry on when the inevitable came up with a rising sun? Fear of inadequacy drove her from that warm bed. She couldn't take care of Regina when Emma herself was unwilling to face her own destiny.

Emma slipped out of blue silk sheets and padded over to her clothes. As silently as possible she struggled into the legs of her pants and cursed the skinny jeans making slow progress up still damp thighs. The sound of a zipper deserved a sigh of joy.

She heard the bed creak and then a not-so-sleepy voice ask, "Are you alright?"

Emma paused. _Am_ I alright? she asked herself. "Yeah." She turned to see Regina sitting up on her elbows, looking at her with slight worry. "You know I have to go."

The brunette pulled the edge of a sheet up her chest as if fighting off a chill that wasn't really there. She looked down in search of words but all that could be found was a simple, "Yes."
Emma gave her an apologetic look. I'm sorry, Regina, she thought. It was the absolute truth, but she couldn't say it to the woman she just spent the night with. They had shared much last night: kisses, whispers of affection, delicious bodily fluids and muffled cries of passion. Now that their bubble of rapturous peace had disintegrated it was a bit too overwhelming to confront each other after a night like that. Emma wasn't emotionally ready for the repercussions of what they did and she was sure Regina felt the same way.

She opened the bedroom door and closed it behind her.

"I'm sorry, too," whispered Regina. Like brittle glass she placed herself gently onto the cooling side of the bed, letting a tear or two escape.
"Hey! Eyes on the road, sister!" shouted a voice just after Regina slammed on the breaks of her car.

She blinked to see Leroy walking around the Mercedes' front bumper to get to the sidewalk all while giving her (the powerful Mayor of Storybrooke and wicked Evil Queen of Fairytale Land) the dirtiest of dirty looks.

Putting her car in gear she rolled forward catching the clear sound of mumbling from the grumpy man walking in the general direction of the first place that offered spirits this time of day.

Regina couldn't even drive a car without thinking about the night before and the many car inferences that had resulted from an orgiastic rough and tumble with the sheriff. She couldn't bring herself to say her name. It was much too painful.

No, Regina scolded herself, I will not make sense of what had occurred. Routine was the only thing she knew in her 28 years in Storybrooke and she would be damned if anyone would change that. Go back to routine and nothing can harm you. That was the answer.

Regina made this pact with herself after a good cry in the shower. Confronting her broken self in the bathroom mirror her reflection revealed everything she was feeling, and it wasn't acceptable. She was the Evil Queen for god's sakes. No one could fool her, hurt her, or… fall in love with her? It just wasn't possible. Not for someone with crimes Regina was guilty of. Not with a past that convinced her of the ruthless, unforgiving person she really was.

There she was staring back at her, the image of a shamefaced woman who still wanted to redeem herself. Regina stopped her sniveling and splashed cold water on her face so that the image would melt and fade into nothing. She looked back into the mirror taking a few seconds to remember what she used to look like. The brown eyes that had seen so many horrors clouded over in darkness as she remembered why she had cast the curse, the people that needed to be punished, and the happy ending that was rightfully hers. Her breath hitched at the thought of her happy ending. Regina was supposed to have that kind of blissful future with someone. She had experienced this not too long ago, the skipping beat of her heart told her so. Someone must have trusted her at some point. Some sorry bastard had to have battered through her cemented walls and achieved possession of the heart she supposed existed. Then hate boiled to the surface, hate mixed with the desire for power. All thoughts of what had been disappeared. The mask slipped into its rightful place. It was like relearning how to ride a bicycle. It was instinctual.

Covering the pain was the only thing she could do because it was automatic. It was routine. After all the disappointment and loss no strength remained to do anything else. Regina Mills would not exact revenge. She would not kill. She would not scheme. Routine was all she had left. The mask and the broken woman behind it was all that remained.

On this monotonous new day Regina changed into her very best suit (the one with the black pinstriped vest and blazer that screamed 'Bitch, don't mess with me.' A heavy application of makeup was in order to cover the sleeplessness, as well as two very strong cups of coffee in sweeping away the cobwebs of her former self. She then made her son breakfast, helped him with the last of his homework (which he left to the last minute as always), and drove him to school. Her day then got significantly better when Henry gave her a swift kiss before jumping out of the car and running to meet his friends, Ava and Nicholas.

Not long after, she found herself ten inches from running over one of her more irritable of
constituents. The Evil Queen wouldn't have minded, of course, and could have found it in herself to
drive those ten inches, but this Regina was too caught up in her thoughts to stick to that particular
routine.

Pulling in to her parking space at city hall her key withdrew from the ignition with a satisfying
metallic click. The action forced her mind to revert back to a memory she thought was locked
securely away. Emma and her insufferable innuendos. She recalled how many times Emma had
called her beautiful: once after establishing her green eyes upon the bare chested, prostrate body for
the first time, another before climaxing in each other's arms, and again just before sleep took them
as she looked on Regina with doe-eyed wonder. It only took a simple click of a car key for a
powerful reverie to return and the memory of a sentimental observation for Regina to slouch back
into her seat just as lonely and despairing as before.

"Get a hold of yourself," she disciplined herself. The keys were shoved roughly into her purse and
any further recollections of broken promises and one night stands were dispelled.

A cup of Granny's finest dark roast waited for her on her secretary's desk, another bright part of her
daily schedule. She gave a passing thanks to the girl.

"Oh, Mayor Mills!" Marcie said, stopping Regina before she got to her office door. "Someone
stopped by to see you this morning."

Her interest peaked and before she knew it her hopes did the same. "Who?"

"I… that's strange," the girl frowned in concentration, "I-I don't remember."

"How can you not remember someone who was here an hour ago?" demanded the mayor who was
trying to remember herself why she hired such an absent-minded fool.

"All I know is they are inside your office. They insisted on waiting for you."

"You left this mysterious person unattended in my office?" Regina asked, fuming. "Without my
consent?!"

The beet-red secretary receded further into her chair wishing it would swallow her whole. "I – I'm
so sorry, Regina. There's no excuse for my behavior." She tortured her bottom lip, wracking her
memory for an explanation, anything that would get her out of being stared down and the
impending termination she knew was coming. "I really don't know why I would do such a thing…
without your permission."

Something peculiar was going on and Regina knew who was responsible. She fixed her determined
gaze on the door to her office and said, "Marcie, why don't you take your break now."

"But Mayor Mills, it's only ten –"

"I said now!" Regina shouted, eyes still secure on the door like it was about to transform into
something unwholesome.

An underling of the mayor didn't need to be asked twice with a tone like that. Marcie gathered her
things and hurried out the building at a hasty trot.

Regina inhaled sharply through her nose and turned the knob with a sweating hand.

"Pleasant morning to you, dearie."
With hands at the ready the mayor stepped into her office, prepared for the worst. What she found was not necessarily that, but it was indeed a sight that disgusted her. There sitting at her desk was Gold, legs crossed, one hand on his cane and the other definitively on her expensive marble desk.

"You know, I never thought one could feel so many things just by sitting in a politician's chair." His fingers swept back and forth over the desk absentely. "The narcissism and artful corruption seeps through the skin at an incredible rate. I almost get the chills."

Regina's skin begins to crawl at the sound of his cackling. "It takes one with those qualities to know them."

"I also happen to recognize a comfortable chair when I sit in one," jested the undeterred pawnbroker.

"What are you doing here?" she asked deliberately, still distanced from her enemy.

"Your kindly secretary let me in, although she might not remember doing so, not with that little hex I put on her." He picked up a paper weight and gave it a toss in the air. "Can't have the peasants knowing our business now, can we?"

"No, we can't," Regina approved, chin up defiantly. "What exactly is this business you speak of? As far as I can remember I have made no recent deals."

Gold laughed and swiveled briefly in the chair. "I thought I only hexed the memory of the secretary. It seems my powers know no bounds. It surprises me that you don't recall, as you tote on quite frequently about your affections for the boy."

"I made no such deal!" Regina took a threatening step forward, hands clenching into heated fists.

"And yet you backed off my trail after I sent you that little present." A haughty smile formed. "By the way, I hoped you appreciated the craftsmanship. It took ages to carve and from recent events it was well worth the effort. From the look on your face I'd say it has served its desired purpose."

"I should kill you now. After everything you put me through –"

"Put you through?" The cane drove him to his feet. "You've done all that to yourself, dearie. All I did was give you a gentle push."

"My son is in danger because of you! The threats you've made and the deals we've struck are at an end. It is time to start paying for your misdeeds." Regina emphasized her own threat with a rolling flame of fire that materialized in the palm of her hand.

"Oh, she's back," he said with an approving guffaw. "I was starting to forget your flair for the dramatic." He rounded the desk slowly, looking at the weapon like it was child's play. "And what of Emma Swan? Are my deals with her at an end as well?"

"Miss Swan is not my concern, only slippery imps like you." Regina rounded the other side of the desk like a lion stalking its prey, eyes skillfully trained on her target.

"When it involves your precious curse you should be concerned. Or is it you now want the Savior to succeed?"

Regina's brow furrowed noticeably. She was aware that Emma wanted to break her curse. She had once in a moment of weakness made the off-handed promise of helping her do so. However, what Regina was not aware of was Gold's part in all this. Suddenly, she started questioning what Emma
and Gold had actually talked about the night before. Emma never divulged the details of her conversation with Gold, only that he had revealed Regina's ability to heel upon command. Had she told him about their plans for breaking the curse without consulting her? she wondered. Was Emma making deals behind my back?

"The wheels are turning, I see. Not so soft on the sheriff when she's so close to fulfilling her purpose, hmm?"

As if she were hit with a stunning spell Regina halted from behind the desk, flame extinguishing with an angry flourish. "My curse is as strong as the day I cast it! That... girl is no longer a threat. I have her under control." Regina narrowed her eyes menacingly and added, "And what do you know of it anyway?"

"Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. That's the strategy I assumed Miss Swan was exhausting, but from our recent…" Gold cocked his head in thought, "mm, spirited conversation shall we say? She seems rather taken with you. And protective, if I might be so bold."

"If that is true than my plan is working." A stabbing pain spread through her chest as she said the words but she persisted in keeping the mask in place. "She is obviously falling into my trap like the ignorant puppy she is."

Gold added, "And succeeding every step of the way. I have never seen true love blossom so unpredictably." A sentimental smirk came to. "I suppose it's the small things we see in a person."

"You are gravely mistaken. My…" Regina searched for a word that would not lend a shred of truth to what she had thought she experienced the past 24 hours, "… my involvement with Miss Swan has nothing to do with the breaking of my own curse."

"With my years and experience I am actually the perfect judge of the stuff. It only feels like yesterday that I bottled the very same true love that released magic into Storybrooke, the true love that spawned your other half."

"Emma is not my –"

"You can deny it all you want, dearie, it won't change the fact that that girl will bring your life's work to ruin. And how feared will you be when it comes to pass? How… forgiving might our people be once they remember who they are, who you are? I hardly think Snow White and Prince Charming would allow their grandson within a mile of you."

Regina recoiled, steadying herself with a hand on her chair. It was the catalyst that brought her gates down and raised her wall brick by brick. All the painstaking work Emma had achieved, bringing the Evil Queen down to her level of goodness and so-called honesty, was shattered with a long-established seed of doubt, with the image of a future that's potential became greater with every day Emma Swan remained in Storybrooke. "It will not come to that," vowed the queen more so to herself than the pawnbroker. Her tone was low to the extent of monotone. The voice was one that belonged to a woman once thought to be a shadow from her past. "I will do what I must to ensure that it doesn't."
Gold held the woman's determined stare for a while, studying the transformation taking place before him. He relished in the ease with which he molded his monster and how a young boy – a blood relative to her sworn enemy – could be the cause of a transition to such wickedness; an innocent child so adamant on breaking a curse and proving everyone wrong that he would become the antithesis of what he believed so faithfully in. Instead of being the undoing to her curse he would form the tie that bound it together. It was poetic, to a certain point of view. Poetic and vastly ironic.

The woman's eyes were hooded by a dark cloud as Gold took in the fruit of his labor. Her jaw clenched before a smirk drew to full, vibrant lips. They both knew the reason of such a look and only one knew the consequences that would follow, consequences that would benefit one person and one person alone.

Gold smiled at the emergence of such windfall. "I believe you will."

***

A yellow VW parked in front of Granny's diner with a skidding halt. It seemed like ages since her last cup of java and Emma would not wait a single minute longer to get it.

After sneaking into her apartment unbeknownst to Mary Margaret, Emma spent as much time as the water softener allowed in washing off what recent activities left behind. She scrubbed till her skin was raw, trying like hell to get rid of the memory and the regret which stained like a persistent bitch. Seemingly insignificant dialogue and lasting caresses seeped into heated red flesh and traveled through her blood stream straight to that vital organ called a heart. It stayed there, pumping in beat with her heart to remind her every step of the way what she had done. She felt it even after changing into crisp clean clothes. She felt it then as she pulled the key from its ignition.

Coffee. Yes, the coffee!

She considered pulled into the drug store to raid the last of those five or so hour energy drinks, but the smell of Granny's dark roast was beckoning her. She needed to stare into that creamy caramel tinted liquid in order to be consumed by its simplicity because that's what coffee was to Emma, uncomplicated. You either take it black or with cream, sugar or without. Two choices that defined who she was: milk, two sugars. It was the simple things in life.

Emma entered Granny's and instantly spotted a familiar face. He was sitting at a vacant booth, flipping the page of a newspaper with what looked to be an expression of frustration. Needing the distraction Emma slipped in opposite the plaid-shirted man.

"Sheriff! Haven't seen you around these parts," David Nolan said, cheering up from the company.

"It's been busy," admitted Emma, which was not at all an overstatement. She leaned forward to catch a peek at the paper. "Apartment listings?"

"Yeah, I'm looking for a place. Something small with a reasonable monthly rent. Can't afford much these days when I'm living on the salary of an animal shelter employee."

"Any luck?" Emma inquired even though there was not a single circled ad in view.

David proved his misfortune by holding up the page with a dejected frown. He sighed. "I don't know, maybe I'm just looking for too much in a place. This feels like a fresh start for me and I want to make the most of it." He gazed in the direction of clouds, his brow worried in thought as if he were looking through not just space, but time as well. "Vaulted ceilings with walls white as
snow," he murmured. "Stained glass windows on the east side to let in the morning sunlight. Red and gold flowing tapestries and a grand balcony..." Wonder continued to radiate over David's face as he thought of his dream house.

Emma raised a brow. "Sounds kind of pricey for a guy with a minimum wage salary."

David grew red with embarrassment. His head bowed back down to the newspaper. "Yeah, I guess so."

Emma was about to ask into the reason for his new living arrangements when the sudden bang of a door caught her attention. Everyone's attention, really.

"Crazy morning drivers!" Leroy grumbled as he slinked to the nearest bar stool. "My usual! And keep' em coming."

"Looks like someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed."

"Huh?" Emma spun back to David. "What?"

"Leroy." He nodded in the direction of the scruffy man knocking back his first of many. Catching Emma's mortified frown he asked gently, "Emma, are you okay? You don't look so good."

"Fine," she managed. "I'm fine. Just need my morning coffee."

With a quickness that was suspect of wolf-like hearing Ruby arrived before their booth with pen and order pad in hand. She was dressed in knee-high black boots, a treacherously short skirt, and a skinny white top that revealed a porcelain smooth mid-drift. It was a welcome sight after Emma's last (literal) run in with the waitress' other form. She spied David's lingering stare over the attire and emphasized her own boot into David's shin.


"Actually, Ruby I'm going straight up black today." It would serve her penance by holding the sweetener. The bitter taste would be punishment well deserved and the undiluted caffeine would curb the sleepiness clouding her shot to hell judgment.

The waitress' eye's widened sarcastically. "Oh, changing things up? I like a girl who keeps me on my toes." Ruby departed with the order but not before giving the blonde a provocative little turn of the hips and arch of a well groomed brow.

"Better tread carefully around that one."

Thankful that she hadn't been drinking her precious dark roast when he said it, Emma sputtered out, "You talkin' to me?"

David laughed and waved her off. "Forget I said anything."

"Kind of hard not to," she mumbled as the indiscernible look on David's face slipped away.

"So you being busy at the station… does that have anything to do with the sickness spreading 'round town?"

"Yeah, unfortunately."

"Do you have any leads as to what caused it? Is there any chance those people will wake up?"
"I can't really talk about it. It's classified information. I can tell you the situation is contained though." It was a very Sheriff-esque thing to say and Emma gave herself a mental pat on the back for finding the proper words to express her professionalism. Emma was never one for lying (as she had a knack for knowing when other people were), but she wasn't about to go frightening the public and causing mass hysteria. The last thing she need on her shoulders was a panicked town now in need of her services more than ever. One white lie wouldn't hurt and she later found it didn't sting in the slightest. Keeping confidences was apparently now a thing for Emma Swan. The sheer number of secrets in her safe keeping deserved her the award of 'Storybrooke's Liar of the Year.' Regina would certainly be proud of her perseverance. Emma, undoubtedly, learned from the master.

Ruby sashayed over and put a cup of the best smelling drug known to man in front of the sheriff. Emma smiled appreciatively and, not waiting for an invitation, inhaled the steam like a drug addict before taking a tentative sip or two of the black as night content. A guttural "Mmm" slipped out despite the bitter aftertaste.

"… blew right past the stop sign!" cried Leroy now plastered six finger-fulls with scotch. His audience consisted of two empty tumblers and a diner full of customers trying to block out the complaining. "I should sue!"

As far as Emma was concerned she was off the clock. The last thing she needed was to be ripped away from fresh legal stimulants in order to arrest Leroy for drunk and disorderly, or even better, hunt down the person who ruined his day by breaking a minor driving violation (minor in Sheriff Swan's book, that is). She hunched down in the booth, tuned the grumbling out, and took a more generous gulp of her beverage. "So if you don't mind me asking, why are you looking for a new place?"

"I don't mind," he shrugged, folding his arms and leaning on the table for support, "it'll get out sooner or later. As you probably know Kathryn and I have been trying to make things work. We considered a session with Dr. Hopper but neither one of us are comfortable having our marital troubles analyzed by a psychologist. It's been pretty rough on both of us and it wasn't getting better so we decided to go our separate ways."

"I'm sorry," offered the blonde.

David's head bobbed in acceptance. "It's best for both of us. And Kathryn, she deserves someone who loves her completely." He fingered the newspaper's corner page in reflection. "That's not to say I never cared for her. She was my wife, of course I loved her, but the part of me that should have felt more… just didn't."

Emma asked delicately, "And this 'part' you speak of, does it by chance belong to someone else?"

Mouth open to counter the accusation he suddenly realized who he was talking to and closed his jaw. He smiled sheepishly. "I think you know."

Emma smiled. "Mary Margaret is one lucky girl. Question is, does she know?"

"I've actually been avoiding that particular conversation. With Kathryn and me just parting ways it seems a little soon to be starting something with Mary Margaret." He took a deep breath and declared matter-of-factly, "I want to do it right this time, no rushing into things."

"Well don't wait too long." Emma pointed out. "We're not getting any younger."

"It's funny you should say that because I used to feel like time was frozen here," a strange look of
recognition crossed his face, "and I still feel destined to make the same mistakes over again the way I did with Kathryn. The only difference is I know how I feel about Mary Margaret and I know without a doubt that she feels the same. On the one hand I want to take things slow and learn from my mistakes, but on the other hand I don't want to wait so long I end up losing her."

Emma sighed heavily and before she knew it the words were tumbling out. "From experience I can tell you taking things slow can be really good. It's tough in the beginning just keeping a relationship at a certain level." Emma laughed into her cup. "If you're like me you've probably already thought about how amazing things are going to be when you get to that next level. It's that crazy tingling sensation… that giddiness you feel when you realize the one person you want to spend the rest of your life with…" Emma's train of thought dropped off abruptly. Her eyes drifted up to stare at David who was giving her an equally astonished expression. Emma felt her heart seize in her chest. It could have been a reaction to the way David was studying her (or judging her), but another explanation might be from the confession she admitted so freely to without a second's thought. Fuzziness crept around her vision and she shook her head to keep the dizzy spell at bay. "Um… but once you find a balance time will seem to move a little faster than before."

"You seem to know something about relationships," David said with interest.

She laughed to justify her rosy cheeks. Just one relationship, Emma thought. "Please don't quote me on any of that," she warned, half joking and half serious. The people of Storybrooke liked to spread rumors and with a sleazy informant like Sidney the mayor was always the first to know such things. "On second thought, my advice is probably not beneficial in the slightest."

"Regina," David affirmed with a nod.

Emma clapped a hand to her eyes in humiliation. "Does everyone know?!" came the cry followed by a muffled expletive.

"Well," David started, scratching a stubbled cheek and chuckling, "this is a small town, people talk, and… Henry is very proud of his parent's new-found relationship." The corner of his mouth turned up. Emma peeked between splayed fingers and then moaned painfully into her hands. "It's not a surprise to anyone. You guys share a son whom you both love very much. That obviously had to have brought you two closer. All those heated arguments wouldn't have happened if there were no feelings there." After a shy pause he continued, "And you two don't hide it very well. Remember that city hall meeting a few days ago? You guys couldn't keep your eyes off each other. I had to convince Sidney out of writing a seething headline about it."

Emma never believed she could be capable of murder, but the thought of Sidney Glass peeping in on her time with the mayor brought on satisfying images of the man's demise.

The sight of the blonde's gritting teeth and clenching jaw brought an amused smile to David's lips. He had never seen the woman so stirred up. There was, of course, no reason to worry. Sidney never had the stones to write such an article and the town seemed to enjoy the leering show the mayor and sheriff unknowingly put on. He leaned back in his booth and grinned happily at Emma.

The kind expression on David's face gave Emma the creeps. She was thinking how different a tune he would be singing if he knew this was his daughter and arch nemesis they were talking about. In order to prevent herself from voicing the concern she attempted to scald her tongue with a gulp of hot coffee.

"What happened with you two anyway? You alluded to there being a problem about the advice you gave me."
"I don't think it's such a good idea to be talking about this," Emma whispered as she took a quick glance over her shoulder. "Anyway, there's nothing to say. Regina and I were over before we ever began."

"Emma, you can't fool me. You were just saying a minute ago about that," he grinned, using air quotes, "'giddy feeling' you get when you realize the one person you want to spend the rest of your life with… and then you didn't finish." David tipped his head in concern and quirked a brow. "Did Regina do something? Did she hurt you?"

"No!" she hissed quickly. A heavy sigh escaped. It all seemed to come out without a moment's pause. "No, she didn't do anything. It was me, I screwed up. I left her when I promised I wouldn't."

"Well," David paused to consider what he could possibly say, "did you at least say goodbye?"

With an animated cock of the head she frowned upon his assertion with overt disgust. "David, come on, of course I said goodbye." Emma stopped to consider the circumstances of her exit that morning. "In fact, I don't think it would have made a difference if I left without a farewell."

"What are you going to do?"

"She wouldn't take me back, so asking for another shot is definitely out of the realm of possibility."

"What makes you so sure that she wouldn't take you back? I mean, you're Henry's mom, too, so it's not like you would stop seeing each other completely."

"Trust me, it was hard enough for her to accept me into Henry's life. Regina wouldn't give me a second chance back into her's, not when I broke my promise." The weight of her actions came down on her all at once. "She has been so paranoid about me taking Henry away – and for good reason. If the biological mother of my son showed up I'd be a little suspicious, too. But then I specifically told her I was staying, not just staying in Storybrooke, staying with her." Shaking her head she muttered, "The one time I succeeded in breaking down her walls, in convincing her to trust me…" She looked at the man who was her father. "I hesitated, David. I let the doubt in for a second and that's all it took for me to believe what Regina and I had was impossible. I gave up on her."

Emma let her head fall into her hands again not in shame but in despair. She stared into the liquid content of her mug. Its roasted brown color reminded her of the dark waves that hung around the mayor's face, those very same strands Emma tugged at in earnest pleasure mere hours ago. And those coffee hued eyes that had opened with splendorous trust, they seemed to stare up at her from the bottom of the mug, asking her the very same question Emma had been inquiring after herself. Why did you leave me?

Emma pushed the mug aside not having the stomach to finish it. Her belly gave a twinge from the harsh drink - that or from the humiliation her conscience was inciting. Dr. Hopper would be so displeased with my behavior, Emma thought.

"If you care about her as much as I think you do then there is no doubt in my mind that you will find a way to get back into the good graces of our mayor. Just turn on that Emma Swan charm and she won't have a reason to turn you down."

"Are we even talking about the same person?" Emma's face contorted in bafflement. "It's not that easy. It shouldn't be that easy."

"You'll never know unless you try. Don't give up on yourself, Emma. If she's worth it you'll find it
in your infinite wisdom to get her back."

"It sounds like we both have our work cut out for us," said the blonde with a roll of her shoulders.

David chuckled nervously, fingers worrying at the button of his cuff sleeve. "It seems that way, doesn't it?"

She stared back into her cup that had been once filled with the most exquisite coffee her lips ever had the pleasure of meeting. A story Regina had recounted to her not too long ago surfaced to her attention and, as a result, a child-like hope arose in Emma. "I'm sure you and Mary Margaret will always find each other."

"What did you say?" David asked suddenly, thrusting his head forward.

"Um… you'll always find each other?" She studied the man. Was it something I said? Emma thought. It had to have been, otherwise David would not have the appearance of… well, someone unlike himself. Worry lines drew through her forehead at the same time they did with David. They were mirror expressions of each other, but neither father nor daughter noticed. "You okay?" she asked.

Startled, he turned his attention back to the woman. "Y-yeah. I'm fine." A hand went to rub the strain from his eyes. "I guess I've been looking at apartment listings for too long."

"Could be," Emma affirmed, but not wholly convinced.

"I'm going to take a walk… get some air." David stared blankly past the blonde.

"Want company?"

David slid out of the booth leaving the newspaper forgotten on the table. "Thank you, no. I'm sure you need to get to the station. Work," he said vaguely.

"Well, alright." Emma watched him walk away, her confusion mounting. "Take care."

"Bye," David replied, preoccupied with an objective now firmly fixed in his mind.

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Like her ability to overcome upsetting times preceding Regina found harmony in cooking. Like her son and her treasured apple tree it was something that brought meaning to her life. When utilized, cooking (especially baking) gave her peace of mind, assuring her that she was exactly where she was supposed to be.

A knife was brandished and set to the pastry sheet. She cut a section out with tailored precision.

It would be a delicious treat. The dough had been massaged with care, stretched and rolled into squares, yet not overworked to develop a tough crust. The crust was everything. Too thin and the filling would saturate through, creating a soggy, sloppy mess; too thick and the dough would subdue the taste of her luscious, juicy apple. Pastry must be light and airy; flaky at first bite while buttery to the last.

With a smile she spooned her special concoction onto the square. She took care not to lose a single drip in the process, her movements as defined as a pâtissière well-practiced in the French art of pastry.
There was only one apple worthy of such a turnover. It took a few delicate enchantments to get a hold of this apple but once accomplished the rest was easy as pie (no pun intended). This would be a momentous occasion, one that would release Regina from all her present worries and squash every doubt. She could already feel her tense muscles beginning to relax from the unforgiving day thrust upon her. She was spent from the decision making, the cooking, and the magic spell or two her mind and body had endured the past few hours. This turnover was going to make everything better and in so doing her world would return to normal; the mayor would resume unrestricted control over Storybrooke as before, unwelcome visitors would disappear never to meddle in or alter her life's affairs again, and Regina would make Henry love her once more.

The brush stroked a buttery sheen over the crescent mound. The added ingredient would give the dough a glossy finish and a rich gold color. She sprinkled a finishing touch of powdered cinnamon that stuck to the savory grease instantly. Then it went to its final stage into the oven where the filling would brown and bubble, giving rise to paper-thin layers of pastry which would puff into a crispy cloud of perfection.

Her hand went for the oven handle but did not pull it open. She faltered in completing the action while her palm gripped the warming metal, the turnover waiting patiently on the sheet pan in her other hand. She looked at the dessert strangely and then panned back to the handle of the oven in her other hand. A brow furrowed in confusion. What am I doing? Regina asked herself. She couldn't recall why she wanted to come home early from work, let alone why it was so critical to cook an apple turnover. A teardrop ran down her cheek and fell, staining her black vest. The hand holding the oven handle went to inspect flooded eyes. Why am I crying? she wondered. She took a deep breath and found that her chest would not let her. Her lungs were an inferno, burning as hot as the oven, using up whatever oxygen was left. She stumbled back, hyperventilating. The tray wobbled but did not drop. Her hip connected with the kitchen counter top, hard.

The pain spread from her hip up her torso and soon enough the air was coming in fresh and cool through her nostrils. Her vision was no longer clouded by those salty things that once fell down flushed cheeks. Regina's back became straight and the tray was raised higher, like she was to serve a five star meal to a prestigious customer. Her carefully devised plan was summoned up and red lips turned up in a smirk.

Regina leaned back on the kitchen counter, gazing intently through the oven window to the now heating dessert. A sigh of relief escaped her lips as she let herself bask in the brilliancy of her plan. Emma, the Savior, was meant to break the curse, and Regina, the Evil Queen, was meant to break her. If Emma's taste was anything to judge by Regina's forbidden fruit would be savored to the last.

The aroma of cinnamon and butter traveled to her nostrils and she inhaled deeply. Her eyes slipped shut in erotic delight. She let out a faint moan of pleasure.

It smelled like triumph.
If she waited any longer there would be nothing left of her nails to worry at. Emma looked down at the devastation left by her biting teeth and let out a huff of impatience. She was sitting (and spinning occasionally) in her chair, flipping through paper work and blindly signing her title without a second's glance. Sheriff's work was dull to begin with so any plan Emma had for using it to keep her mind preoccupied from the day's events was demolished immediately. What had kept her occupied instead was a manic jumble of unfamiliar feelings. Emma sifted through these unexpected sentiments while mentally berating herself for a decision that would not stop haunting her. The whirlwind of thoughts and emotions in her head were driving her delirious and stir-crazy (which explained the chair spinning). What overwhelmed her more than anything was the revelation that came to her through her conversation with David. She had meant to give impartial advice, tips from someone who knew nothing of true love or the even the faintest hints of it, but what started out as advice quickly turned into confession.

And then she received a little counsel in return.

"Just turn on that Emma Swan charm and she won't have a reason to turn you down."

That was easier said than done. David seemed to think charm was like a light switch that could be turned on or off with a mere flick. Emma didn't even know she had charm and was quite sure she didn't know how to access it let alone apply the stuff.

"If she's worth it you'll find it in your infinite wisdom to get her back."

This guy's confidence in her was starting to get real annoying. Since when did anyone ever accuse me of possessing wisdom? Emma questioned herself.

The advice was like trying to swallow an apple (whole), and it hardly went down like warm cider. David and Mary Margaret may not have been aware of their blood relation to Emma but they sure knew just the right things to say – even if the advice was unwanted. Parental guidance (yet again) was a real bitch.

If Emma wanted to rectify her mistake and make amends it was now or never. As slim as the chances were of being forgiven Emma would have to ride on David's faith and try her hardest. If she could break down Regina's rough exterior before it could certainly be done again, and if by some miracle Emma succeeded she hoped those walls would stay down for good.

Picking up the phone handle she dialed.

"Mayor Mills' office this is Marcie."

"Hey, Marcie it's Emma. Is Regina in?"

"Oh, hi Emma!" piped up the voice. "Mayor Mills is out for the rest of the evening. She had me
cancel all her scheduled meetings for today."

"Is she all right?" Emma clutched at her shirt collar in trepidation. "Did she say why she was leaving?"

There was a pause on the other line. "I hardly asked her. She didn't seem to be in much of a mood to answer questions. All she said was she was going home and that I should call Mrs. Nolan to take Henry for the night."

"What?"

"She wanted Kathryn to pick Henry up from school today and keep him with her until the morning." There was an awkward silence then. Marcie didn't know whether to be worried that Emma didn't know or that she wasn't supposed to know. "She didn't tell you?"

"Um… no," Emma fiddled the phone cord between nervous fingers. "I'm sure she has a lot going on, it probably just slipped her mind. Thanks for your help, Marcie."

"My pleasure. Have a good night, Sheriff."

Emma bid farewell and hung up, less confident than before.

***

An owl hooted not far off and Gold looked over his shoulder for the third time. A prickling sensation at the back of his neck told him he was not alone, yet all that was around were the shadows of trees. His eyes panned the woodland nightscape and turned back to the object of his thoughts.

It was empty, of course, and black as an immeasurable void that could pull one in if they looked too deep, too long in searching for answers to questions you carried around for years (and in Gold's case, decades).

The essence of fear that the well gave off did not affect him, he had learned long ago how to kill such unwanted emotions. The fears that once invaded his heart no longer existed just as the one true hope in his life vanished without a trace. Yet as Gold stared into the abyss stinking of moldy regret and dank uncertainties he experienced what was once lost: the fear of letting go, the fear of never knowing someone, the fear of what was missing.

Fear. It was attacking the integrity of exposed hands which were resting on the cobblestone lined well. Gold persisted in holding the darkness in his sights while his grip on the rim tightened. It started to seep into skin that had been fortified with pain and power. The essence tickled the hairs and leaching through the layers of tissue and muscle. Gold felt the shock as it went further, his spine shivering at the cold running through his veins, attacking his fortitude. His body was immovable, frozen by this old acquaintance of a feeling, but his eyes never tore from the depths of the well. The fear traveled skin deep and did not stop its venture. Swimming through his bloodstream its long, thin fingers curled around his beating organ and held it snug like a long lost lover.

There was a rustling of clothes and the echo of an owl-like whistle. The distraction allowed the remaining strength in Gold's arms to push himself away. He gasped and clutched at his heart.

"You look into the darkness and it soon begins to look back into you."

A rising chuckle resonated in his ears. "Why do you follow me?" Gold rasped out, coughing over a
dry throat.

"First and foremost… introductions!" shouted the man draped in a fur-lined cloak and a green scarf. A bow was strung on his back. "You. You are Rump –"

"Gold," hissed the pawnbroker between crooked, gritting teeth, "Mister Gold is my name."

The stranger laughed as if it was an inside joke only he and the man named Mister Gold were in on. "That you are, Goldmistergold." He then took a step forward, turning back the edge of his cape with a grand flourish and bowed elaborately with one toe pointed forward. Gold watched on in disgust. "My name is Robin of Loxley. The woods are my home and the animals my friends. I seal from the greedy and give back to those needy. My hobbies including hiking, running with –"

"Yes, that's nice." Gold rolled his eyes and ground the tip of his cane into the soft dirt. "Do get on with your business."

Robin gave out a short huff, wounded that his introduction had not been completed. "We have a common enemy. And also, as luck would have it, a common savior, as well."

"Antiques are my specialty," Gold stated, ignoring the giddy stranger. "You wish to talk priceless china and treasured toys of the past? That is our only common interest."

"Contracts are also your specialty, am I correct?"

"I have been known to draw up a document or two in the past, yes. Is it my legal services you request?"

Robin winced and pursed his lips at the suggestion. "Yeah, ah, no. Any deal I make with you will be over my dead corpse." The hair of his brows arched fantastically. His hands shot out in a cautionary gesture as if calming a waking dragon. "But let's not be too hasty with that option. No, I have another plan that does not end with me on a slab at the morgue." Robin paused. A finger went to his chin and tapped. "In fact, I do not recall Storybrooke ever having a morgue now that I bring it up."

"To the point," Gold sneered, "my… whimsical new friend."

Robin giggled at that. He paced before the pawnbroker, twiddling his steeped fingers. "You lost something long ago, something that has value to you. Oh but who am I kidding, it is not a something that I speak of, rather, a someone. Long brown hair, round face, petite mouth, possesses an old fashioned love for books. Does any of that ring a… a bell?" He fluttered his eyes until they spied the hand gripping a very scary looking cane. Robin backed away warily. "She is not lost in the meaning you understand, I assure you. I have within my exquisite possession information proving just how sprightly and alive she is. More importantly, I know who stole this lost la belle you seek."

Gold's eyes narrowed with devious intent. The peculiar stranger and his proposed subject of conversation were becoming far more stimulating as the night wore on. "Get on with it then."

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The cell phone landed on the passenger seat after it went to voicemail for the seventh time. At first the recorded message put her at ease – the sound of Regina's prim voice assuring her that the tough bitch could take anything – but by the fourth redirect Emma's patience grew thin while her worry intensified. The steering wheel of her cruiser sustained the brunt of the blonde's anxiety as her hands twisted and curled around the worn leather. Forgoing the persistent phone calls the sheriff
put liberal pressure on the gas pedal, sending her speeding down the dimly lit street.

Considering all that had went down the past 24 hours Emma could think up a dozen possibilities as to why Regina hadn't been answering her calls. She had experienced the woman's paranoia first hand and was not thrilled at going through it yet again. Among these dreadful scenarios was Regina's carefully conceived demise of the lover that scorned her, the heavy intake of homemade apple cider (the kind containing alcohol), violent behavior that led to unrestrained bouts of magic, and the least appealing: purposely causing harm to herself.

Every single one of those possibilities did not bode well for Regina and each one made Emma's blood turn to ice. If anything happened to Regina it would be on Emma's head. It only took one crucial misstep on Emma's part to set the brunette off or ruin her, one of the two or both. It just so happened that said misstep occurred just hours after Regina's meltdown. They had been fighting about Henry, Gold, and their forbidden, toxic relationship. Regina had not been in a good place then as she was fragile and utterly hopeless. A few hours of amazing sex would not erase those doubts and neither would the sudden departure of the one person who had faith in her.

Then there was Henry to think of. Emma failed at holding in a startling sob at the thought that she might have to tell her son that Regina gave up on life and didn't love them enough to try harder. Regina could leave her and Emma would be consumed with overwhelming hate, but if she left their son Emma would walk through hell itself to give that woman a piece of her mind.

A string of apologies and explanations flew threw her mind as the cruiser sped down Mifflin Street. If Emma didn't get a chance to confess these things, if Regina was ripped from her life so abruptly, so selfishly, then forgiveness was something Emma would never find in herself to accept. She would be lost, forever destined to walk through life carrying the weight of one damning decision on her shoulders, and raising a son all on her own. When she had wondered whether or not to leave the mayor's bed that morning she had weighed the consequences of being with Regina. She had thought of the curse, her parents, Henry, but not what would happen to Regina or what she was capable of doing to herself in such a lonely, depressed state. Emma couldn't comprehend the fallout until a white door with the gold plated number 108 was staring her in the face.

Three rings of the doorbell. No answer. Then three knocks. Nothing. Emma banged her fist manically at the wood obstruction until all feeling was absent from the limb. Still no response. She backed up a few feet and with a deep breath sprinted at the door shoulder first. Pain flared up her left side but the door splintered free.

"Regina!"

After bounding up the foyer steps Emma listened for a response somewhere along the lines of "What the hell are you doing?!" or "Sheriff Swan, how dare you break down my door!" Any spiteful reply was welcome as long as it came from a living, breathing mayor. She stood and waited but there was no backlash and no echo of fast approaching heels. What Emma did make out was a brief, sharp cry; the sound of someone in pain – or pleasure.

The outburst led her to the kitchen and the mess on the floor. A lump of pastry sat in sloppy brown goo and was surrounded in errant crumbs. A metal sheet pan lay not too far away from what Emma was sure would have been a mouthwatering dessert. A pair of legs stretched out on the floor, the counter blocking the other half of what they were attached to.

It took a few seconds for Emma to register the mumbled speech which translated as, "I can't." She moved further into the kitchen to find Regina in a haphazard state: wrinkled slacks dusted with flour, a pinstriped vest unbuttoned to a tear saturated blouse. Her arms hung limp in lap with palms turned up. She was chin to chest and shaking with what Emma understood to be sobs.
"I can't," the brunette repeated, head bowed low and shaking side to side. "I-I can't do it. I'm so
tired… just can't…"

"Regina?"

A mascara streaked face lifted and gasped at the appearance of Emma. She shook her head again
avoiding eye contact. "Not here," she rasped. "I'm alone. No one is here."

Emma bent down silently and took one of the limp hands in hers. She said gently, "I am
here."

The squeezing of her hand and the sound of the blonde's voice jerked Regina out of her delusion,
setting her back straight, and stimulating short breaths.

"It's me." Emma shook the hand again. "It's Emma."

Something flashed behind brown eyes that blinked rapidly with recognition. "Emma."

It wasn't a question; it was a statement of fact. Emma was present in the kitchen… with her…
where she had planned her destruction which came dangerously close to being carried out. As
much as her delusional mind would deny it Emma was very much there kneeling close to Regina
holding her hand providing comfort and security. "No," she voiced firmly and pushed the blonde as
far away as possible, "don't come any closer."

Emma stood up and backed away to give the woman her space. Tears seemed to flow of their own
acCORD as she took in the woman assuming a defensive position, knees pulled to the chest and arms
wrapped around a torso.

Regina glared warningly. "Stay back."

"Regina," the soft whisper came from trembling lips, "I didn't mean to. Can you just…"

"There is nothing left to say. We have been over this one too many times." With every word she
seemed to be growing more lucid. Her breathing ceased its erratic rhythm causing her body to lean
still against the cabinet behind her. The fists clamped to her sides persisted in staying clenched.
"Enough is enough."

"You have to listen to me. You have to know why."

"Why? How about because of who I am. You left because I ruined your life. I robbed you of a
childhood and parents who loved you. You realized one night with me wouldn't change any of
that."

"You're so wrong!" Emma shouted, literally putting her foot down like a child who wasn't getting
her way. Her tear streaked eyes opened wide as she pushed on. "It's not always about you, you
know. I left because it's what I used to do. Staying a whole damn night and morning with someone,
establishing a 'next time'... it just wasn't my thing, I didn't do that. I'm scared of this, just like you
are. We've made mistakes and hurt each other along the way. Then last night happened and…”

Emma used a fist to wipe angrily at the drop tickling her cheek, "and I felt something I can't
describe. I didn't know what it was and that scared the crap out of me. But it felt so good I didn't
want to lose it. I didn't want to lose you. So I left because I had this sick, messed up impression that
if I stayed I would use it up."

Regina frowned and sniffed. "I don't understand."

"That feeling, I didn't think it could last. It felt like an addiction and if I kept taking, if it got all
used up there would be no more left. I would take and take until there wasn't a reason to stay. I
couldn't lose you if I never had you in the first place. I was wrong."

"So what, you were sparing me the pain I would feel down the road?" Regina cocked her head
back, doing her best to keep up appearances so far out of reach. "It is a bit late for that."

"You don't have to punish me, I've been doing it plenty. I thought coming here and explaining
myself would somehow make things better. Please tell me I have because I don't know what else to
do."

"Explaining yourself?" Regina scoffed. "You have done no such thing. I'm afraid I don't understand
this novel feeling that has struck you and even if I did what does that have to do with why you so
unceremoniously threw your promise away?" Regina didn't wait for an answer because she was
afraid of what it might entail. She didn't need an explanation or nice, clean clarification of why her
heart had been broken yet again. The only thing Regina had left in her was the will to lash out. She
had to punish Emma, she had to punish herself. They both were to blame and they both deserved
the pain. She put every ounce of this pain into the verbal attack as her brown eyes shared an
unbearable sorrow with the green ones staring back. "It took mere minutes to cut and run after you
got what you came for. You weasel into my life, make me believe I could trust you. You –" Regina
gasped over the cry threatening to break loose, "you fuck me, leave me, and then come back for
more, expecting a sorry and a vague existential feeling to make everything better."

Emma wanted so much to comfort the crumbled woman on the floor, to take chaos in her arms and
put the pieces back together. This was Emma's mess and the responsibility to clean it up laid on her
shoulders. Yet the question remained, how could those shards of a broken woman be pieced back
together without cutting herself or Regina in the process? Emma's voice was small, almost cricket-
like in reply. "It's not like that."

"Well that's how it was for me," the brunette shot back. "Why are you really here? Haven't you
endured enough?" Her voice grew deep with malicious intent. "What more could you gain from the
Evil Queen?"

"Knock it off. We both know that's not who you are."

"Henry's Evil Queen is as real as the fairytale book that brought you here. That book… that bible
of truth my son holds so dear paints my picture with vivid accuracy: a cruel woman who steals
hearts for her own pleasure. I will always be that way. It is who I am. The only thing that's changed
is…" A lump formed in her throat as the words tried to escape. It was the same way she felt when
they were together the night before and courage failed to back her up in speaking those words.
Regina wanted to get it out because the truth was a lonely thing when you had no one to share it
with. The moment it left her lips, though, she knew there would be no stopping Emma. Things
would be said, more promises would be made, and Regina would not be strong enough to keep up
her mask. The stronger the feelings the harder the fall. If danger befell them like it always had
Emma would be caught in the crossfire. Emma would sacrifice herself for a lost soul incapable of
change and destined to die the evil fiend she was. She sniffled up the aroma of cinnamon and
apples and tasted the salty regret running down her cheeks. Lashing out was a tiresome business.
Her defenses were wearing down leaving her open to further pain but more accepting of the truth.
She sighed heavily and hugged her body tighter. "I just don't want you to get hurt. You can't suffer
anymore because of my faults."

Emma had returned to her place beside the woman but at a closer proximity. They were close
enough to feel each other's body heat; close enough to hear their hearts rattling in their cages
fighting for dominance over fear. The blonde reached out to the stiff, lonely body.
When Regina realized what Emma was doing she battled with flailing arms. "Stay away from me! Get back!" She pushed again and again not caring if her tightly clenched fists met a jaw or shoulder.

Emma seized the arms before they could do any damage and brought wrists together. She placed quivering lips on the snug fists in a muddled kiss and murmured against them, "I'm sorry." Emma was starting to think she deserved to be left alone just as she had done the same to Regina. Regina had given up so much to Emma: her patience, her friendship, their son. She had these things in her possession for years but never had to relinquish them, not until Emma had arrived and given her a reason. A tear let loose from watery green eyes and landed on the clenched hands. She kissed them again and choked out, "I'm so sorry." Emma had assumed a very convincing argument for breaking down those walls – one unspoken reason that she stood for with all her being. The mayor put up a fight, no doubt, but with time and encouragement the giving came easier while the taking became only a faded memory. Emma wished she could say the same, that she had given more of herself than she had taken of Regina, but in the end, when the giving really mattered, she couldn't find the same strength within herself, and Regina's honesty and trust were returned with a heartless goodbye and a cold bed. The result of such a decision was within her grip, collapsed in a sobbing mess on the floor of her own kitchen. Emma's heart broke at the sight. Her damp cheek brushed the white knuckles as her eyes squeezed shut. "Please forgive me."

The pleading voice resonated in Regina's ears making her heart clench. The tears drenching her face made her cheeks sting. She was tired of crying, of fighting back. Regina felt the hands squeeze desperately around hers, silently begging for a second chance. Absolution was not something that could be given away freely and Regina was not experienced in granting such pardons. Yet wasn't she the one not long ago asking for redemption? How many chances did Emma give me? Regina thought. How many of my sins has she forgiven and forgotten? One too many, a voice in her head replied. Her body stopped struggling. They stayed silent where they were; Emma, hanging on for dear life and Regina, permitting the warm, clammy security her hands were receiving.

After a while Regina looked up. "Emma," her eyes met what was left of the turnover with a devastation that gave the blonde chills, "I don't know who I am anymore. I almost tried to kill you."

"What stopped you?"

"I was tending to my tree and on my way back in I saw that stupid dent in the siding." Regina tilted her head in grief like the damage to her house was more responsible for her melancholy state than anything else. "I remembered how right that day felt, like we had always been a family and that nothing else mattered, not my feud with Snow or the fear that Henry would disappear." Regina stared back into green eyes with conviction. "You are a good person, Emma. I know that if you were to take him away it would be for his protection. In fact, you should take him away, from me… this town…"

Emma caught a tear hanging from the brunette's jaw. "I have no experience raising children, but I know that when a kid loves someone they will do whatever it takes to keep them in their life. Henry took that same chance after I left all those months ago. He still believed you were the Evil Queen then, in yet he sought your help in bringing me back. As much as you hated me you would have gone to the ends of the earth to get me because you love your son and couldn't break his heart. He knew how much his happiness meant to you. In his eyes now you're his mom not some queen from a fairytale land." A strand of hair fell in Regina's face and it was pushed back by gentle fingers. Before leaving the confines of brown locks Emma unselfishly caressed the curve of an ear. The slightest contact of a finger to flesh was a shock to Emma and gave her that warm feeling she felt the last time they had been this close and touching. "I could try taking him away, but then he
would just come running back to you."

Regina was shocked at such a sentiment and wracked her brain for a situation that would call for Henry running to her in any capacity. "I almost succeeded in destroying you. What if the same happens with him? What if I don't stop myself like I did tonight?" Her head fell, shaking from side to side. She tried to make sense of the thought process that led her to take such extreme measures. She pressed shaking fingers to her throbbing temples. "I don't know what I was thinking. There's something wrong with me."

"Regina," Emma pulled the woman into open arms. "You have to hold on to those good memories. Remember when you saved me from Ruby in the forest. Remember all those dinners we shared together... the delicious chicken dinner and that blue dress you enticed me with. Remember all the times you tucked our son in for bed after I had read him to sleep. Remember the dent in the siding and how you made Henry and I wash dishes as punishment." The two women laughed in each other's arms as they recalled such a time. With each breath Regina leaned into Emma a little closer. "Remember what we shared last night, how close we fit together and how nothing else mattered but the happiness that came from it." Emma kissed the head resting on her shoulder. Her lips didn't leave when she admitted, mouth hovering over dark, roasted coffee shaded hair. "The woman in those memories, that's the real you. That's the woman I'm fighting for." Emma attempted to lay another kiss, but the head was shifting, rising up to meet her.

Regina found Emma. Green found brown. Their sharp intake of air was shared, their lungs living on the same molecules of cinnamon and apples. Regina took the opportunity at such proximity to study the face. Like many objects of her desire they were pursued with passion and taken without approval. It didn't matter if the sentiment of passion was returned because it didn't need to be returned. It was a one-sided love affair. This time, though, what Regina wanted was more than an object; it was a beautiful, rambunctious, infuriating woman who fixated those ever present hungry eyes on her with equal need. When Regina studied the contours of round cheekbones and pouty pink lips she knew the penchant was returned, but she wavered in closing the remaining few inches of space between them. Emma was a clear and present example of what was good in Regina's life. Something like that (someone like that) couldn't be taken like a toy and then tossed away at a moment of boredom. Emma was not sitting there holding her in order to be taken like an object of desire. Emma was there to be given freely. She was offering herself unselfishly despite her past misgivings towards long-term relationships.

The next request would be Regina's last. It would be said and it would never be repeated again. She had no strength any more, no desire to push away what was good and what made her happy. "Go home, Emma."

She didn't hesitate this time. "I am home." Taking initiative Emma closed the distance and sealed their devotion with a kiss.

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Every couple of feet or so the sidewalk was lit up by the occasional driveway lamp post. Mary Margaret did not like walking in the dark, especially alone, so whenever she crossed into the dark area of the path she sped forward to catch the lighted portion ahead. This went on for a while as she checked and rechecked her phone, waiting for the call she knew was coming.

School had the extended pleasure of her company that day due to the many calls she had been receiving from David Nolan. Apparently 'marriage vows' weren't in the man's vocabulary as Kathryn was probably within ample distance of him when he called on her. Mary Margaret had made a mistake falling for David and she remembered how for a time she didn't stop making that
mistake until it ended up hurting the people around them. Honesty was in short supply when Mary Margaret and David were together. Talking through their problems was never an issue, but making a decision together and sticking with it evidently was. Lying was their default and Mary Margaret would not be burdened with such an unpleasant flaw, even if it meant being away from the man she loved.

So in ignoring David's calls she was learning from that mistake. She was also hiding from David by staying late at school in the hopes that they would not run in to each other on the streets of their very small town.

Her hat was tugged closer to her ears and the collar of her coat turned up before she passed into another shadowed foot or two of sidewalk.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," she murmured. "Storybrooke is a safe, happy place… especially during the night." The mantra was repeated over and over again while she walked as fast as her petite legs would take her.

A gust of wind howled past her ears. The lamp post of the house just passed went out leaving the path behind her extinguished from light. She turned a little but walked on, repeating the assuring words.

Her resolve started to fade as her voice squeaked, "…especially the night."

The lamp ahead lost its flame and died. Mary Margaret stopped in her tracks, in the dark. The wind came stronger and was somehow able to knock the air out of her. She gasped sharply, taking in the changing temperature of oxygen that felt like ice in her lungs. An invisible force took hold of her, seizing her muscles and standing the hairs of her skin on end.

"David," she breathed out. The thought of losing him and never being able find him invaded her mind. Kathryn would always have him. She would forever be his wife while Mary Margaret, the home-wrecker, the tramp, would be left forgotten and unloved in the dust. The fear caught her and became a vice grip around her heart. The sensation stirred a powerful memory.

"My baby. My…"

Baby? Mary Margaret thought. What baby? I don't have a –

It came without warning, consuming her shivering body and wakening mind in one fell swoop. Her screams echoed down the 'safe' and 'happy' streets of Storybrooke.

Chapter End Notes

Some of you may have caught the metaphysical line I slipped in. Robin's comment about the darkness staring back into Gold is a reference to Friedrich Nietzsche's quote "Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you." This expansion on morality and identity is a fundamental theme in the show and more specifically related to how all of these characters (not just Regina and Rumplestiltskin) see themselves and what kind of people they think they are. Just thought I should share this interesting little tidbit with my readers.
"Getting ideas, Miss Swan?"

"Me?" asked Emma over the thunder of raining water. "Ideas about having you in the shower all to myself? Nonsense, I'm strictly here for a scrub down."

"Mm-hmm." Regina rolled her eyes and envisioned the smile spreading on the other woman's face.

Several crying jags and a tumulus battle with a turnover left Regina feeling rather stale and disheveled, her appearance being the very definition of a dismal mess. After a day like that her mind and body were screaming for rest and relaxation in any form that it might yield. It didn't take much convincing to shed off shabby wears and coax her into a shower where she was joined in earnest innocence by the blonde.

The hot downpour of water pattered against her breasts and trickled down her belly as Regina tipped back her head amidst the steam. She leaned into the sponge laving her back and enjoyed feeling its slow journey down, down, and ending at the base of her spine where things would surely get interesting. The squeezing luffah released a plethora of bubbles that cascaded into a dimple, over the firm globes of the mayor's backside and God (and Emma) only knew where else. Emma swirled her instrument in tantalizing circles before making a trail of foam around the swell of a hip and up an olive-toned stomach.

It was as intimate as they had ever been together. Touching but not giving sexual pleasure was an excruciating challenge for Emma, though, the way Regina had looked that night gave her reason for a change of pace. The last thing either of them needed was a repeat of before which consisted of an argument leading to make-up sex and followed by a hasty sendoff. As much as she wanted to claim Regina in the most seductive of positions it was not the time for that. Regina needed the same comfort and security that Emma needed. Holding one another and simply being present assured them both this was how they would remain.

They also happened to need a bath.

Emma's sponge settled perfectly between plump breasts while the other pulled the body closer, pressing her unlathered front to the soapy back of another. She closed her eyes and leaned in to smell the lily fragrance of clean brown hair. Nuzzling the wet strands she found that "Touchably Smooth" by Herbal Essence was exactly what it cracked itself up to be.

The shiny new mayor covered the sheriff's hands with her own and sighed at her cleansed body while offering her thanks. Emma responded by placing her lips to a wet shoulder.

Regina shifted beneath their encircled arms and instructed, "Now be good and turn around. It's time for your scrub down."

Catching the egotistic smirk and strict arch of a brow the sheriff did as she was told.

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Regina fell asleep to the stroking of fingers in her hair and woke up to the sound of a panicked voice.

"Why was she walking home alone in the first place?! She hates the dark!"
Removing her head from Emma's lap Regina sat up on the sofa of her den and frowned at the woman in the throes of worry.

"I know she has a cell phone, Ruby, but why didn't she use it?" Emma's trembling hand went to her forehead. Whatever was being discussed over the phone seemed to have her attention transfixed because she hardly noticed Regina waken. "I'm her roommate and the goddamned sheriff, why wouldn't she ask for a ride?!"

Comforting was not in Regina's nature, nonetheless, her hand managed to find itself on the blonde's shoulder for support. Startled, Emma looked from the hand to the woman offering it and then took a deep breath. Apparently, giving comfort was something this new Regina was getting the hang of.

"Alright, alright," she soothed into the receiver, "I'm on my way now. Don't leave her side."

Once the call was terminated Emma flew from the sofa and lunged for her jacket.

"What was that about?" Regina asked.

Tucking in the blue satin blouse that was lent to her Emma shook her head. "Mary Margaret was found unconscious in the street last night. Ruby took her to the hospital."

"Unconscious… like a coma?" asked Regina.

"Yeah." Emma paused before pulling the zipper on her boot. She looked to the other woman who was having the same thought. "This is not like the others. Something is different. Something is wrong."

Regina picked up the pained note of sadness in the voice. Despite her animosity towards Snow she felt her own chest constrict for the woman's daughter. It was not right that Emma had lived so long without her mother and just when she was finally found Mary Margaret was on the tipping point between life and death. She wondered if it would be possible, if she had it in herself, to set aside their differences and ignore the heartbreak her once stepdaughter caused her; for Emma's sake.

All leathered up with boots and jacket Emma tugged her hair back into a ponytail. With a few stiff jerks her trembling hands managed the strands into a tight if sloppy twist as she made her way across the room towards the foyer.

Regina looked on as it took no time at all for the blonde to answer a call of distress from someone who needed her. She felt a pang of envy for Mary Margaret. "You're going to her," Regina replied grimly.

Emma stopped herself with a hand to the door jamb and looked down before turning. There was an expression on her face that the brunette couldn't decipher. It could have been guilt for leaving Regina yet again. Another possibility was frustration that after the many years Regina had kept Emma and her mother apart she would continue to separate them by playing the jealous lover. Whatever was going on in that head of hers Regina hoped it wouldn't destroy what they were working so hard to rebuild. "Go," she found herself saying. Eyes filled with watery warmth.

With a slight nod Emma left. Although moving at a swift pace it seemed like a long and lonely walk to the front door. Leaving one heart for another, that was how it felt for Emma even though her head was telling a different story. She was torn between duty and love as she stepped outside the place she now called home.

Trudging down the walkway to her car there was a sound of fast approaching footfalls on her trail. Emma smiled.
They made it to Storybrooke General Hospital in record time thanks to police cruiser sirens. Emma and Regina spotted Ruby sitting anxiously in a chair opposite the intensive care unit where Mary Margaret was checked in. Her heel was bobbing in time with the third hand tick of a nearby clock until she saw the two women hurrying along.

"Emma, thank god you're here!"

The blonde wasted no time in asking, "Where is she?"

"ICU." Emma made a bee-line for the room but Ruby caught hold of her. "Wait, Dr. Whale needs to speak with you first. She doesn't have an emergency contact and you're the closest to her next of kin."

"Ruby where did you find Mary Margaret? If she was walking on one of the main roads someone must have seen something," remarked Emma. She tried to remain in 'Sheriff mode,' but the desperation in her voice suggested differently.

"She was walking through a residential area, but even if someone managed to look out their window they wouldn't have seen anything. The streetlamps were out making it pitch black."

"Not to downplay your heroism for finding and admitting Miss Blanchard," Regina started, "but what were you doing on the streets of Storybrooke so late at night?"

Emma knew where the mayor was going with the question and gave Ruby her own quizzical raise of a brow.

The girl picked absently at her nails. "I just had this… hunger for fresh air." She shrugged innocently. "And Granny was snoring up a Category 5, I'm surprised the bed and breakfast gets any business with walls so thin. God, sometimes I just wanna…" Ruby made a strangling gesture with her hands while Emma's eyes widened and Regina's shined in amusement.

Doctor Whale walked up with clipboard in hand. Ruby took the opportunity to head off for the cafeteria to stretch her legs and grab some sustenance.

"Sheriff Swan," greeted Whale, "I'm glad you have arrived."

Emma didn't waste any time. "How's Mary Margaret?"

The doctor made a sideways glance at the mayor.

"It's alright," Emma declared, "she's with me."

"She is stable for now. It's a good thing Miss Lucas found her when she did, Miss Blanchard's symptoms have progressed far quicker than my other patients. Tests have concluded that she lies in a very deep coma despite her verbal responses however incoherent. What has me most concerned, though, are the circumstances of her condition. Unlike the others she was struck unconscious before being admitted to the hospital. With our patient the only one who knows how she ended up like this I am afraid there is little I can do without a cause."

"Can't you run more tests? There's gotta be a dozen brain scans that can determine how she got this way."

"Sheriff, the possibilities are endless. Comas can be a result of anything from head trauma to
infection to poison. This hospital does not have the equipment necessary to carry out such advanced tests and even if we did, well, results in this professional are never one hundred percent conclusive. There is only one person who knows what is going on and that person is in a highly anomalous coma." The doctor chewed his lip and grimaced sadly. "With that said I'm afraid we must discuss Miss Blanchard's options."

"Options?" Emma choked, eyes widening with dismay. She folded her arms across her chest roughly. "What the hell are you talking about, options? Mary Margaret is in a coma. She's just… in a deep sleep, but she'll pull through. She's going to pull through."

"Indeed, there is always hope, but the likelihood of resurfacing without some form of neurological damage is below average, at best. After waking, Miss Blanchard may not be the same person she was before her accident. Many patients who come out of comas experience short-term memory loss, speech impairment, and motor and sensory dysfunction." He licked his lips and held up a cautioning hand. "But I cannot stress enough the abnormality of her state. I have never seen or read about a coma such as this and there is no telling how long it will last. If her body remains in such a chronic condition there will be irreversible damage to cerebral functions. Once her brain dies… Mary Margaret won't be Mary Margaret any more."

Regina had stayed silent for most of the conversation, playing the role of passive observer and not interfering. The paling face and growing strain in Emma's shoulders told her it was all too much on the blonde and that Regina should probably do something about it. Once her ears picked up the words 'withdrawing of life support' and 'let her go' she decided that enough was enough.

"Dr. Whale, you have explained the patient's options quite thoroughly. I'm sure Miss Swan understands what is at stake. Why don't we give her some time to reflect?" Regina finished with a stare that could have set fire to Whale. In fact, it would have been within her power to torch the man, but unfortunately she was on this 'good' kick thing and decided no magic was best. No magic in front of Emma, at least.

Whale nodded solemnly and left without a word.

Too caught up in her thoughts to notice the tentative hand moving to her back, Emma turned away and said, "I need to be alone with her." She closed the door to the room marked M. Blanchard, ICU behind her.

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She pulled a chair to the bed and sat down heavily. The woman tucked snug beneath an off-white blanket couldn't look any more peaceful. If Emma didn't know any better she would have thought her roommate was simply resting. The teacher's hair had been brushed back into its rightful pixie flair, sweat was patted dry from a forehead, and the wrinkles of her gown and blanket were smoothed down. From the looks of it Ruby had taken great care of Mary Margaret and Emma made a mental note to thank her when she got the chance. The chest rose silently and fell steadily. It was a calming movement to watch if Emma ignored the rest of the body; like the tide coming into shore, dragging in and then out, in and out. Emma wondered if Mary Margaret had looked this serene when she was coffin captive in Fairytale Land years ago.

Just as she took the still hand in hers Mary Margaret stirred. The sleeping woman moaned softly as her forehead wrinkled in distress. It sounded to Emma like a response to pain, so she squeezed anxiously at the hand in the hope (however vain it might seem) that Mary Margaret would feel it.

The cadence of a washing tide quickened. "Charming… come back."
"Mary Margaret." Emma saw the bed-ridden woman gasp at the sound of her voice and leaned forward so she could be heard well. "Hey, you have to wake up now. Come on." With both hands she covered the small one in hers and embraced it as if it were a treasured keepsake. "This is all my fault. If I had only told you about Gold and his plans then you wouldn't have been walking alone at night. You would have called me and ended up safe in your own bed. I have kept so many things from you… things you have a right to know. I should have --" Emma choked over her hitching breath and let unbidden tears descend. "-- I should have been honest with you about who I really am. It's my responsibility to save you, to break the curse, and I… I didn't and now you're here."

Emma looked the body over from head to toe expecting a response, a sign, any glimmer of hope that the woman would triumph over her slumber. The patient remained unresponsive to her words and Emma sobbed over the consequences of her selfish, cowardly ego.

The woman grimaced again, moaning to unseen pain. Sweat began to bead at her hairline and along her neck. Deeply comatose and unaware of Emma's presence she rasped weakly, "…shouldn't have let you go. Baby girl… gone… my Emma…"

Emma clamped a shaking hand to her mouth and squeezed her eyes shut. This was never how she wanted things to be. When she lied to Mary Margaret for her protection she never would have thought it would lead to this. She could shut her eyes to it all she wanted, but when she opened them the view of her half-dead best friend would still be there.

"Mary Margaret you have to wake up." Emma glared through her flooded vision for a moment as if she had the power – the magic – to spark some life into the pale, inert woman. "It's me, your…" she let out a long held in breath, "…it's your daughter."

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She interchanged between sitting in one of the visitor chairs with hands properly atop her lap and leaning against the wall, pulling at the cuffs of her blue cotton blouse. It was an awkward business this waiting, especially when the patient wasn't a family member or friend. Her eyes darted up and down the hall and found no other visitors; it was just Regina and the occasional nurse passing by.

It wasn't the musty smelling, mustard yellow cushions or the cautionary glances from the on duty nurse that left her feeling insecure, but the thought of what was happening behind that door. The woman she cared for was in the same room as her nemesis and that was something worthy to fret over. Regina crossed the hall, sitting down for the fifth time and fixed her eyes on the door.

Leaving wasn't an option. She wanted to be there for Emma, ready to do or say anything necessary to comfort her. She also needed to be close in case there was any change in Mary Margaret's condition – in case Mary Margaret not only woke up but remembered the life she once had. As an innocent child she ruined Regina's chance at happiness and now she was doing it again. The wretched woman was in a coma and she still found a way to destroy her blissful afternoon. Mary Margaret was probably making her daughter cry her eyes out and leaving Emma to believe she was the cause for such events. Regina hated Mary Margaret for inflicting such pain.

The clapping of tennis shoes echoed across glossy, sterile flooring. The nurse, some woman with shifty eyes and a bad back, passed in front of Regina who straightened her stature and raised her chin like it was her mayoral duty to wait on every sick patient in Storybrooke. The nurse looked away and continued on while Regina slouched back and resumed her study of the door in front of her.

Though she still saw Mary Margaret as an enemy Regina would not make the same mistakes because she finally had a reason to learn from them. Now, there were people in her life that...
genuinely cared what happened to her and have proven their feelings for her. So as much as she wanted to burst through that hospital room and finish off the bitch that wronged her she had to have faith in Emma that whatever happened in the coming days would not tear them asunder or destroy the trust they have poured their heart and souls into restoring. It was her resentment towards Mary Margaret that set her afire but this trust in Emma that kept the flames to a minimum

Another echo of approaching feet but this sound did not belong to nurse regulation shoes. The heavy clogging came nearer in the form of muddy hiking boots attached to well-fitted jeans and a red and blue plaid-shirted David Nolan. The knight in shining armor – or, rather, knight in flannel.

The mayor stood up and stopped him with a warning gesture. "This is highly inappropriate," she stated firmly.

"Where is Mary Margaret? Is she going to be alright?"

"She is in a coma, so no Miss Blanchard is not alright. In fact, the doctor thinks she might never wake up." Regina flipped her hair back to cover her smirk.

The man's head jerked back. "But… I bumped into her a few days ago and she never looked sick."

David looked to his feet as if they could tell him the appropriate thing to say. He licked his lips hurriedly and raised his eyes. "There has to be a way she can wake up. Did Doctor Whale have any suggestions? Can we get a second opinion?"

Regina studied the man and the worry lines around his eyes. He had the same hope Emma displayed when Whale had discussed Mary Margaret's chances of survival. Regina wouldn't admit it before but now it was staring her in the face: Emma was the spitting image of her father.

"Hospital visitation rights do not extend to non-family members. Miss Blanchard is not your concern."

"I have every right to be here. Mary Margaret would want me by her side."

Regina took a step forward and spoke with a voice as sharp as steel. "This school boy crush you have is clouding your judgment. After standing by you during the investigation into Kathryn's disappearance you failed to do the same when she was arrested for murder. After the lies you've told and the mess you've made of my friend's marriage Miss Blanchard would do well to stay away from you. In fact, I hear she has been avoiding you, or haven't you noticed?" David's eyes narrowed, fearing a setup. "Miss Blanchard is done with your dishonesty and your indecision. She has made her choice. You being here is not helping the patient."

David jerked a finger at the closed door. "That patient is the woman I love!"

"David," Regina muttered softly placing a hand on the man's chest, a tender gesture filled with intent, "you've been through much these past few days. You're tired. You're not thinking straight." She took a step back, dragging her hand away. "Go home and be with your wife."

"Enough, Regina."

The mayor spun to the blonde emerging from the room. "Emma." Regina's features softened instantly.

"David, you can go in and see her now."

The man immediately did as the sheriff instructed.
Emma asked, "Can you do anything?"

Regina clasped her hands and sucked in a breath. "My healing powers do not go beyond wounds I cannot see. Magic restores material objects… tangible entities, but not the mind."

"If you could heal her, would you?"

Regina parted her lips for a split-second and then closed them, putting genuine effort in thinking about it.

It was a simple question and the reluctance the brunette had displayed was all Emma needed. Turning on her heel she walked away.

"Where are you going?"

"To save my friend and throttle the man responsible."

Regina held back in silence. She suddenly felt very small, uncertain of where she should be or who needed her (if at all). She didn't belong with the Charmings - they were neither her family nor her sovereign - and there was no reason to help Mary Margaret or save her life a second time. Then Regina remembered the first time she had went out of her way to help the girl. Her mare had been spurred on as fast as she had ever been taken. The blood was pounding like a hammer in her ears, the adrenaline rushing through her veins, and the wind whipping her braided hair askew. The cherub-like face painted with pure terror loomed before young Regina and the child was taken, shivering, into her outstretched arms. Regina had never forgotten how wide those eyes had been, how wide in shock and disbelief they had pierced into hers. Now, years later in a parallel world and very changed from the girl who had so bravely saved a child, Regina was looking into striking green eyes that were filled with that same panic.

Emma noticed the brunette's hesitancy and failed at holding back the ruthless sarcasm to her question. "You think now is a good time to end this?"

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They were still in the hospital parking lot when Regina ended the call.

"What's the word?"

"He has not been seen by the shop or in his work shed. Sidney is now camped out in front of his house and there has yet to be any sign of activity."

Emma rested her arm on the door rest and squirmed in the driver's seat. "Are you sure we can trust Sidney? I mean, he's been acting the jealous, scorned lover since our truce. If I know anything about affairs it's that the one being cheated on has a tendency to take it out on the guilty party."

"Sidney and I were never lovers, I can assure you," Regina chortled from the passenger seat, "and although he resents my affiliation with you he would never betray my trust. His obsession over me may be petty, but it is useful in oh so many ways."

"I don't wanna know," muttered the sheriff with abhorrence. When Emma had expressed the desire to know who Regina was that did not extend to what went on between her and that snake Sidney Glass. Ignorance was bliss as they say. "So if he's not around his shop or at home that leaves only one possible location he might be hiding."

"Yes, unfortunately."
Emma gunned the engine and threw the shifter in reverse with a violent shove. "Freaking great."

***

Emma drove down the dirt trail until it ended a mile into the forest.

"It's a good thing there's still daylight," noted the mayor.

"Doesn't make this any less disturbing. And since when have you been the optimist?"

"I am simply making an observation, dear."

With hands still gripping the wheel, Emma was starting to feel smothered despite the spaciousness of the police cruiser. "Don't call me that."

"Dear?" Regina clarified with raised brows, taken aback.

"Yeah, I don't like it."

"You just decided this now?" Regina grabbed the fleeting arm before Emma could leave the car. "Hey, what's gotten into you?"

"What's gotten into me?" scoffed the blonde. She jerked her body around so one hand was on the wheel and the other on the brunette's headrest. "Really, you have no idea? I don't know how about the fact that my best friend who happens to be the mother who abandoned me is lying in a coma? or that I haven't been honest with her the past three months? How about that everything bad that's happened in this town since I got here is because I didn't break the curse?" She tucked her chin down to emphasize the glowering stare but her tone was losing its grip on ferocity. "It's my fault Mary Margaret may never wake up. I didn't want to accept my stupid destiny and everyone is paying for it."

"So... you're not mad at me?"

"Oh, don't get me started with that one!"

Motionless and blinking, Regina was left to the confines of the vehicle as the sheriff exited. The display of frustration and distaste shook the brunette even though Emma's behavior was fully justified by the circumstances. Despite time being of the essence Regina sat there for a moment, gathering her thoughts and giving the other woman time to cool down.

Emma let out a ragged breath when Regina appeared. "It's just not fair," she announced, shrugging and dropping a hand on the car hood. "That day you brought me back and we stepped through the barrier into the forest you told me everything – well, mostly everything. If breaking the curse had been my number one priority from then on Mary Margaret and all those people would not be suffering like they are now. I would have parents, Henry would have his grandparents, and Storybrooke would have been saved." Emma finally met Regina's eyes which were waiting with gloomy patience. "But then I wouldn't have seen who you really were. I wouldn't have known who you were becoming."

"I am the way I am because of you and Henry," Regina spoke over the hood from the passenger side.

"That's why it isn't fair. Henry kept telling me you were not always like this, that my being here changed you. If I hadn't rejected the Savior thing and all the good that would have come from it we wouldn't have gotten - for lack of a better term - familiar with each other." The blonde was struck
with the sudden urge to hide the warmth spreading across her cheeks. She shoved one hand in her back pocket as her boot toed aimlessly into the dirt. "All the late night meetings we shared over coffee, I wasn't there simply to discuss the investigation. I looked forward to spending time with you even though you always kept things in totally professional context. Even if all we ever talked about was work it was better than not being around someone like you. If Gold hadn't released magic, if I hadn't left and you didn't bring me back, then those meetings wouldn't have happened." Emma looked down biting her lip. "And I wouldn't feel the way I do about you now."

The cold, iron facade threatened to take hold of Regina and send her hiding behind her wall. She was still learning to express feelings but when Emma had just unloaded a plethora of emotions it was all too overwhelming for a novice like Regina when for the past few hours Emma had proceeded to express all the colors on the wheel of emotions. Fear of intimacy and the fear of speaking the truth (and hearing it, for that matter) were still so familiar and pervading in her mind. "That is quite a confession. Why are you saying all of this now?"

"You mean why I am confessing my feelings for you before our imminent doom?" Emma shoulders gave a flippant shrug. "Seems as good a time as any."

"You really are dreadfully forward with people. I don't know how I ever let you influence me."

Feeling courageous, Emma blurted out, "I'm your wonderwall, Regina."

"Pardon, you are my what?"

"Wonderwall." Emma chuckled at having to explain such a thing to the great and powerful Madame Mayor and former Evil Queen of a faraway realm. "It's a song from the 90's. It means that I helped you find your way. I was there when you needed me most. Essentially… I pretty much became your Savior." Threading a stray lock behind her ear and rubbing her neck she winced. "It's kind of corny, I know."

"Yes," the mayor primly stated, clasping her hands in front of her body, "it is."

As Regina turned from the car Emma caught the hint of an amused smirk on those full, luscious lips. What she didn't catch was the rosy warmth rising to the mayor's cheeks.

The sheriff plowed ahead in the direction of where the trail end was pointed towards. Batting away some branches Emma twisted and hopped through some thatching with a particular thorny disposition.

"Miss Swan, where may I ask are you going in such a vigorous manner?"

Emma spared with some brush and grunted in reply, "The well of course."

"Might I suggest we follow the footprints?" mused the brunette. Emma surrendered to the foliage and backed up, retracing her steps with a bashful laugh. Regina looked over the sheriff's attire and observed with scorn, "We would not want to poke any holes in that priceless pleather now would we?"

"I would have you know, Madame Mayor," Emma said as she walked beside Regina, "that this jacket you so snobbishly mistake as pleather is priceless." Emma proceeded to lovingly smooth over the left arm sleeve of brown leather, tracing the creases and wrinkles of past memories both good and bad.

Too concerned over the adoration the blonde was showing for the treasured jacket, a stray root caught her toe. Before Emma's lips could form an appropriate obscenity for the occasion Regina
had already gathered her up in unexpectedly sturdy arms.

"Thanks."

As if scolding a child, Regina simply responded with a stern glare.

They moved on, unhindered by the thorns or roots that endangered the Savior's graceful balance. After a few minutes of comfortable silence Emma smiled and asked, "Just like old times, huh?"

The woman did something that caught Emma completely off guard: Regina smiled. It wasn't a reluctant turn up of the mouth or a sarcastic smirk paired with rolling eyes, but a genuine, gleaming, Regina Mills smile. The sight made Emma's heart soar.

"It seems that way, doesn't it?" Regina commented, mouth still wide. She continued scanning the horizon as they walked, alert for the slightest change in the air. The sky was losing its sun which was at the two women's backs, lighting their journey ahead. The naked trees formed shadows of its branches which stretched out like arms, pointing them in the proper direction of darkness. Regina caught on to the irony, leaving the warmth of sunlight to step forward into a shadowed world cast with frosty uncertainty. There was no clearly paved trail under their feet but to Regina there was. She was walking the road of redemption which also just happened to be the highway to darkness and destruction.

Regina felt the brush of a shoulder as the sheriff veered closer noticing, too, the changing atmosphere. It was reassuring to Regina not only the warmth of the other woman but her calming presence. Emma Swan was the Savior, her Savior. That had to count for something, right?

"You mentioned earlier… something about our imminent doom." Regina's voice gained back its gravity, though the words sailed as a fragile cloud in the frigid air of twilight. "You really don't think we'll make it out of this?"

"I don't know. I say stupid things in the moment." Emma held Regina's gaze with fierce honesty and devotion. "But if things go to hell I'm glad I'm here with you."

Regina's eyes filled with tears. No one had ever expressed the desire to walk with her into unknown danger. She had no idea what was waiting for them at the well and the thought of facing that terror of the deep again made the lingering sun behind them a welcome alternative. However treacherous the beyond may seem Regina realized she now had an ally, and – if Gold ever spoke a shred of verity – a true love. Emma was her constant, the one person who would keep Regina from turning her back on her path to redemption.

"Emma, we have to talk about something. It's very important that you listen."

"Okay, shoot."

"When this is finished, when Gold is defeated and this well destroyed, you will be free to break the curse. I'm not only giving you permission to do this, but I'm giving you my blessing. No matter how much I tried to deny it before I don't want Henry to grow up in a cursed world. He deserves better." Emma opened her mouth to retort, although, she wasn't sure what would come out. Sensing the blonde's indecision Regina went on. "The whole point of breaking the curse is to get your happy ending. Once you succeed Henry is yours. He is your happy ending."

She sensed that when the mayor had said, 'Henry is yours' she meant that Henry would be in the sole custody of Emma. It was said so fleetingly, so offhandedly as if Henry were an object the two women were sparing over. Emma stared in shock, studying the reaction on Regina's face in order to
catch any hint of emotion that resulted in such a brazen remark about their son. What Emma
witnessed was the fall of a solitary tear, a single drop that possessed the weight of a thousand
drops. After all the words and the punches and the threats, Regina was relinquishing what she
fought so hard to protect. She was accepting her post-curse fate and giving her son up without a
fight. The tragic look of defeat was displayed in that single tear. Emma thought she had wanted this
moment for so long, to have the right to call Henry her son and to have him come home to her safe
and happy, but now Emma was taking this gift of a request with sadness. Like Mary Margaret
wasting away in her hospital bed encased in her own fears, taking Henry for herself was not how
things were supposed to turn out. Emma didn't want it this way.

"Wasn't your happy ending supposed to be this cursed world?" Emma asked. "Why would you help
me in ruining your own happy ending?" With Henry, she finished with a thought.

"Because as happy as I am with you, Emma, it will never last. Former evil queens were never
meant to end up with princess saviors. I had mentioned before that your family will want their
revenge once their memories return. I still believe that. It is futile to think we can cheat the hand
fate has dealt us."

Emma turned on the woman, halting her progress forward. "Then why are you helping me? What
is in this for you if the well is destroyed and I go breaking your spell? Mary Margaret was never
your friend here or in the other world, so why risk your own life to save hers?"

It came to a surprise to Regina that Emma had not jumped to the conclusion of foul play when
poison was among the list of causes to Mary Margaret's condition. After all, it wouldn't be the first
time she had attempted to do away with unwanted persons, and if anyone was aware of what the
mayor was capable of it was the sheriff. So what did Emma do? She skipped right over the usual
game of rightful blame and made a course correction to asking the one question Regina didn't have
the answer to.

Their surrounding view suddenly captivated the mayor who was clenching her hands deep within
the pockets of her coat. Shuffling her feet together for added warmth she diverted the blonde's
expectant gaze in favor for the flowing creek. The water bubbled and flowed around the peeking
stones, caressing them to smoothness. Waves lapped along the frosting edge of earth making a
'plopping' noise that reverberated in Regina's ears. "Because…" She exhaled and watched the
breath drift out and then swirl until the biting wind took it to some unknown place east of
Storybrooke. Emma held onto the solitary word, not blinking. "Because all I ever wanted was for
her to suffer and she can't if she's not conscious of it."

Emma waited in case there was more because the way her question had been answered so
carelessly suggested that there must be an explanation or added grievance. Emma tapped into her
'superpower' to detect a lie. Regina's face looked hard, her mouth turned down into a frown and
brow furrowed in anger; there was no dishonesty there. On a whim Emma's scrutiny fell on tear
frosted eyelashes which sent her spiraling around burnished brown irises and falling into the black
depths of her pupils to the heart of Regina's soul. A surprising warmth wrapped around Emma like
ribbons of silk and when she pushed deeper her progress was not impeded. She then arrived at that
place where no one had gone before, the terminus that had never been open to anyone. There at
Regina's bottom was a trace of something Emma had not been looking for. Though her mind could
not define what it was, Emma's jumping heart seemed to have a culminating bond with this...

A light flashed around them and grew so bright Emma had to cover her eyes. The light provided no
warmth despite its intensity and by the time the flash faded the air was just as cold (if not colder)
than before. There was a gasp from beside her and Emma felt a hand cling to the leather of her arm.
Her vision eventually cleared to show the well and Gold beside it.
"Son of a bitch!"

"Wrong son, dearie."

The battle began with an earsplitting crack of lightning.
The air was thick with smoke by the time a cursing Emma got to her feet. A dizzy spell hit her as she wobbled through thick bushes. Clutching her knees she doubled over so the vertigo would pass. Emma had no idea where in the forest she was or how long she had been out. The last thing she remembered was Gold stretching forth his arm towards a thundering night sky.

Once her vision cleared she realized her surroundings did not include Regina, Gold or the well. Grimacing, she rubbed the back of her head. At the start of the battle Regina must have propelled her away from danger. Typical, Emma thought, Regina always wanting to be the first to win a fight.

A loud crack echoed followed by a bolt of green lightning which split the tree just a few feet from her. Emma gaped in horror at the smoldering stump that could have been her jacket clad self. Realizing this was definitely out of her area of expertise the sheriff receded, wishing desperately to be back home curled up in front of the fire with a hot chocolate. At least there she would not run the risk of being struck by magical lightning. But no Emma was the hero. Scary lightning and materializing sorcerers were supposed to be a part of her job description.

“Here comes the Savior,” she muttered weakly as she dragged herself towards the horrible sounds.

Entering the circle of what appeared to be the magical version of Fight Club, Emma ducked as the limb of a tree came flying out of nowhere. The crunching, twisting sound of bark was deafening amidst the thunder of lightning and howling wind and the sheriff almost had to make a grab for the roots below to keep herself in place.

Amid the smoke and flying objects Emma could make out two figures. There was nothing that could have prepared the blonde for what she was to see next. The flicker of brunette hair in the chaos was clearly Regina, but this Regina looked like a woman possessed. Her black coat flapped about like the wings of a crow as she dug her heels into the frozen ground with arms outstretched and fingers curling like claws. Emma stared transfixed at the lethal weapons of those arms as they danced in a strange pattern, calling forth the elements and manifesting deadly things.

As the fierce duo circled each other, throwing and repelling spells, the face of the brunette witch came into view. The state of the woman’s attire and posture was frightening, but as Emma squinted through the burning fog there was an even more unsettling sight before her. Gray soot obscured the once beautiful face of Regina Mills while ugly slashes leaked thin trails of blood down her chin and neck. And the eyes, there was a wild fire in those brown eyes – no, red, her eyes were glowing red Emma saw. The inflamed orbs pulsating with every flick of a clawed hand which sparked forth red lightning.

Emma had never seen Regina wield magic in full force and, frankly, the visual disturbed her. Just the sight of the witch’s eyes alone made Emma fear for her life. Who was to say in the chaos of
flying tree limbs, twister strength winds and a malevolent stink in the air that a measly pistol toting Sheriff Swan wouldn’t be a casualty? Though Emma was scared for her own skin she also feared how close the woman was to her dark side. With all the selfish desires it brought out there was no telling when this alter ego would rear its ugly head. Regina was strong, Emma was sure of it, but how long could she keep this darkness at bay after 28 years of not having to?

There was such a fine line between the Evil Queen and the Regina Mills Emma had gotten to know over the course of a few months, and Emma feared losing the woman she had come to fight for and possibly love. Emma’s heart pounded as she watched the woman, battling for the lives of those both loved and loathed, on the tipping point of wickedness and coming so very close to slipping from the edge.

“Regina!”

The brunette hadn’t heard the sound of her name over the crackling red lightning. Her attacks were becoming aimless for her arms grew heavy and strained from exertion. She was not used to calling forth and absorbing so many assaults. It had been a good 28 years since the queen had the opportunity to put up with a worthy opponent and Regina was quickly figuring out that Gold was indeed a very worthy opponent. A formidable one at that.

After using his now glowing cane to absorb the previous spell Gold brought forth a gravity defying twister of wind sparking with electricity and sent it hurling in the witch’s direction. Before it even reached within a few feet Regina summoned a barrier similar to the one Gold manifested around Storybrooke (but on a smaller scale) and the electrified windstorm flowed past her. Regina didn’t even flinch.

Emma watched from the sidelines, biting her lip and fidgeting. Her heart begged to jump in and help the woman but her head cautioned her back. Blindly charging forth without a plan of attack would only place more worry on Regina who was already weary from having to deflect the spells flying in the blonde’s direction. This was not a fight Emma could win, so with a rapidly beating heart and pacing feet she waited for the victor to emerge.

And seconds later they had.

“Stop!” Gold shouted, squirming in the embracing arms of winding weeds and thorns which rendered his spell casting hands useless. “You must let me live!”

“And what on this earth would make me do such a thing?” hissed the witch whose eyes now took on an oily black hue.

“With me dead you will never know how to defeat the evil you fear!”

“Oh and let me guess, you want to make a deal?” Her fingers curled into a fist making the bind on Gold’s body tighter. She smiled and laughed as the man squealed at the thorns piercing his skin. “I am through with your contracts and its deceiving loopholes. You will pay for the monster you have created.”

“And what monster, pray tell, are we talking about, dearie?”

The witch stopped smiling and clenched her shaking fist. The wails of a defeated imp cut through the smoke and echoed beyond.

“Regina, stop!” The blonde rushed over to put a hand on the arm. Emma trembled through fear induced tears as she whispered, “Come back.”
The inky charcoal ebbed to make room for wide brown eyes. She inhaled sharply and blinked. The exhaustion came suddenly like a crushing wave, her breath coming in uneven gasps. Slightly disoriented, Regina wobbled into the waiting arms of Emma. Her torn and bleeding body shook at what she had become only after a few minutes of using magic. “Are you hurt?”

“What?” Emma frowned, taking in the damage that the brunette had succumbed to. “I-I’m peachy. Now can we please turn the concern to you?”

Regina chuckled despite the pain it caused her. How the woman could keep her sharp wit intact in dangerous situations was beyond Regina. It was a contagious defense mechanism and she felt the laughs continue to rise from her still panting chest.

“What the hell? You are bleeding, you crazy woman! Stop laughing!”

Laughter died in Regina’s throat as her eyes found the trembling lip and pale face.

The sheriff confessed with a shaky breath, “You scared me.” While Regina was feeling her stab of guilt Emma busied herself with cleaning the ghastly face. Taking the sleeve of her precious jacket she blotted at the blood and sweat staining the woman underneath. She looked anywhere but the once clouded eyes. “The way you looked... it scared me.”

“It must have been a frightful sight.” Regina then took hold of the hand nursing her cuts. Her voice grew as soft as the caressing touch she was giving the hand. “I’m sorry you had to see me like that.”

The tingling sensation that had passed so many times previous coursed through their touching hands, the jolt still bringing forth a gasp from both. Their eyes met and Emma knew that the Regina she had talked with over coffee, the one who had insulted her cooking skills and kissed her cheek, and the woman she had made passionate love to was still intact. Her Regina was alive and free from the clutches of her former self.

Knowing full well what was passing between them the two women shared a teary smile.

“I see that I am two for two in my deductions on true love.”

Regina tensed at the sing-song voice and gritted her teeth.

“How fortunate for him.” Without assistance Regina stood on her own two feet, glaring at the pawnbroker now free from her magic. A thought occurred to her. “Unlike the others, Mary Margaret was attacked directly by the monster. Unlike before, it didn’t need to be fed by the hand because it is now strong enough to seek out its own food.” She turned on Gold. “You can’t control this monster anymore can you?”

“You would assume correctly,” replied Gold.

Regina’s anger mounted. “It is now powerful enough to terrorize the town without your help. It no longer needs you, so the monster can feed whenever and on whomever it wants.”

“You’re on a roll, dearie.”

Regina took a threatening step forward and countered, “If what I say is true then you no longer have a hold on this town.” She laughed softly then. “You had no idea what you were dealing with did you? You had no concept of what this monster was or what it could do when it grew out of
being fed like a dog.”

“If you no longer have power over this thing,” Emma spoke up, “then there is nothing left you can gain from it. It’s in your best interest to help us, Gold.”

His smile disappeared as he knew when defeat was upon him. He nodded weakly.

Regina addressed the pawnbroker, “I assume you will want something in return for your candid assistance?”

“Now you’re talking,” Gold said, his smirk returning. Using his cane he leveraged himself upright. “My demands are simple: I. Want. Belle.”

Regina pursed her lips and inhaled sharply through her nose. “How did you find out?”

“Not all your secrets are as hidden as you think, Regina. A rather peculiar fellow from these parts revealed the circumstances of what I thought was once lost.” Gold pointed a finger at the mayor and sneered, “Belle.”

“Who the hell is Belle?”

The other two ignored the confused sheriff.

“You were responsible for her disappearance. She was torn from my life just when…” He started to feel the welling of tears. Against his will, they began to fall down a vengeful face. “You know what she was to me.”

“The Dark One cannot love,” Regina spat. “He doesn’t have it in him. Belle wanted to break your curse and take away all those useful abilities you were so attached to. I banished her and your power remained intact, so forgive me for doing you a favor.”

“She wanted to make me a better man!” Gold roared. “You had no right to do what you did!”

“Wait, are we talking about the Belle from Beauty and the Beast?” Emma wondered out loud.

“I will not apologize for something I did 28 years ago,” Regina declared, glowering. “What’s done is done.”

“You will tell me where she is.”

“Yes, I will… in return for your cooperation.”

“How can I trust that Belle will be returned to me?”

Emma stepped forward, catching up with the conversation. “Just like we can trust that you will tell us how to kill that thing.” She jutted her chin towards the ominous well.

“And…” Regina said, lowering her voice so only Gold would hear, “you seem to know just how much I’ve changed and who I’m risking my life for.”

“So,” he scoffed, delighted that the woman had accepted his earlier postulation, “you’ve finally seen the light, dearie? You now know what this means for you.”

“What is he talking about?” Emma asked the brunette.

“Nothing,” Regina answered quickly. Emma knew full well the consequences of breaking the
curse, yet she still did not know how to do so. It was a kiss, a simple brushing of lips that would
break the queen’s spell, but without the proper timing could mean failure. It was a requirement not
only that the kiss must be meaningfully executed but be an act out of true love. If Regina was
willing to believe that Emma was her true love then surely their next kiss would do more than
weaken her knees and send her heart skipping. It would shake the very ground they stood, crumble
her defenses and render all her sacrifices void. Regina would have a hand in her own downfall.

Despite what would result from such a confession, it wasn’t difficult to accept her love for Emma.
Her heart cried out the words every time it was within a reasonable distance of Emma’s. True
love’s kiss could break any curse and Emma was the savior, the one foretold to do just that. It was
a prophecy so far becoming true, so who was Regina to argue differently? Who was Regina to
deny a kiss from her truest love?

Regina turned to Gold with a melancholy yet expectant stare. “We’re waiting.”

“It is not an easy thing,” Gold explains. “Fear cannot be destroyed. Only buried.”

“There’s a first time for everything.”

Regina nodded. “There must be a way to incapacitate this monster, render it powerless.”

“Of course, but as you both know all magic comes with a price.”

Emma’s eyes narrowed while Regina’s flinched. “What kind of price?” implored the sheriff.

“A price of the selfless kind,” spoke Gold with a gentle warning that sent a shudder through
Regina. “A true test of honor, bravery and heroism.” He gestured pointedly with a finger and
emphasized his words in several rising octaves. “A sacrifice must be made!”

***

David was on the verge of hopelessness. He had taken things for granted and made far too many
mistakes in his life, losing Mary Margaret being his biggest misstep. When the realization struck
him, when his feelings had risen from the clouds of doubt and were revealed for what they truly
were, a most unfortunate event occurred.

He thought back to what Emma had told him at the diner about not letting the moment pass him by
and about righting his wrongs for a second (or rather a third) chance. That tingling sensation, that
giddiness Emma had mentioned was something he felt every moment he was near Mary Margaret.
The woman was like a breath of fresh air that filled his lungs with the purest of oxygen and
enriching his soul with everything that was good. That piece David thought was missing when he
was with Kathryn could be made complete with the help of Mary Margaret. She could fill his heart
with a promise of trust and lifelong happiness.

But reality collided with hope as David sat by the sleeping woman’s bedside. He could love Mary
Margaret all he wanted but a simple declaration of love would not heal her unseen wounds. Would
she wake up? David asked himself. Would she ever know what I feel for her?

Then the strangest memory occurred to the grieving man. All the instances Henry went on about
the storybook and his ridiculous theory about a curse, David remembered something about a kiss.
A kiss of true love that could break any curse, any wicked spell cast on the most innocent of
victims.

It may have seemed absurd to David, but if he could believe in the power of his love for this
woman than it wasn’t a stretch to believe a kiss between them could be just as powerful. There was a time not long ago when Mary Margaret had woken him from a dreamless sleep. David was determined to return the favor.

***

“Well? How must I proceed?” Hands on her hips and tapping her foot impatiently, Regina waited for instructions. “Will it be summoned by incantation or must I simply call its name – if it has one?”

“There is no name for this kind of evil. You will feel the monster’s presence when it arrives. I assume you know how to invoke the convergence spell?”

Regina snorted. She brushed some soot from her coat sleeve while replying in a most annoying sneer, “Of course.”

While the magic folk ironed out their plan Emma hung back in shock. The words were muffled and everything seemed to proceed in slow motion but the resolute face of Regina was unmistakable. Emma stared at her in utter disbelief, becoming aware of the sacrifice the woman before her was making. The shock of this realization hit Emma to the core almost sending her to her knees. When she finally found her voice it came out soft and crackling. “No.”

Regina didn’t seem to hear. After a few minor disagreements on spell casting techniques had been settled the mayor already had her focus on the well. Prepared for the role he would play, Gold stood a safe distance away. Regina would have taken her place in front of the well but a determined young blonde cut her off, blocking her path.

“Step aside.”

Regina’s tone was icy, almost heartless, and her hands were curled into fists. Emma didn’t seem to take heed. The blonde’s eyes widened at the order yet her body stood firm. “No,” she grounded out. “This is not your decision to make.”

Teeth grated. Regina sighed heavily before flicking her wrist sending Emma hurling back. Instead of landing on hard, frozen earth the blonde hung in midair a safe distance away. A tear escaped down her cheek before Regina twirled her finger, casting a binding spell around the protesting woman. The mayor closed her eyes for a moment, preparing herself. Once satisfied that turning back wasn’t an option she unstuck her heel from the ground and took her first step towards her fate. Her progress went unhindered by Emma’s continued shouting.

“Well, Miss Swan, this is no time for discussion.”

“The timing couldn’t get any goddamned perfect!” Emma barked out. “Just let me down and we can talk about this!”

“No. I have to do this. You of all people should know that.” Regina met the struggling woman’s hard stare. “This is what I’m supposed to do.”

All the sheriff could do was shake her head violently. Emma knew she had to say something, but the words didn’t come. The binding spell continued to keep her suspended, arms strung to her sides. She squirmed beneath the blue glowing force field, hoping to break free and be the savior everyone wanted her to be. The spell remained unbroken in spite of her efforts. Stopping her struggle against the binding Emma Swan cried, finally laying eyes on the woman who was robbing her of her own destiny.
Watching the sobs wracking the bound body, Regina wished she could supply the closure Emma needed, the strength to endure what was to come. A smile, that seemed like a good idea to the mayor. A smile was what decent people did when they wanted to cheer up a friend or a loved one. One last goodbye was all Regina wanted to give, but it was too painful. It was ironic that she could face her worst fears before this well but become paralyzed when it came time to bid a simple farewell. A smile was not enough, so the once queen would have to settle for giving her life.

Her eyes beheld vibrant green eyes for the last time before turning towards the well. “Do it,” she instructed with a croak.

Emma’s mouth opening to cast her own spell which emanated in the form of a resounding “No!” She screamed as long and as hard as she could, but all her objections managed to achieve was the stirring of cold air.

Gold closed his eyes and began the incantation. A string of words tumbled from his lips which formed an ancient, mystic spell once they hit air. When the last word was spoken the earth shook.

Having nothing else to support herself with, Regina instinctively grabbed the rim of the well as the ground beneath her feet quaked precariously. The second her hand touched the cold stone she felt her blood turn to ice. The fear she experience at her last visit returned, this time swifter and with an eternal vengeance. She couldn’t keep up with her rapidly beating heart and thought she would pass out before achieving her purpose. A cloudy haze crept around her vision. Regina gasped in lung-fulls of air and took her hand back, but the damage was done. An undulating black smoke emerged before her.

Emma swallowed hard at the sight. This smoke had an organic quality to it, hissing and growing to enormity. Its plumes climbed higher, rolling to such a height that had her craning her neck. As the monster continued to generate upwards all Emma could do was gape open-mouthed with the solitary thought of what a seriously fucked up plan the other two had come up with.

Regina trembled like a witch at her first duel. She had never seen anything like it. The smoke was massive and gave off an ominous growling sound. For a moment she doubted her powers in the face of such size and propensity of evil. Then the face of Henry entered her narrowing vision, his brown hair lying messily (just the way he liked it) and a wry smile on his lips. It was the image of her son that convinced her to see this through. This was the end of the line, the aim of her redemption, and Regina was okay with it. With one last breath she gave herself over to the fear.

The following moments were a blur to Regina. A sequence of images flashed before her, flying so fast through her field of vision she couldn’t control them. Many of these flashes were of Henry, of him leaving her, of striking her down with a gleaming sword, and of falling to the ground motionless with a turnover in his grasp. The horrid images didn’t stop: being tied to her apple tree and heckled by a crowd of her enemies… Snow and Charming reclaiming their kingdom… the once Evil Queen of Fairytale Land remaining behind in Storybrooke, alone, to account for her crimes. Regina sobbed, wanting it all to stop. She begged and pleaded with whoever would listen. It never did. Then there were new flashes… Emma leaving town never to return… Emma lying naked and broken on the mayor’s bed, asking to be healed… Emma crumpled at the base of the well in a pool of her own blood.

These were her fears.

The wind carried the wailing sound of her name. It came from a female voice. It could have emanated from the Emma still bound by her magic or from the prostrate illusion bidding for relief. Her name being endlessly repeated over and over again was a siren song; Regina was convinced of it, this melodious, enchanting chorus luring her into doom. Temptation by such a femme fatale was
incongruous to Regina’s aims. She would not be seduced into fear. She had to stay strong, for
Emma’s life depended on this kind of selfless heroism Regina once thought a trite notion.

She was weakening. The raging force of her magic that had once flowed as strong and vibrant as
the moment it was reignited slowed to a mere trickle. She could feel herself slipping under the
void. Her vision faded whilst she swayed on unsteady ground. The last thing Regina saw was a blur
of golden curls. After that, everything went black.

Emma’s last thoughts were how infuriating that mayor really was and how much she loved her.

***

It was now or never. It was too late to back out. No more mistakes, not a single regret had. This
was the start of the rest of David’s life no matter what would result from his next act.

“I don’t believe in fairytales,” he said, “but I do believe in us. If there is any magic in this world
than it has to come from love. The purest emotion I have ever felt… I have felt for you, Mary
Margaret.”

He touched her cheek. It was warm under his fingertips but pale to his eyes. Her face was white as
snow just like Henry’s book said, and across her forehead he brushed away a strand of hair that
was black as night. He scooted closer on the bed and looked to her closed lids, her nose, and then
further down. Her lips, red as blood, also in the storybook.

Maybe there is such a thing as happy endings, David found himself wondering before he leaned in
and kissed the woman in slumber.

“Charming!”

He hadn’t opened his eyes before feeling two lively palms on his cheeks. The hands were small
and gripped him with such ferocity as if it were the first time in a long time they had touched solid
reality. When he finally understood, there below him were the brightest most beautiful eyes he ever
saw. “Snow!”

“How did you know…?” Snow asked, happy to be reunited but wary of such fortune.

“I think David always knew my love for you, despite all his mistakes. It just took a little pushing
on the part of our daughter.”

“Emma!”

Charming watched his wife’s face go through a torrent of emotions. Shaking his head he quelled
the worst of her doubts by placing a hand back on her cheek now flushed with her returning
lifeblood. “Time is on our side now. Let’s enjoy every minute of it.”

Snow sighed, letting it all sink in. She cocked her head and smiled warmly. “We’re going to be a
family again.”

“I told you, I will always fi –“

“Charming,” Snow censured with a smirk, “just shut up and kiss me.”
What Happens to All Heroes

It was nightfall. There was no light but the moon and the stars and the glowing fireflies. Dirt and crumbled stone was all that was left of the well. The monster that spawned from this site would remain buried forever, all because of the Savior.

There was no sign of the pawnbroker; all that lingered from his presence were footprints and the indentations of a cane. Storybrooke’s mayor (and Fairytale Land’s Evil Queen) lay sprawled on her back, unconscious but alive. Crumpled not far away was the blonde Savior, mumbling softly, her life-force slipping.

Regina came to with a pain in her side. There was no blood, yet the spreading bruise attested to a hard fall. She shook away her blurry vision and gasped when her protector came into view.

“Emma?”

To Regina, the well monster could not have been defeated if she was feeling such overwhelming terror. It was the kind of terror that stole her breath and stopped her heart. She had experienced this before, seeing her true love looking so still and so possibly dead. This time was different, though. Her adrenaline suddenly kicked in the moment she scrambled to her feet and slid in beside the prone blonde. Once she was turned over Emma’s face was revealed to be white as a sheet, her usual pale pink lips turning paler. The whispering coming from these lips came out quick and strained. Regina voice caught at the sight of the woman who had obviously sustained some sort of trauma before the black smoke. Trembling hands hovered over the body as if they desperately wanted to touch but somehow couldn’t. With a racing mind and pounding heart she debated what to do first, whether to heal, or comfort, or provide heat to the shuddering body. A proper course of action could not be reached instantly. Regina let out a sob before these timid hands descended.

Emma continued to mumble incoherently until she felt the mayor’s hands patting her body, possibly looking for some wound to heal. A drop of water hit her neck and she opened her eyes to witness a tear streaked face contorted in agony. Regina appeared to be in as much pain as Emma – and Emma was experiencing some pain.

Regina took in a shaky breath. It was impossible to act composed when Emma (half present, half elsewhere) was looking at her from beneath heavy lids. “I have to call an ambulance,” she spoke out loud more to herself than the hurt woman. She sniffed and wiped her eyes before fishing into her coat pocket.

“No,” Emma said weakly. A convulsion shook her and she winced. “There’s no time.”

Being the defiant woman she was, Regina didn’t heed such advice. She blinked the tears back as she squinted at her phone’s display. Before she could dial the final number a hand blindly slapped the phone down. Regina gritted her teeth before shouting, “Stop it! You’re hurt. I’m calling for help. Now lie still and save your strength.” She finished with a sob.

“Regina… it’s okay. I’m going to be fine. Just heal me.”

The request brought a gasp from the brunette. She was hit with a strong case of déjà vu. But unlike the nightmares and the recent vision of a dreaded future this appeal was genuine. What her eyes were seeing was solid and what her ears were hearing was crystal clear. No vision. No dream. Just reality, no strings attached.
Emma flinched through the pain spreading through her veins, but her voice remained soft, reassuring. “Heal, Regina.”

“I can’t,” the witch shook her head. More tears fell. “My powers are drained. I’m not strong enough.”

“You’re so stubborn,” Emma chuckled lightly, “you know that? Here,” Regina’s hand was taken and placed on a slowly rising chest. Emma shut her eyes and covered the hand with her own. “Just focus. Feel my heartbeat.”

Regina’s fingertips caressed the silk of her own blue shirt. She shook her head and then Emma slipped the hand to the skin underneath. The sensation caused Regina’s breath to hitch. She had expected the warm skin that had once touched hers, the flesh that had rubbed with and molded over her own during those wistful hours they had shared. The cold as steel flesh under her palm was a shock to Regina’s system and crushed every last hope remaining. “You’re so cold.”

“I’m fine,” Emma repeated. Her chest slowed its rhythm.

After a few seconds that felt like hours Regina sighed. “It’s not working. I have nothing left.” Her thumb caressed the spot. She squeezed her eyes shut as more tears were shed. “I’m sorry, Emma. I’m so sorry.”

“I know you. You can do this.” The whispers could barely cut through the wind, the crickets, and the crying coming from the other woman. The pins and needles wracking the sheriff’s body and the misery it was causing her love were too much for Emma to bear. With what little strength left she smiled and said, “I have faith in you… even though… you can be…”

As soon as Regina opened her eyes she wished she hadn’t. A strangled cry let loose from her salty lips.

***

Henry watched his pencil roll off the open pages of his book, past the algebraic equations and multiples of two and taking a suicide drop off the edge. It continued to make its journey across the desk, gaining speed until its progress was stopped by the finger of a ten-year-old.

Math was not a favorite subject of the boy’s. He much rather preferred recess and lunch like most children his age did. He also preferred spending time with his family. Quality time with the parents had slowed to a minimum lately and this was cause for worry. Henry had noticed this widening divide between his mothers and was quick to blame himself. Usually the subject of such fights revolved around their son, but so much time had passed since then and Henry had believed those days were in the past. He remembered the heated arguments where they would get up real close to one another, glaring and seething like rivals. However intense those moments were, he also witnessed other moments between them: smiling, laughing, staring (the non-glaring type), and lingering touches. Evidence like that would suggest feelings of love, not hate.

After a long sigh the pencil was placed in the crease of his textbook. The instrument didn’t stay put, of course. He watched with boredom as its jagged edges plowed end over end across his homework.

There he was in Nolan’s house biding his time in front of a boring book because his mother had something to take care of. Henry thought Regina didn’t want him home because she didn’t want him to overhear the shouting. She didn’t want him to know his parents had reverted back to their old ways. Henry’s shoulders dropped at the thought that he was yet again the reason why his
parents were not together.

He wished the leather bound tome was still in his possession. Maybe there was a page he missed, some story about his mother that would have opened his eyes to the person she really was. There had to be something in that book; a childhood she never talked about, the dreams she never fulfilled, a past self so repressed and lost it seemed would never reemerge. Until Emma.

A dull pang attacked his chest. Henry clutched at the area as it spread. It wasn’t painful like a wound, but horrifying like a warning. It was a dreadful feeling and Henry couldn’t stop the alarm from taking over. As Kathryn Nolan started calling for him excitedly the pencil rolled off the desk’s edge, forgotten.

***

Regina couldn’t believe this was happening to her again. The evidence in her arms was exactly why she didn’t want to get involved with Emma. Giving her heart to the blonde felt like the only decent thing she had ever accomplished. It came as a surprise to Regina that she still had it in herself to love again. After Daniel the likelihood of doing so a second time seemed impossible, but then Emma invaded her life, shattering that theory. Emma had fought with her, laughed with her, loved with her, and where did it lead them? What had it cost them? All that remained of Emma was a still heart and a lifeless body that Regina clung to desperately. Just like with Daniel.

“Emma, dear, you must stay awake. Stay with me.”

From behind, Regina wrapped her arms around the blonde who was laying limp into her body. The mayor shook and scratched manically at the lifeless form until she lost all strength to do so.

“Don’t leave me. Please, I need you here.” She shivered not from the cold of night but from the price that was paid. The truth dawned on her at that moment. Her voice shook as she finished, “You are my happiness.” The words could hardly escape her heaving chest but they managed to pass through trembling lips which she then pressed sloppily to Emma’s temple.

Regina thought how hard the woman had fought for her. Emma had saved her life multiple times, the most recent attempt ending in what seemed to be her own demise. It was strange that Emma had admitted her fear of giving her whole self to another, of taking without returning. It was strange because just minutes earlier Emma had done the complete opposite. Regina couldn’t be sure of what was going through the blonde’s mind when she launched herself between her and the monster. She couldn’t be sure if this selfless act was spurred on by Emma’s duty as Savior or by love. Regina didn’t know because Emma didn’t get a chance to tell her.

Regina willed her eyes open to stare down at the leather jacket that was clutched into her fists. Though the thing was the object of most of her loathing she took the time to really study it. She could feel all its glossiness and its imperfections, the smooth parts and the creases that interceded. This was something that belonged to a woman who had traveled, who had seen many things, and experienced so much. She inhaled deeply, smelling earth, cheap perfume, and French fries. It smelled like Emma.

The metals buttons shined back at her in the moonlight. Still clutching the jacket she gathered the lapels tighter around the body and held it close. The chest beneath her hands remained motionless. Regina buried her face into the blonde curls she loved so much. She loved the bounce of those silken waves and how they tickled her skin. She loved so much it hurt.

Regina never got to say those words. There was too much that had been left unsaid, so many things she wanted to experience with Emma. These experiences ranged from mundane subjects of
conversation to spending quality time with their son to planning the upcoming Christmas holiday together. Regina had also been hoping to share even more in what their hunger for each other produced. She realized she would never feel Emma’s lips on hers, never hear her name being cried out as the woman reached her peak, or feel the warm arousal spilling into her palm. Now it would all be a memory, and as time passed on, a faint emotion… just a lingering touch that fizzled into nothingness. It would be like someone that always seemed a part of her would be gone forever.

A most ordinary thought struck her. “I never even got to show you that stupid scrapbook.” A soft chuckle followed by more tears. “You would have hated it. ‘Emma Swan and crafts don’t mix’ I’m sure you’d say.” She cried even harder at the realization that Emma would no longer throw such artful sarcastic comments her way.

“I actually like the scrapbook,” came a gravelly voice. Emma cleared her throat, “but I wish it had more of you in it.”

It was like Regina had been punched in the stomach and slapped in the face all at the same time. Her head shot up as she gave an audible gasp. “You knew?!”

“I snoop.” Emma shrugged weakly under the embrace. “It’s what I do.”

A sharp reprimand for breaking into her study was in order, but the shock of a living, breathing Emma held precedence. Before shifting her body to look into green eyes she spotted a bright golden glow from her hands. Her remaining magic healed what she loved most. Regina didn’t even realize she was doing it.

Emma grunted under the crushing weight of the bear hug. She muffled against a shoulder, “Where are we? What happened?”

Regina let go and smacked her good. “You played the hero, you stupid fool!”

“Ow! I just came back from the dead, could you be a bit gentle?!”

The brunette brought her in for a less voracious hug and nuzzled her neck reverently.

Emma and Regina basked in the miracle of the moment, laying strategically placed kisses, inhaling each other’s scent (in all its earthy, sweaty glory), touching the warmth of their cheeks and hands. They ceased to speak, but simply held on with immeasurable adoration and would not let go.

“Whatever you did it worked.” Regina sniffed up the last of joyful tears. “The well – or what is left of it – should not be a problem anymore.”

Emma smirked proudly. “…Wasn’t even thinking about the well. I just knew I needed to get to you.”

Their fingers laced together with ease. “Maybe there’s a bit of magic in you after all.”

The idea brought a smile to the blonde’s lips. She sighed happily and nestled a head to the brunette’s breast. “I love you, dear.” The whisper tumbled effortlessly from brightening lips which turned up into a mischievous grin.

“You stole my line.” Regina’s glare disappeared to make room for shining eyes and a snicker. “I love you back my brave, stubborn sheriff.”

***
Storybrooke General was as bustling as it had ever been. The Charming duo fulfilled the prophecy by breaking the Queen’s spell with a kiss of true love. The result of such a momentous event spread like a domino effect as each and every one of the Fairytale Land characters awoke from their 28 year sleep. In addition to the lifting of a curse, the Savior’s final act as hero was successful in defeating the well monster and freeing its victims from their nightmare prison.

The people of Storybrooke gathered at the hospital to greet newly awakened loved ones and converse with friends they hadn’t seen since the curse robbed them of their true selves.

The blonde savior had lapsed in and out of consciousness on the drive to this lively hospital. Though Emma’s breathing remained steady Regina never stopped fretting over her condition and talked on in an effort to keep her awake. The constant gabbing and worrying during the seemingly long journey made Emma want to fall back under. As grateful as it was to be alive she simply longed for a warm bath, a cheeseburger, and a comfy bed (burger first). As Emma was lifted onto a gurney and rolled into the building she prayed that Dr. Whale had good news for a speedy release.

Regina fixed her eyes on Emma the whole ride to the emergency room. She ran beside the gurney, one hand in the blonde’s and the other with a death grip on the rail. So focused on her love, the once queen was not aware of her audience. Her enemies surrounded her, glaring, whispering, and growling plans for her execution. The nurses wheeled the sheriff past Princess Abigail who looked on the trotting mayor with a disappointing tear. Sitting on the steps was Jefferson shaking his head and planning his vengeance. They turned a corner which revealed Jiminy pacifying a growling Red. No one approached the brunette because it would seem that their savior didn’t want bloodshed. Despite the one not being transported by gurney, Regina was under the protection of their sheriff. There would be no assassination, yet.

By the time they arrived at the ER Regina had to be physically restrained from entering so that Whale could conduct his tests. She watched from behind the glass as Emma was poked and prodded with needles and hooked up to various machines. Though the worst was over Regina’s heart would not stop racing. She had come so close to losing the woman and just because Emma insisted she was fine did not mean she was. The worrying would cease when a clean bill of health was issued and a signature roll of green eyes was presented. Her hands pressed against the glass as she observed with a staggering need to be on the other side.

The sound of squeaking sneakers and labored breathing brought Regina’s gaze from the room to the boy running into her arms. “Henry!”

“Mom!”

Mother and son gripped each other with intense love. Henry didn’t care that the whole town would soon be out for her blood. He was a boy in need of his mother and all her wrongdoings as Evil Queen took a backseat to this priority.

“Are you okay? You’re not hurt are you?”

Regina’s breath hitched. She had longed to hear such words from him and the concern he was displaying almost brought her to tears. “No, dear, I’m fine. I brought Emma here to be checked out.” Henry’s eyes widened, assuming the worst. She quickly shook her head and cupped his cheeks to instill just the reverse. “She’s going to be okay. Dr. Whale simply needs to conduct a few routine tests. I’m sure you can see her as soon as she’s cleared.” The boy breathed a sigh of relief. “Henry, how did you get here?”

“Once I heard what happened I came right over. Mrs. Nolan – I mean…”
“Mrs. Nolan what?”

“Well,” he started, avoiding her eyes while shifting his weight, “what I meant to say was Princess Abigail drove me here.” His eyes met her widening brown orbs. “The curse is broken, mom.”

If the mayor’s son didn’t have a hand on her arm she would have stumbled back. Henry saw the devastation materializing and suddenly felt a great sympathy for her. No matter what crimes she had committed in the past that was where they were, in the past. Regina was a changed person thanks to Emma. A cool spirit had settled itself within this woman. The brokenhearted queen that had ripped away happiness, separated true loves, and taken lives had been succeeded by a truly brave soul, an individual who had risked her life to save not only her family but her enemies as well. Regina Mills was not just a changed woman. She was a hero.

Regina finally sensed the others assembled in the hospital. The chilling looks were aimed in only one direction. The Evil Queen would have cut each and every one of those peasants down with a promise to destroy their happiness and then made her exit in a puff of smoke, however, the soon-to-be ex-Mayor of Storybrooke and true love of the Savior stayed put before those threatening stares. For the first time, the people of Storybrooke had made their mayor quake under their presence.

Regina took the small hands in hers just like her son did when he begged her to hunt down Emma and bring her home. “Henry, I didn’t mean to lie to you. Once Emma found out we decided it was best to keep it secret, for your protection. I was going to help her break the curse. You have to believe that.”

The boy studied the woman’s face in all its contours and emotions. He scrutinized as if he had the Savior’s ability to detect a lie, but he didn’t need a superpower to read his own mother. It only took one look for Henry to know the truth. “I know,” he stated. “I saw it before. You really have changed.”

It was all Regina needed to hear for her heart to become whole. A thumb stroked adoringly at his cheek. They shared a smile that sealed their destiny as devoted mother and loyal child.

When the doctor emerged Regina approached him with hopeful countenance. Henry’s eyes practically burned through the glass in search of his biological mother who was bedridden, eyes closed, yet relaxed.

“How is she?” spoke the brunette in a shaky voice.

“Stable,” answered Whale. “I recommend that Sheriff Swan stay overnight. I want to monitor her progress just to be sure she’s one hundred percent before I release her.”

“Can we see her?”

“I’m afraid not.” Whale shifted his sympathetic eyes from Henry (still nose to the glass) toward Regina. All compassion and sensitivity left his face to make room for the very same expression the others had given her. His tone was sharp as a razor when he said, “But even if visitors were permitted at this stage they would be immediate family only.”

Everything in the mayor wanted to scream out ‘I am family,’ but considering Snow and James were somewhere in the vicinity she decided not to make that argument. Instead, Regina called upon her mayoral boldness (and a little essence of Evil Queen) to turn things her way.

Breathing in anxiety and exhaling to release that tension, Regina put on one of her signature, if not
deadly, glares and took a step forward. “Emma Swan is my son’s biological mother. She also happens to be the woman *I love*. So if *you*,” she jabbed a finger into his chest, “don’t let me in there then so help me I will run you out of this world and into the next before you can say ‘Will there be nuns there?’”

Dr. Whale stumbled back by the sheer determination on the woman’s face.

“Are we clear… *Doctor*?”

There was a fierce nod and then, “O-of course!”

Henry watched in awe. Unlike Whale and the onlookers, he was seeing a woman in love that desperately needed to be at Emma’s side. Henry was so proud of the mayor for openly displaying such concern for a sheriff she once openly detested, so when he saw her rush to the other woman’s bedside he decided to give his mothers their much needed time alone.

Just as Henry saw Regina slip her hand into Emma’s and mumble something the glass prevented him from hearing there arose a commotion in the hallway.

“Emma! Where is she?” Snow’s voice was frantic. She came barreling down the hall with her prince in tow. “We heard she was admitted. Is our daughter alright?”

Henry waved them over. He assured them that Dr. Whale had just seen Emma and that she was resting comfortably. He was about to tell them of the blonde’s other visitor when his grandmother interrupted with a shriek.

“Oh my god!” The short brunette covered her mouth in horror. “Is that the queen?!”

“Regina?” James’ attention followed where his wife’s was aimed. “That witch!” he growled at the sight of his greatest enemy sitting at the bedside of his long lost daughter. His eyes beheld the hand reach up to caress the blonde’s cheek. It was enough to make him dive through the glass to perform a rescue.

But before the knight could make his gallant (if not misplaced) endeavor his grandson intervened. “She may have been the Evil Queen before but she isn’t anymore. Emma changed her. She’s done hurting people.” Snow opened her mouth but the boy continued. “I’ve seen the good in her and it’s not an act.”

“Henry, sweetheart, you don’t know her like we do. Regina is good at playing people. I know you think she’s doing good, but she’s simply showing you what you want to see. It’s an illusion.”

“She’s right, Henry.” James clapped his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “The Evil Queen has been given plenty of chances to redeem herself. Each and every one of those times was met with threats against our lives. There is no more good in that woman. She will destroy everything our family loves… which means Emma.”

James made a move to enter the sliding glass doors but Henry weaseled in, putting himself between his grandparents and the parents he knew now to be in love. “She’s my mom!” he countered with a hardened gaze that matched a similar expression of said mom. He turned to witness Emma chuckling at something Regina had said. “They’re both my moms.” Henry never wanted so much in that moment for Emma and Regina to be a part of his family – and not as separate parents to him. Witnessing how well they were conversing and how relaxed his adoptive mother’s posture was he knew whatever fight that had occurred between them was forgotten and perhaps even forgiven. He liked them this way. He liked that they held hands and exchanged
meaningful smiles. Once he came to a satisfying conclusion as to why that was Henry faced his grandparents. “I’ve seen the way they look at each other. It’s exactly how you two act.” He emphasized his final words with a passion they had never seen. “It’s true love.”

Snow and James looked at each other and then at the couple beyond the glass. Whatever confusing scene they had perceived when they arrived was now made clear with those spoken words. James saw the blonde’s smile widening and the tip of her head as if in understanding or affection. He also noticed how easily she laughed and the undisturbed way her body responded in the witch’s presence.

While her husband was having his epiphany Snow studied the pair’s hands and how snugly they fit together. The girl who had saved her life and taught her about true love was sweeping a thumb across her daughter’s hand. It was the gentlest sign of warmth Snow had ever seen and the gesture reminded her of that carefree girl who had spoken of love and magic all those years ago. Emma gripped the caressing hand as if it was all the comfort she needed in the world. The sight of this desperation caused jealousy to burn within Snow, but she quickly pushed it down. This was clearly what her daughter wanted. This was who her daughter was falling in love with. She neither expected this nor wanted to believe it, but the evidence was presented clear as day beyond the glass barrier. It was no spiteful illusion. It was the magic of true love.

Henry noticed the sad, yet quiet expressions and the way his grandparents' hands blindly found each other. He sighed in relief at the work he had accomplished.

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A hum vibrated between closed lips at the sight of a sleeping Emma. Sitting beside her Regina tipped her head and let her eyes drag down the form. There wasn’t a mark on the woman, no sign of trauma, and no indication of the death she narrowly escaped. She was the image of an ordinary 28-year-old sleeping off a little stress. But Regina knew better. This blonde woman was extraordinary. Emma Swan had ignited love, setting a spark to a flame that had been extinguished for decades. It was a feat only accomplishable by the most dogged fighter, an angel willing to give a sinner a second chance, someone who was all-too wary of her savior destiny.

Regina took the hand of the woman who had lit her soul. “You’re strikingly beautiful.” She kept her voice down so as not to disturb the sheriff’s slumber. “I never said that enough. In fact, I don’t think I have ever told you.”

Emma stirred beneath the hospital’s soft blue blanket. “Hey,” came the greeting. She didn’t need to open her eyes to identify her visitor.

“How are you feeling?”

“Just tired is all,” the sheriff answered, giving a reassuring grin. “I’m fine.”

Beholding still shut lids Regina bristled. “I’m coming to the conclusion that you don’t understand the concept of ‘fine,’ dear.”

Emma laughed and opened droopy eyes to affirm the presence of mockery. Instead, she was met with worry lines and honest brown eyes.

She thought of all the times they had gotten each other out of a tight (and usually deadly) situation. A fire… a wrecked Mercedes… a wolf… the Dark One… a fear inducing monstrosity… Despite having ended up in such dire circumstances Emma found herself to be a very lucky woman. To rescue her true love and be rescued in return was an honor indeed. “You saved me again,” Emma
stated with fondness.

Reaching out with her other hand Regina stroked the blonde’s cheek. “You saved everyone. The curse has been lifted.” Green eyes widened and the brunette explained, “Whatever you said to David worked. He was able to use true love’s kiss in bringing everyone’s memories back.”

“So… Mary Margaret is okay? She woke up?”

Regina nodded despite her objections to the woman’s fate. “When you so heroically threw yourself in front of me the fear couldn’t overthrow you entirely. You must have a strong heart, Miss Swan.”

To witness such a thing, her hand disengaged from its other half and settled on the blonde’s steadily rising and falling chest. “I blacked out just as the smoke was receding, but I know for sure your sacrifice was not in vain. If you hadn’t given yourself over to that thing those people would still be lying comatose, even after my curse was broken.” Regina diverted her gaze and grinned shyly. “I’ve never seen such courage.”

Emma cleared her throat to distract from the stinging her eyes were experiencing. As strong as this savior was she was wholly unfamiliar with such compliments and just as unprepared to hear them from a woman who once upon a time detested her. Their eyes met.

“I am so proud of you, Emma.”

Shifting under the blanket the blonde winced animatedly. “This soft side of you… it’s kind of unsettling.”

There was a fiendish snicker. The witch drawled, “There are ways to remedy that.”

“Next time you’re cross with me I’ll have to remember to do something heroic. Or turn on my Emma Swan charm.”

“Charm?” scoffed Regina. “Let’s not resort to extremes, dear.”

Pink lips widened further as Emma basked in the long overdue sarcasm à la Madam Mayor. The hairs on her back hand rose to the ghost like sensation of a thumb. Emma allowed the fingers to make their seductive entrance into to her palm. She gripped the hand with desperation, hoping its digits would never cease to elicit such wonderful sensations.

Regina took a deep breath and let it out unsteadily. “I’ve never been so happy and so afraid in my entire life.”

“My parents?”

“And the entire town I cursed.”

“They may be pissed off —” Regina’s brow rose, “— okay they’re gonna be really pissed off, but once we tell them what you did and how you risked your life for everyone they will eventually see who I see.”

“And who is that?”

Emma bit her lip. “A condescending mayor with a nice ass.”

“Miss Swan!” the brunette reproached over the giggling.

“I see a good person who has made some mistakes and got lost along the way. You’re no different
from the rest of us.” Emma gave a comical wink of her eye. “There is nothing evil about you. You, Regina Mills, are all brains and beauty. And you take my breath away.”

Regina turned away to smooth down the blanket wrinkles, focusing on a stubborn crease towards the patient’s knee. “Look who’s getting soft now?”

A shrug and then, “You asked for it.”

After the blanket was properly cared for Emma was met with shining brown irises brimming with gratitude. She then noticed movement beyond the doors to her hospital room and leaned to the side in order to get a better look. “I wonder what’s going on out there.”

The inquiry and the steadily rising chatter outside prompted the Regina to see for herself. There standing tall and oddly regal was Henry Mills addressing a crowd of Storybrooke citizens. Flanking the boy were his grandparents, Snow with a protective hand on the adolescent’s shoulder, and James arms crossed and standing like an immovable statue. It looked like, Regina supposed, the three were barricading the glass doors from a vengeful mob.

“They are here for me.”

Emma’s hand was caught in a vice grip born of regret and panic. She had never heard Regina speak in such a small voice, so stripped of its usually sharp, tactful quality. A tremor passed between their touching hands, seeping like ink into the blonde who then turned it into a harmless flow of warmth. Regina’s fear subsided, the blonde’s touch acting like a buffer to these dark sensations. Emma had sworn to do whatever it took to insure the mayor’s safety and no matter what came at them – whether dark magic or rampaging townspeople – the Savior would keep her promise. To reinforce the message Emma wrapped her arms around the brunette’s waist and pulled her closer. They held each other, watching, waiting for the inevitable.

But there was no need to show such protection, for their son had things well under control. Henry (standing on a crate to get some height) was delivering what appeared to be an eloquent speech while waving a hand deliberately to his points. His audience included Red and Granny, Jiminy, Leroy and his dwarf friends, Abigail and Frederick, and others. They listened impatiently, some shifting uncomfortably while others sighed out their frustration. Most of their negative spirits seemed to be gradually quelled by the young boy’s speech with Snow’s added contribution.

“Looks like we have a hero of our own,” Emma commented with smile. It was the first time she was experiencing motherly pride in her son.

Regina sank back into her lover’s arms, more relaxed at the sight of their ten-year-old boy defending them. “Mm, I think he gets that from you.”

“Nu-uh,” Emma shook her head, “It’s those public speaking skills he’s learned from the master. And that brutal persuasion… that is all you.”

Fully aware she was being teased Regina slapped away the roaming fingers and glared. “I did have a life beyond politics. Not all my qualities are so brutish.”

“I am well aware of that, Madame Mayor.” The blonde grinned slyly. Before Regina could soften her demeanor for a long outstanding kiss Emma interceded with a question that had been nagging her. “I guess they would still need to exact some sort of punishment.” Lips were forced into a thin, irritated line. “Although there’s no justification in doing so if this world is markedly better than the other one.”
“I may escape execution, but it would be naïve to think there are no repercussions for what I’ve done. I can’t deny this world may have its benefits. That still doesn’t disregard the 28 years I robbed from them.” Regina gave a sad smile. “I’m afraid you will not get the satisfaction of calling me Madame Mayor anytime soon.”

“So what will you do?”

“I’ve been mayor for so long I don’t know anything else. Except…” the brunette wrung her hands nervously at the thought, “… I suppose I could become a stay-at-home mother to Henry. But then I haven’t exactly done a good job of that.” Eyes closed at the times she had lied to her son, forced him into therapy he didn’t need, and neglected to love him the way he deserved. “I could use your help.” Her voice was soft and vulnerable. The former Evil Queen was not used to admitting her inability at doing things herself.

“You don’t even have to ask.” The blonde Savior took the hand in hers. “You know, the sheriff could use a deputy,” she offered with a wiggle of her brows.

Regina rocked back and laughed, shaking the bed in the process. It was certainly a chore to imagine Emma being her superior but then the idea of working under the sheriff brought a cool smile to her lips.

Reveling in the joy she had brought to the amused woman Emma looked from the bright, full smile to the boy holding the now curious attention of the crowd.

She finally understood what Henry was trying to tell her that day she left them. A hero never escapes unscathed from their trials. They go through moments of heartbreak, a time when those hearts are mended, and even more periods of losing faith. To get to your goal a low point must be experienced so you know what is at stake and what is being risked. You must see the dark side of what you are trying to destroy. You must also know evil in order to save one of evil. The storms weathered, the blood that was shed, the trust which shattered… this happens to all heroes and no one flees without the scars.

Emma stared at Regina who was staring back at her and knew that it was all worth it.

“Emma?” The brunette studied the hand of her true love for a moment as if debating whether to go on. “I want you to move in with Henry and me.”

In true Regina form it was not phrased as a question, although, the way she shifted fretfully on the bed suggested the opposite. Emma was completely caught off guard and Regina took the blonde’s silence to express doubts. She waited patiently as the mayor went on about how it was probably too soon to take things to the next level, that Emma wasn’t ready considering her misgivings about long-term relationships, and how she would rather spend time with her newly awakened parents. Instead of worrying over such a quick change of heart Emma thought it adorable how nervous Regina was behaving. She was so used to seeing the woman in control of social situations, always taking the lead without regard for others’ contribution. This Regina, the one babbling on and fiddling over non-existent wrinkles in the blanket was too irresistible for Emma to listen patiently to.

“Umph,” Regina’s rapidly moving lips muffled against another.

“Does that answer your question?”

There was a tilt of a brunette head. “Not quite.”
To provide emphasis, the blonde deepened the kiss.

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