Striking Down Roots
by lostlilsnail

Summary

When Emma shows back up in Storybrooke months after taking on the dark curse, she's not the only one who has gone through a transformation. With battles to fight on two fronts against powers beyond her comprehension, Regina finds herself scrambling to keep entire worlds from falling apart.

Notes

I know there are a million and one Dark Swan fics out there but I guess this is my sappy gay take. A heads up that even though there will be some battles this is mostly going to be a slow, quiet story about how much Regina loves Henry and how much Henry loves Emma and how much Emma loves them both.

**If this seems familiar to you and you feel the urge to yell at me please don’t! I had 13 chapters of this posted on FF.net before taking it down.**
Two months, that's how long it's been.

Leroy swears he saw her a week ago, perched on the clock tower, surveying the town like some kind of anti-hero night stalker out of Henry's comic books. But Regina wasn't there. She hadn't seen a thing. Hasn't heard a word. And she's not one to count drunken dwarfs as reliable witnesses.

So, two months it is.

Two months since anybody in the entirety of Storybrooke has laid eyes on Emma Swan.

"Do you want me to stay?"

Regina glances up, at last makes eye contact with Henry and realizes she's not quite sure where she's meant to be giving him permission to go.

"Because I can stay if you want." He's fidgety. Nervous. Has been ever since last week when he'd snapped at her for not solving their current crisis fast enough. She's soothed it a thousand times over, but she can still see the guilt reflecting in his gaze. "I don't mind."

"It's fine." Regina swallows and stands, pushes up from behind her desk and straightens her clothes so she at least looks like she's been following the conversation. She reaches out and trails her fingers along the soft swell of Henry's cheek. "Just do your best to be home before ten, hmm?"

Fighting his teenage instincts, he doesn't pull away. "Okay."

"Text me when you get to-"

A wry grimace spreads across his lips. It's the closest they get to smiling these days. "Grandma's."

"Right." She nods, heavy and slow and then, belatedly, "Do you need a ride?"

"No, because Grandpa's on his way over, remember?" Henry's prompting is more gentle than it has any right to be.

"Of course." It's funny, after everything, a part of her wishes she suspected he was lying to her again. Sneaking around with his birth mother behind her back, planning asinine operations and stealing the odd milkshake before dinner. She shakes her head, clears out the memory of her old rival's hard glare. "I'm sorry. I'm just-"

"Tired," he finishes for her. "Are you sure you don't want me to stay?"

She breathes deep, forces her voice higher. "Positive. Go, have fun."

The face he pulls reminds her that he's going over to work on a school report. Which he'd told her about when she'd only been half listening, again.
"I'm sorry, Henry."

"I'm not mad." He hesitates for a moment, then steps forward and wraps her in a tight hug. She folds into it without resistance. "Don't forget to eat, okay?"

She sighs in his hair before pulling away. "Yes, sir." She smooths the collar on his shirt and steps back. "Go on, there are some things I need to finish looking over."

As soon as he's gone, Regina slumps back into her chair. Her limbs are heavier these days, her back sore, her feet tired. Even in the early days of the curse, when Regina had had all the time in the world to throw herself into her work, she feels comfortable saying Storybrooke has never run smoother. She's never been more dedicated to the job. More singularly focused.

Better to focus on what can be done, than obsess over the impossible.

She stares down at the crooked, ugly dagger on her desk. Traces the intricate patterns etched in the blade with her eyes. Skate's over Emma Swan's name, can't bring herself to focus on the words.

"What are you waiting for?" she murmurs.

There's no answer.

There never is.

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Granny's is easier these days. Cooking takes more energy than she can muster and for once in her life, Regina finds she's not looking to wallow in her solitude. There's something almost comforting about walking into the quiet diner. Familiar faces with strained features lost in the haze of impossible questions. All asking themselves the very same thing.

There's something unifying in it. And she's exhausted and devastated and aching, but for the first time she can look around and say she's with them. Share in this experience with the masses after a lifetime of being othered.

"Hey." Ruby doesn't look up from where she's wiping down the counters as Regina takes a stool. She doesn't look at Regina much these days.

Maybe in her desperate bid to fight through the tears and spread word of her daughter's final act of heroics, Snow had yet again done more harm than good. Because even if most of the populace seems okay with it, emphasizing "she saved Regina. It was all because of Regina," might not endear the Evil Queen to some of the Savior's closest friends.

At least Ruby never seems angry. She's better than Regina in that way. It would be different, she knows, were the roles reversed. Ruby likely knows it too. And yet she's big enough to glance up and flash a strained smile and say, "What can I get you?"

Regina orders something small, if only to keep her promise to Henry. And then she gets a couple of sandwiches. Something for him to bring to school tomorrow and her to work. The kitchen is rather barren these days. They desperately need to stop by the grocery store.
She tacks on, "To go," at the end of her order and doesn't miss the wave of relief that washes through Ruby.

"I'll get on it," Ruby says with a nod, polite, professional, and then she's gone.

Regina sits on her stool and keeps to herself as she waits. Gaze trailing over the thin line of salt someone's spilled on the countertop. Or maybe that's sugar? It looks like it could be sugar.

For the briefest second she's tempted to reach out and taste it just to be sure and then she laughs at herself, disgusted. God, David's right. She is going to go crazy if she doesn't get more sleep.

"Regina?"

She startles out of her thoughts and looks up to find Robin awkwardly hovering. He seems to hesitate for a moment while she just blankly stares before swallowing and stealing the stool beside her.

"How are you?" he tries, soft and tentative.

"We're managing," she replies, because she'll never let anyone forget this grief belongs to Henry more than anyone else. That she has to watch how it weighs on him daily. That he'll never escape it for the rest of his life unless his mother comes home.

"Good." He nods, rubs his palms over his crisp, dark jeans - huh, those must be new. "That's, uh, that's good."

She forces a strained smile. It's weak, but apparently it's enough to bolster his courage.

"It's been awhile."

She nods her agreement.

"Roland's getting along rather well in the kindergarten. He's catching up fairly well to the other children. Some things about this realm still confuse him but I think he'll be able to work past it before long."

He's aiming right for her weakness. Knows Roland is his greatest chance at holding her interest. Always has been.

"I'm glad," she says, and she really means it. Even if she's a little itchy and slides to the edge of her stool, half-standing as she cranes her neck to get a look into the window at the kitchen. How long do a few sandwiches take? "He's a smart boy, I'm sure he'll get along just fine."

"He will." Robin leans a bit closer. Hands up on the counter, he twiddles his thumbs. "I'm sure he'd like to see you again."

In different circumstances, Regina would like that too. But the world is muffled these days, unfocused, and she doesn't appreciate being blatantly manipulated. No matter how well meaning the reason.

"I would too," he pushes lightly when she takes too long to reply.

Ruby reappears then, a folded paper bag in her hands. A quick swipe of her credit card and some hurried thanks and Regina slides fully off the stool, ready to make a break for the safety of home.

"Look, Robin, I'm kind of busy right now just trying to keep my family from falling apart. Henry is-"
Her voice breaks. She swallows. "He needs me. More than ever before, he needs me. And after being separated for so long last year, I refuse to not be there for him every waking moment. I'm sorry."

She heads for the door before he can answer, but halfway to it she falters. Thinks better of marching out when she knows if she does she'll just be having this conversation all over again in a week, in a month, in a year. They've cultivated an endless cycle between them. The coming together, the outside circumstances, the breaking apart.

Over and over and over until she was left dizzy and breathless and feeling more alone than ever before.

Maybe he is her soulmate chosen by pixie dust. But if her fate is a love that leaves her constantly scrambling, constantly fighting, suffering through unaltering waves of anxiety and uncertainty and strife, at this point in her life she's old and weary enough to take a stand and say no. She doesn't want it.

All she wants is to live in peace and watch her son smile.

That's all she's ever wanted.

Regina turns back, moves close to save him the embarrassment in case they're overheard. "From the very start it's been so messy with us. So difficult and involved and consuming and- And even without what's happening Henry is my first priority. Always. No matter who else comes into my life. And whatever we've tried to build between us, it just never seemed able to gel with that, did it?"

He stares at her, eyes wide with pained understanding.

"I'm sorry," she says again. And when she walks away from him for a second time she expects to feel sorrow. Maybe a little bitterness, some resentment and that ache of almost at what she's being forced to give up yet again because of outside forces hellbent on dictating the outcome of her life.

But she finds as she heads out of Granny's and into the warm, early evening of Storybrooke, she mostly just feels tired.

- "You've worked too hard to have your happiness destroyed."

Regina sprawls sideways across her mattress, a hand to her stomach as she stares up at the colorless ceiling. Is she a horrible person? A monster all over again?

Because she's been working so hard at reforming. At being good. Someone worthy of the family that, despite all odds and past deeds, has somehow still fallen into her lap. Every day she fights to move forward and be worthy of them. Of their love.

Of Snow's smile and David's grin and the way baby Neal molds so easily into her arms.

Of Henry's tight hugs and warm laugh and unaltering belief in her potential for goodness.

Of Emma throwing herself bodily into the darkest curse just to protect the very idea of Regina's
future.

The future Regina had just walked out on.

If Emma comes home and she and Robin aren't together living a happy, wholesome, fairy tale ever after will she ever be able to forgive Regina?

If she never comes home will Regina ever be able to forgive herself?

But what's the alternative? Force herself? Feign happiness? Trap Robin? Tether him to a lie because once he'd decided to get his king’s crest branded on his arm?

Regina groans and rolls over on the mattress, eyes finding the dagger on her bedside table. "You're going to hate me for this, aren't you?"

There's no answer.

There never is.

The phone rings and Regina scrambles to answer it.

Some new evil has hit the town.

Something's wrong with Henry.

They've found her, she was just fine all along and it's all over now.

"Hello?" she answers without even bothering to check the ID.

"Regina." It's Snow. Calm and passive and not at all a mother who just got back the entirety of her world. "Would it be okay if Henry stayed the night? I can tell he didn't want to be the one to ask but-" She falters. Her breathing shaky. "He's up in Emma's room. I think maybe he'd like to stay."

Regina's throat burns and she swipes a hand under her eyes. "That's fine," she manages past the thickness. "Of course that's fine. Do you need anything?"

"He has his backpack with him and there are still some clothes here so we'll handle school in the morning."

"Tell him I'll be there to pick him up in the afternoon."

"Okay." Snow sounds so small. Small and tired and so much less than she ought to be.

They hang up without saying goodbye.

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"Look at her, completely off guard." The words are so soft in her ear, they're almost lost on the wind. "She's just lying there. Waiting."

She curls her fingers into her thighs. Presses harder and harder until the pain throbs louder than the words.
"I wonder how it would feel, to dig your nails into her skin. Soft, I'll bet. Warm too."

She swallows as she pictures it. The flesh resistant until pierced. How it would yield so easily afterwards. How her insides would mold and form around her searching fingers.

"Please stop." Her voice wavers. Weak.

"Are you sure you want me to?"
The Well

When Regina steps into her office in the morning, the whole thing is torn apart. Her furniture flipped. Papers strewn about. Paintings and photos ripped down from the walls.

She merely sighs before setting to right it with magic. There's no shock or surprise here. It's Hook's work. No question. He hadn't taken well to her rejecting his latest bid to get his hand on Emma's dagger. Two months of relentless, increasingly aggressive hounding and she's become rather immune to his dramatics.

Whether he was looking for it while she was away or just sending a message, Regina's not one to be intimidated by a drunken pirate. No matter how much he insists it's his right to the dagger as Emma's True Love. With Snow and David and Henry on her side, she continues to walk away the victor in their spats. If they believe in her to hold this power over Emma and not abuse it, like hell is she going to give it up.

As she's told Hook numerous times, he can pry the damned thing from her cold, dead fingers.

And, okay, yes, fine, maybe she's projecting, but she also can't help but feel Emma would want her to have it. That she wouldn't have leapt forward to offer herself as sacrifice if she hadn't.

Perhaps it doesn't carry much weight now with Emma gone but it's still a bond of trust Regina refuses to break.

Not after everything Emma has done.


"Did you have a good night last night?"

The answer is obvious by his posture. The way Henry's slumped in his seat, sullen and withdrawn and eyes glued to the window. But still, it's something to break the silence in the car, and sometimes they both just need to pretend.

Except today, Henry doesn't seem to want to.

"Can you take me to the well?" The question bursts out of him. Short and breathless as though he's been swallowing the words down for so long now he can't bear to contain them any longer.

Regina keeps her eyes on the road and does her best to forget about the fact that the last time she was there Henry had been small and angry and lighting a fuse of all things. "Why would you want to do that, sweetheart?"

"Way back when, August told me it's supposed to return things we've lost." Henry holds his backpack to his chest, gaze firm on the passing trees outside the window. "That's where Grandpa Gold brought magic back. And that's where-" his voice falters, cracks a little and for once she thinks he can't blame puberty.

"Where Emma and Snow came home," Regina finishes for him when he can't.
"Yeah." Henry swallows as she turns onto Mifflin. "Will you?"

Regina hums while she pulls into the driveway, fighting to stay calm as everything within her screams no. Of course not.

Why would she ever, ever take Henry to the well and give him false hope that it could somehow bring his savior back when she knows down to her bones it won't work. That there's no way that something so simple can be the answer. Not when she's spent months so tirelessly employing all of the magic the whole town has at its disposal.

How can she stand to lead him there? To watch the bright light of hope fade from his eyes yet again.

But god, how can she listen to this earnest plea from her precious boy and be the type of mother who shakes her head and says, "no"?

It's an impossible question with two horrendous answers.

Regina puts the car in park and shuts it off. Turns to Henry. Runs tentative fingers through his hair. Smooths it again and again until he's restless enough to pull away.

"Maybe this weekend we'll take a hike," she allows, "you and me," because she wants so badly for Henry to live life with a heart full of hope but she refuses to ever, ever play his villain again for as long as she lives. "It can't hurt to take a look around."

His smile is wider than it's been since they've lost her.

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Henry is slow behind Regina. Struggling under the clunkiness of the box he insists on carrying all on his own. It rattles and clanks as they trudge through the forest. Its contents rolling about inside and scaring off any wildlife their footsteps haven't already managed to. It's not too difficult of a trek, but there are other ways Regina would prefer to spend her Saturday afternoon.

Wherever Henry leads though, she'll follow. That will never change.

It's nearing two by the time they reach the old stone well. Magic is heavier here. Regina can feel it in the air. It presses down on her and reminds her a bit of the old world. Where the sun and the sea and the sky was crackling with the stuff. Brimming with energy to be wielded and explored.

It's so much weaker in Storybrooke. So much more subdued. More difficult to call forth and mold into something usable. God, she used to wonder sometimes after witnessing the power Emma - untrained and in this realm built to resist it's use - could produce. How magnificent it would be in the Enchanted Forest.

How unstoppable she would become.

If little Snow White had been allowed to raise her daughter there and teach her properly, all the might of the Evil Queen would have never stood a chance, that was for certain.

The heavy thunk of Henry dropping the box onto the lip of the well draws her to the present. She watches him open it carefully.
Okay, so, I brought pretty much everything important. Even though Grandma wouldn't let me take your blanket.

Regina's eyes snap shut as she listens to him speak not to her, but to Emma. She breathes deep. Fights to stay composed for her little boy.

"I brought your badge." He pulls it out first. Holds it flat against his palm. "I know you don't always love the paperwork and everybody calling you all the time because Pongo got loose again and is digging up their yards, but I also know you always do your best with the job because you want to help keep people safe. Whether it's a Disney super villain or a speeding ticket." He tilts his hand. The badge glints in the sun as it slides off into the well.

For a moment Henry pauses, peering down into the darkness as though waiting for a burst of magic that will call Emma forth.

Nothing happens.

He reaches into the box and pulls out a takeout bag from Granny's. "The Swan Special cooked by one Ruby Lucas," he announces with a watery laugh. "Grilled cheese with tomato. Half and half onion rings and french fries." He drops that too. "The smell alone has gotta be worth coming home for, if nothing else."

Regina stands, arms wrapped around her torso, squeezing as tight as she can, hardly daring to breath.

Henry chuckles as he pulls out a stack of papers next. "I thought maybe it could be like a ghost thing. Like in movies, you know? With unfinished business and stuff." He holds them in a bundle over the well. "This is all the paperwork you left on your desk. Everything you swore to Mom you would turn in and never did."

He looks over his shoulder at her then, as though just remembering she's there, and the fresh tear tracks on his cheeks glisten. "Don't worry, I had Grandpa photocopy everything."

She manages a tight lipped smile and he returns it before dropping those too.

"You have to come back soon and finish them or Mom's gonna kick your ass."

Regina chokes on the laugh that bubbles out of her. Lets the language slip by without reprimand, just this once.

"Oh," Henry hums a little, clearly self conscious as he digs through the box, "this is a little dumb, but it's the closest thing I could find at the mart." It's hard to make out, but Regina thinks he pulls out a tiny yellow model of a muscle car. Something for children to play with.

"I couldn't exactly bring the bug, but you get the idea. Nobody's keeping up with the work. She's just sitting in your spot at the station. Getting all rusty. So you have to come back and take care of her, okay? You always told me she needs constant upkeep so she doesn't give up on you, right?"

He drops the toy and the next thing he pulls out is a picture. Regina quietly moves closer until she can make out David and Snow's smiling faces, baby Neal squashed between them.

"I know you miss them wherever you are. Grandma and Grandpa and Neal." He swallows. "They miss you. All of us do. I miss when you would roll your eyes when Grandma made a hope speech or wrinkle your nose at me whenever we would catch them kissing. And I miss trying to babysit with you on their date nights." He laughs. "Even though we always got freaked out when he started crying and had to call Mom over to get him to stop."
"I know it's hard for you to look at him sometimes. And I know it's hard for you to say his name. Sometimes it's hard for me to say it too. To not be mad at them for doing that to us without even trying to ask first. But it was easier to deal with when you were here." His fingers tighten around the photograph and he murmurs, "I hope I made it easier for you too," so softly Regina almost doesn't hear him.

The picture sways gently in the air as it flutters into the mouth of the well. Side to side, sweeping down. Before it's even out of sight Henry's got another in his hand.

It's her own face Regina sees smiling out at her, Emma's too, Henry pressed between them with a beaming grin. She remembers it so clearly. After Neverland and curses and a forgotten year and a trip through time and Marian and forgiveness.

A quiet night out at Granny's. Stuffed together in a too-small booth, pressing into each other tightly at Henry's insistence so Emma could stretch her arm out and take a selfie even though there were a dozen people littered around the tables surrounding them who would have been more than happy to help if they'd just thought to ask.

Henry looks at the picture for a long time. Doesn't say anything as he takes in the scene. And Regina almost goes to him before he leans forward and gazes down into the dark.

"I just-" His voice cracks, and he hunches over the well. "Just come back home. Please."

And Regina can't hold herself back any longer as she watches his shoulders shake. She moves forward and collects his trembling form against her chest. A sob slips out of him and he throws his arms around her shoulders, squeezing tight.

"Oh, baby," she murmurs against him, running soothing fingers through his hair. And he's six again. Huddled against her in bed while they ride out the storm raging outside their windows. "Baby boy. It's okay."

"I'm sorry," he cries and she doesn't know why so she just holds him tighter and shakes her head against him.

"Never," she says. "Never ever."

She holds him until he's just quietly sniffing into her neck. He's so tall now. So close to surpassing her and the thought makes her ache even more as she leans back and takes in the tears tracking down his cheeks.

He rubs at his eyes, a sheepish half-smile on his face as she smooths out his hair.

"I just have one more thing," he says, eyes darting back to the box.

"Get it."

She watches him reach in and her heart plummets into her stomach when he pulls out the familiar jacket. Garish, bright, red pleather that Regina's rolled her eyes at for so many years now.

Everything within her rocks forward. Jolts as nausea races through her.

"Wait," she bursts out before he can even raise it over the hole.

Because he can't. They can't. Not if-
And Regina's eyes burn. Burn, burn, burn as she realizes there's still some idiotic, hopeful part of her deep inside that thinks Emma Swan might actually come home.

Henry's gaze brightens as he looks at her and realizes it too. "Yeah," he breathes, sniffing again, "she'll probably be upset if it's gone when she comes back, huh?"

Regina manages a stiff nod and Henry lets out a sigh before he packs the jacket away.

"How long does it take do you think?" His cheeks go a bit pink as he looks back down into the well. "If it works, I mean."

"I'm not sure, Henry," she says, because it's better than saying she's certain it won't. "We'll just have to wait and see."

He nods and scoops up the box and she holds out an arm for him to move underneath.

"Maybe we could come back tomorrow and check it out?"

"If that's what you want, sweetheart."

"Yeah."

Regina keeps her arm around him as they start their long trek back to the car. Holds him tight against her and tries not to think about that fact that there was a time in her life when she'd been prepared to do this to Henry herself. To offer Emma a turnover with a smile and force him into this grief to protect a curse that seems so insignificant now.

"Maybe we'll have something special for dessert tonight," she says, giving him a squeeze. "Just to really tempt her."

He laughs, bright and genuine and her heart's just about ready to burst. "I should have thought of it sooner. We could leave some chocolate on the stoop as a lure."

And Regina laughs too. Feeling lighter than she has in weeks.

The forest grows quiet as they walk, crunching over fallen twigs and carefully navigating thick roots. Brambles and the odd thorn snag at their clothes every so often, but for the most part their journey is an easy one.

Down the wooded hill. Past the line of pines. Over the creek. Meeting back up with the hiking trail that heads towards the main road.

They're halfway down that path when Regina hesitates, a tickle on the back of her neck. Hair on end.

It's quiet.

Too quiet.

Where are the birds?

A shiver runs through her. Crawls up her spine like a skittering spider.

There's magic in the air. She can feel it. Humming around her. Buzzing just over her skin.
Someone's watching them.

"Henry," Regina murmurs, "keep calm and don't say anything, just walk a little faster with me, okay?" And she leads him into quickening their pace.

His eyes widen at her words, but he's a good boy, and obeys without so much as a nod while she steers him towards the road. They're close now. So close. The trees are starting to thin. Coming fewer and farther between. She'll be able to see it soon. That dark pavement. Her car, parked by the curb.

Just a little farther and-

Henry jerks to a stop beside her. Frozen in mid-step. His box drops down to the ground with a thud.

"M-mom," he chokes out, eyes wide and haunted and when she follows his gaze she finds a familiar figure in the woods. Just to the right of their path, a dozen or so yards away.

A ragged thing. Draped in a dark cloak that's tattered and torn. Shoulders hunched, features hard. Long hair twisted and tangled but eyes sharp. Piercing. Inhumanly perceptive. Boring into them with such intense scrutiny it's enough to have Regina's knees quake.

Power.


Regina's never felt anything like it in the whole of her life. Something so big. So grand. So blindly destructive that no other force in this world could ever hope of standing up to it.

And the figure - the woman - is gaunt and pale, a living, breathing, walking skeleton. Skin stretched like paper over sharp, jutting bones. But still so achingly, breathtakingly familiar.

"Mother?"
The First Battle

It's not possible. It can't be possible. And Regina wants to shake the idea out of her head even as she stands there staring because not only is her mother dead and buried for the second time but this woman - this creature - before her is-

Is-

A cloak. A disguise. A being of dark magic wearing her mother's face as a shield into battle.

That must be it.

And if it's chosen Cora Mills as it's disguise, Regina must be the target.

"Mother?" This new pseudo Cora straightens, stares down at them, head tilting slowly. There's something childlike in the movement. Eerie. "Well now, that's interesting."

"Henry," Regina whispers, and presses the keys into his hands, "I need you to run out to the car, okay? As fast as you can. I'll make sure it can't follow you, I promise."

"I can't-" he splutters.

"You can," she urges. "You have to."

"No, I- I can't move."

There are fresh tears in his voice and Regina dares to pull her eyes away from Cora long enough to look upon her son. His face his stiff. His muscles rigid. And when she tries to shake him out of it she finds herself immobile. A wave of darkness licking up her spine. Coursing through her, inside of her, leaving her fighting simply to breathe.

She's suffocating. Cora hadn't even raised her hand to cast a spell and they're suffocating under the sheer power of her magic.

A plume of red smoke and Regina hisses out a sharp gasp as Cora appears in front of them now, mere inches from her face. Her gaze bounces over Regina, brow furrowed as she soaks in every inch of her. Hunting desperately for something Regina can't fathom. A scowl crawling across her lips when she evidently can't find it.

"No, not you either," she hisses through gritted teeth. An animalistic sort of growl bursts out of her and she jerks away. Marches through the underbrush and snaps her head to the sky. "Where are you?"

Her sharp voice echoes through the forest and then she whirls back around, features twisted up in frustration and malice as she turns on them once more. "Where is he?" She sniffs, like a creature catching wind of its prey and Regina can't tamp down the shudder that dances through her. "I can feel him on you."

No matter how hard she tries, Regina can't get a grip on her magic. It flails uselessly around her, slips through her grasp, struggles to reach her fingertips under the weight of Cora's magic.

There's nothing she can do. There's no choice but to play along.

"Who?" Regina forces out.
Cora looks about to answer when she falters suddenly, a gleam in her eye. "He's here. I can feel him." Her head jerks about this way and that, hunting for something. Someone. "Show yourself, coward."

No response.

She's getting restless now. Frustrated and angry.

Dangerous.

This isn't Mother. Calm and cool and methodical. This thing before Regina, she's too much. Too powerful. Too unstable. Too wild.

"Enough of this," Cora roars. And with a wave of her hand it's over. Simple as that.

A frothing, furling storm of violent red magic shoots out towards Regina and Henry where they stand. Helpless. Completely frozen. It hurtles towards them at an impossible speed and Regina barely has time to register the attack before it bursts into a cloud of grey not inches in front of them.

The smoke washes over Regina. Fills her senses and leaves her hacking. She feels Henry shuddering against her. And it's when she instinctively moves to comfort him she realizes her limbs are unlocked. Free.

She's free and-

Regina blinks the magic from her eyes as the dust settles.

Emma Swan stands before them.

Back turned, but Regina would know her anywhere. Even as she stands, straight and stiff and poised, Regina knows it's her. Worn and weathered and grubby in the clothes she'd left them with. Braced for attack, it's Emma, unflinching as she faces down whatever new foe has decided to invade Storybrooke.

"Emma," she breathes in disbelief. But there's no response or recognition.

All of her focus is on Cora.

"Oh." Everything about Cora seems to soften. She stands with her hands up, gaze gentle. A genuine smile playing at her lips. "There you are. Forgive me, I've not yet come across your form in all the worlds I've traveled." She stretches an arm out towards Emma, fingers curled in beckoning. "Come here to me now, darling. I'm not one for dragging these things out for very long."

Even beneath the tattered sweater on her back, Regina can make out the way Emma's shoulders tense.

"Leave." Curt and crisp. Cold. Weighted with more understanding than Emma's ever carried before.

And it's just so utterly not her that something prickles at the backs of Regina's eyes. Because this isn't Emma. Not anymore. Not the one they've been waiting for to come home.

"Go back to your world before you do any more damage."

"After I've come all this way to find you?"

"What's going on?" Henry whispers against her. "I don't understand."
Regina hushes him.

"You're messing with things neither of us can comprehend," Emma spits back. "Stop this before you damage something that can't be repaired."

Cora's laugh is cutting. Cruel. "You can't stop me now, Dark One. I'm what's beyond your comprehension. You and the rest of your kind are but relics in this new hierarchy. The only place left for you is at my side."

"Not the most accurate description." And finally, finally, she's there. Sardonic, and a little cocky. Some small semblance of Emma Swan shining through the darkness. "I've gotten a different impression from your previous conquests."

What the hell are they on about? Regina bites her tongue. Swallows back all the questions. She's completely out of her depth here. Outclassed in a way she's never been in the whole of her life.

"Emma, was it?" Sweet. Almost tender.

Emma doesn't respond and Cora's smile is wide as her gaze at last returns to Henry and Regina. Finally remembering them and all they could be to her.

"Let's settle this civilly before someone," she tilts her head, hums, "fragile gets hurt."

Regina feels Henry shiver against her once more as those hungry eyes drink them in. Emma takes a step back towards them.

"If you go now," she says, "I won't follow you."

"Oh, darling," Cora coos out along a sigh, head shaking, "you could only ever hope to delay me."

There's a beat of silence. Pure silence as Emma and Cora stare one another down, twisted grimaces on their faces. And then in the very same breath, they lunge.

White hot sparks of magic shoot from their hands. Vibrant red from Cora, a dull, pale grey from Emma. The energy that bursts from their collision creates a shockwave that's enough to have both Regina and Henry crumple to the ground. It's like an electric current that's trapped between the women. Zapping and buzzing. Hissing. Snapping.

Regina wraps her arms around Henry. Hauls him up to his knees and urges him to follow. "Go, Henry," she shouts over the witches' battle. "Just go! Don't stop!"

He scrambles over roots and wet leaves. Stumbling and sliding gracelessly as they duck under stray bursts of magic.

It's complete chaos.

Lines of lightning shooting this way and that.

Red.

Grey.

Over.

Under.
A deafening crack. Slow, then picking up speed. A tree falls. An ethereal boom.


"Don't stop," she calls again, desperate as a jagged line of red pierces the air just over her head. She can barely hear her own voice. "Keep going!"

"Enough," Cora growls and when Regina dares a peek over her shoulder she watches in horror as the blast of energy Emma shoots her way is collected in Cora's palms, absorbed into her own power.

Humming, bright and deadly in her hands, it grows and grows. Brighter and brighter and she brings it to her lips. Blows into it like kindling and it explodes into a massive column of fire.

Far beyond anything Regina's managed to produce from her own fingers. A blazing vortex twisting and turning through the air, headed straight for Emma.

Teeth grit, Emma plants her feet and stands her ground. Glowing hands braced in front of her, she lets the vortex come.

"Ma!" Henry shouts in alarm and Regina turns to see him frozen. Watching, eyes wide.

"Henry, I told you to keep going. Go!"

He lets out a pained whine before he obeys. Turns and sprints down the path toward the road. Regina doesn't follow. She keeps her attention fixed on Emma as the fire storm reaches her.

Emma's eyes are glowing now. An inhuman brightness behind them that the light in her palms match. And Regina watches in awed horror as she reaches out and grips the flames. Catches them in a tight fist, contains the stories high vortex in her hands and swings them around her like she's performing a hammer throw.

It hurtles backs towards Cora at nearly untraceable speed but Cora disappears in a plume of rouge smoke and the fire consumes a tree instead. Eats it's way up the trunk in seconds like a living, starving beast until both are gone as though they never existed at all.

Cora appears again behind Emma and sends jolts of red lightning into her spine. A sharp cry echoes through the forest as Emma is sent sprawling to the ground. Cora approaches, victory in her gaze, fire in her fingertips, but the next shot she fires hits nothing but earth as Emma pushes onto her back, rolls away through the leaves and dirt.

She scrambles to her feet. Eyes shining, she raises empty fists and then starts swinging. She's feet away from Cora. Too far to make any sort of physical contact, but that doesn't matter. The first punch she throws, a rock lifts from the ground and follows the swing. Whistles through the air towards Cora's face like a bullet.

Cora just barely manages to erect a protective barrier to deflect it but as soon as it shatters against her magic Emma's sent another. Then another.

And another.

And again.

More still until Cora's brow is furrowed and pinched with effort and Emma's panting heavily through her swings.
The assault is enough to keep Cora on the defensive, but Emma's expending too much energy and she's yet to land a solid blow. Her legs are clearly trembling and her cheeks are pale and the minute she hesitates just a second too long to gather her strength for the next swing, Cora takes advantage.

With a wave of her hand roots snake up from the ground and start curling up Emma's legs. They're halfway to her knees before Emma notices.

She moves her hands to fight back but vines shoot up from the ground and trap her wrists. Keep her arms tethered in place. And despite how she struggles the roots continue to climb and constrict. Creeping up her thighs and over her hips and steadily towards her throat where they can squeeze the air right out of her very lungs.

Cora stands triumphant, eyes bright with victory. And even in this battle of titans where she is so overwhelmingly outclassed, Regina clenches her fists and starts to summon whatever power resides within her. This may not be the friend she remembers, but she can't just sit back and watch as the life is choked out Emma.

Maybe, if she can just catch Cora off guard from behind-

The roots coil around Emma's chest now and she stands defiant in the face of Cora's cold laughter.

"Now, Dark One," she steps forward, hands outstretched, "we shall be on-"

With a grunt, Emma jerks. Throws her whole body to the left and, arm flexed, rips her right hand free of its bonds. The vine snaps. One end still wrapped around her wrist, the other dangling uselessly in the air.

Cora only has a second for her eyes to widen in surprise before Emma lifts her free hand and curls her magic around a tree. Pulls with all her might, and it rips out of the ground with a harsh crack.

It creaks as it topples to the earth just over Cora. The witch has no choice but to magic herself away again lest she be crushed under the deafening crash.

Regina takes the opportunity to do what she can. Transports herself in a plume of violet right behind Emma and grabs at the roots. Pumps her own magic through them until they shrivel and recede. Fall dead and useless in the dirt.

"Thank you." Emma's voice is tight and pained and Regina's heart clenches within her at the way Emma won't even spare her so much as a glance. Like she's so utterly inconsequential in this moment. "Stay back."

And then she steps forward, palms splayed towards the ground. The vines that had trapped her wrists lift into the air, surrounded by her murky magic.

She raises them high. Her power snaps them like whips at Cora. Licking at her limbs as the other woman fights them off with bursts of her own magic.

Emma keeps up the assault, driving her back until Cora snaps and lets out a yowl of frustration and pours everything she has into one last blast.

Regina finds her limbs locking up once more as she watches the enormous sphere pull together. Hot, biting magic. She can feel it. See it take shape. Ready to cut through everything in its path. No other purpose but blind destruction.

Aimed right at Emma. And, a couple feet behind, right at her.
"You will embrace us," Cora roars and fires it off.

Regina's limbs are locked once more but this time she's under no spell of petrification. This time fear keeps her rooted. Locked in place. Helpless before imminent death.

It's so fast. It's so dark, and evil, and-

Emma's gone.

And then that now familiar smoke fills her vision and Regina's gone too.

Pulled free of it's path, Regina watches as the magic roars past them. Her skin humming just at the sheer might of it as it clears a destructive path through the forest. Pushing on and on and consuming all it touches until finally, it's out of sight. A few seconds later they hear it burst in an explosion that rocks the very ground on which they stand.

Breath coming in short and shallow at the near miss, Regina sags in relief and finds Emma behind her. Molded against her back. An arm comes up, firm and sturdy, a hand splayed protectively across her abdomen.

It's intoxicating. The sheer power flowing through her. The energy radiating off Emma in waves. Washing over Regina's skin. Buzzing along every dip and shallow.

Emma's chin is heavy on her shoulder. Her breath hot against her ear.

"Give me everything you've got."

And Regina doesn't know exactly what she's agreeing to but this is Emma against her and her mind is foggy with magic and all she can do is lean into her and frantically nod.

Emma takes Regina's hand in her own and lifts them. Her palm pressed over the back of Regina's hand, fingers splayed as their energy pulls together. Entwines. Their magic racing between them everywhere they touch. Molding together like their bodies to bolster one another. To create a force more powerful than anything Regina's ever wielded before.

And it feels like forever. Like they were meant to live in this moment - like they have lived in it - for always, but she knows it must be a matter of seconds because Cora looks like she's taken by surprise. And she just barely manages to vanish in a cloud before the full force of Emma and Regina's shared magic consumes her.

Their magic doesn't cut through the woods without direction or intent. It vanishes just after Cora does, its target gone. And Regina and Emma stand pressed together in the silent forest, hands raised, chests heaving.

The birds don't return. Trees are toppled over. Underbrush is smoldering.

It's quiet. So quiet save for Emma's breath in her ear.

Regina swallows. "That- That was-" And then an intense, overwhelming weariness washes over her. Seeps into the very marrow of her bones and has her crumpling to her knees.

Emma keeps a tight hold on her. Makes sure her fall is a slow, gentle descent. "Easy," she soothes. "You've exhausted yourself."

"You did," Regina murmurs bitterly as she suddenly finds herself fighting off sleep, because Emma
had been the one to suck out all of Regina's magic for an extra boost. That hadn't been Regina's idea.

And it's hard to be sure because her vision is going dim, but Regina thinks she might see a flicker of amusement on Emma's lips before she passes out.

"You'll be just fine,"
The Aftermath

A groan is the first thing Regina hears as she comes to. Loud and low and long. And it takes a minute or two for her to get her bearings and realize she's the one who released it.

She's home. In bed. The room is empty save for her.

And it's an absolute mess.

Regina sits up quickly. Too quickly. Her head throbs and her muscles ache in protest. It's easy to block the pain out though because she's sitting alone in bed and somehow everything around her is all but destroyed.

Her furniture is flipped. Her mirror smashed. Her closet emptied. The drawers ripped from her dresser and her clothes strewn every which way.

"What the hell?" Rage bubbles within her. Hot and biting. She forces herself out of bed and onto the floor.

The first few steps don't go too well. Her body is drained and her legs are shaky. Weak. But irritation is motivation enough to get her feet moving. Regina grits her teeth and forces herself towards the hall. Takes a quick break at the entrance, leans heavily against the door frame, panting, before pushing off and towards the stairs.

Quiet voices trickle up from the living room and spur her on. The railing supports most of her weight as she stumbles her way down and when she reaches the landing a now familiar sight greets her.

The house is torn apart.

Glass shattered and shelves snapped and frames broken.

When she gets her hands on that filthy pirate she's going to-

"Hook," Regina growls as soon as the man is in view.

Snow and David and Henry are there too, but she only has eyes for one person. She storms up to him. Intimidates her way right up into his personal space even when her knees threaten to give out beneath her.

"Where do you get off? My office wasn't enough?"

Despite himself, Hook takes a half step back. "What are you talking about?"

"What am I-?" Regina throws her arms out around her. Gestures to the flipped coffee table, the shredded pillows, the toppled over television. "What else could I possibly be talking about? This wouldn't be the first tantrum you've thrown over the dagger."

Features dark, Hook opens his mouth to spew his defense but Snow steps in before anything can turn too ugly.

"Hook didn't do this, Regina. When we got home the loft was in the same state."

Regina softens in confusion, blinking. "The loft?"
David nods while Hook finds his voice. "The Rodger was the same." He doesn't meet Regina's gaze as he speaks and his nose is wrinkled the whole time. His face pinched as though her presence physically pains him. "She's been torn apart."

"Oh." Her shoulders sag, but Regina refuses to apologize. She may be working on her image but there are some lines Regina won't cross, reformed evil or no.

"We've been talking," Henry saves her, "I think it must have been Cora. She's gotta be looking for something for whatever she's planning."

"Henry filled us in on everything he saw," Snow explains. She catches Regina in a desperate, wide eyed stare. "He said Emma-"

Regina swallows, nods. "She was there."

A strangled sob bursts out of Snow. David moves behind her, wraps an arm around her waist and tugs her to his chest. "She was gone before we got here," he says, voice soft.

"I don't remember anything after I-" Regina falters, hesitates, then clears her throat and forces out, "fainted."

Hook scoffs and she shoots him a hard glare. Instead of balking, he matches her, returns it with just as much venom. It's Henry who once again breaks their standoff.

"Ma brought us home." He chews on his lip when he speaks, eyes downcast. "But she was- it was weird. She carried you out to me in the street but didn't really say anything. Then she used magic to take us and the car back here. After she put you in bed she told me not to worry because you just needed to sleep and you would be fine. Then she said she'd make sure Cora couldn't get in here. I tried asking her stuff, like where she's been, but she wouldn't even look at me. She left before I could even call Grandma or Grandpa."

It's obvious he's hurt by Emma's avoidance and Regina reaches for him. Henry steps into her embrace. Holds her tight and presses his face into her neck.

"There's a lot going on," she murmurs into his hair. "We'll figure it out and set it right and get her home."

He nods against her. "I'm just glad you're both okay."

Regina tightens her grip.

"So she didn't say anything when you were alone together?" Snow's face is pale and drawn. "Anything at all? Any clue what her plans are? Where she's staying?"

"I'd hardly say we were alone." Regina lays out a quick detailing of the scene.

How fiercely Emma had fought. How Cora had shown no recognition of, or interest in, her daughter and seemed a different creature altogether. How their magic was beyond anything Regina had ever experienced before, even in the Enchanted Forest.

"Not much was said, but whoever this impostor is, Emma seems to know something about them. I think the smartest thing to do now is find a way to contact Emma again and figure out what exactly is happening here and how we can help her stop it."

Hook steps forward, hand outstretched. "I think we all know the quickest way to summon a Dark
One.” There's a desperation in his gaze that could be - should be - so similar to Snow's. But there's also a hunger in it. A possessive defiance. Like this is just as much a victory over Regina as it is a lifeline to a loved one.

It's Henry who snaps his head up, eyes hard. "We're not gonna take away Ma's free will. We're supposed to be keeping the dagger safe, not using it to control her."

Regina stands firm behind him. Nods sharply and furrows her brow until Hook's hand drops. His lips ripple as though he's on the cusp of a sharp retort, but then he thinks better of it apparently. Alone in this room where Henry and Regina and David and Snow all stand united against him.

"Well what's your idea then, majesty?"

Regina fights the urge to roll her eyes. "I-"

"Regina needs to rest," Snow interrupts. "She's still half dead on her feet."

It feels like a claim she should protest, especially in front of Hook who is so quick to pounce on her every weakness - which isn't something that's fair to hate him for considering when the roles are reversed she's exactly the same - but there's some merit to Snow's words. Regina's muscles are throbbing and exhaustion is still settled heavily in her core.

With a new enemy beyond anything they've ever faced, Regina needs every edge she can get in the battles to come. She needs to be sharp. Alert. Well rested.

"Henry, you stay here and make sure your mother stays in bed," Snow orders, and even has the gall to smirk at Regina's glare. "Killian, why don't you take a walk around town? Ask if anyone's seen or heard anything about Cora or Emma. David and I will drop by Gold's. He might not have magic, but maybe he knows something about what's happening here."

Not the most satisfying plan, but it's the most any of them can do for the time being. "I'll have my phone by the bed. Call me the second you find out anything. No matter what it is."

Snow shakes her head at the light threat lacing her words. "You know we will. Go rest. We'll be in touch."

Henry moves under Regina's arm to help her back towards the stairs. It's a slow process - much more difficult going up than down as her limbs scream in protest - but eventually Henry manages to lug her to the top. He presses close as they limp down the hall towards her room.

"Do- do you think I did this?" When she opens the door he wastes no time guiding her to the mattress and helping her down. "You know, because of what I did at the well?"

Her smile is soft as she trails gentle fingers along his cheek. "I think we have a lot of questions that need answers. Ones only Emma can give us."

A heavy sigh escapes him, her boy who has always been forced to see way too much of the world far too quickly. "It was so weird, Mom. It was like she couldn't even look me in the eyes. And-" He falters. Hesitates.

"What?" she urges, chest tight because it's been years now since they've ever considered having secrets between them. And no matter how they've healed, how they've surpassed anything they've ever been in the past, there's always that quiet, panicked voice of doubt in her that whispers the relationship they've built up between them can crumble down at any moment. That she has no right to expect anything less after all she's chosen to be in life.
"When she took us back here and brought you to bed, she just kind of looked like-" his features scrunch up as he struggles to find the words. "She looked sick. Like just being here made her ready to throw up or- I dunno." His shoulders sag. "That sounds dumb. It was just weird, like, she couldn't stand to be around us a second longer."

Regina worries her lip. "I think, Henry," she starts as delicately as she can, "Emma's probably been through a lot of changes since we've last seen her. And even though I'm sure she's so happy to see you again, we're going to have to let her have some time to adjust."

"I'm thirteen, Mom. You don't have to sugarcoat everything like I'm a ten again."

"I know." A smirk steals her lips as she brushes her thumb over the last remnants of baby fat still clinging to his cheeks. "But maybe I want to."

He rolls his eyes but can't hide his shy grin. Regina guides him forward to press a kiss on his forehead before pulling away and settling back in bed. "I'm going to try and get a little more rest."

She reaches out to clasp his hand, catches his eye. "Stay in the house, please."

Henry nods. "I promise."

"And if you need anything or anything happens don't hesitate to wake me up, okay?"

"Okay."

Regina doesn't let herself fully relax until she's alone behind a closed door. Faintly, she can hear Henry's goodbyes to their guests downstairs and then the sound of them trailing out onto her front walk, going their separate ways.

A soft groan escapes her as she lets herself sink into the mattress. It's like her very bones ache. It's incredible, really. Regina has heard of such things, but she's never experienced it before. To have magic use drain you so thoroughly you're left incapacitated.

In Storybrooke it's certainly left her winded, feeling drained even, but in the magic filled Enchanted Forest the best she'd ever done was work up a sweat. This though-

Well, Emma had asked for everything, so Regina supposes she can't be bitter about the outcome.

Regina stares up at the ceiling. So much has changed, and yet she feels like nothing has. There's still this heaviness over Henry. An unshakable grief that shadows his once bright smiles. Snow is desperate, devastated. Hook's brooding. David's defeated. And Emma is still out there somewhere. They know she's alive, but she's still lost to them all, her whereabouts unknown.

"Sorry about the mess."

Regina jerks up onto her elbows and finds Emma Swan at the foot of her bed.
The Other Mother

A wave of Emma's hand and the room is back in order. Everything clean and pristine and in place once more.

"Emma," Regina all but bursts, scrambling up to her knees on the mattress. "You're-" Her voice fails her as she takes the other woman in. She'd noticed the state of her while they were in the woods, but so much had been happening there really hadn't been time to digest. Now there is and-

And-

"You're a wreck."

Emma blinks down at her. She stands in the middle of Regina's room, worn and dirtied. Her heavy sweater from the night she left clings pathetically to her form. Her pants ripped and torn. Her boots muddy and patched. She's thin as a rail. Her cheeks gaunt and her eyes hollow. Tangled mats of hair framing her sunken face and draping low over her shoulders.

"Have you really not changed in all the time you've been gone?"

"Changed?" Emma parrots. Her gaze drops to her outfit as though she's confused she's wearing it.

"Emma, it's been two months."

"Has it?" Soft. Genuinely perplexed. Not a cheeky game she might have played before everything went so wrong.

What the hell happened to her?

Regina swallows, fights back the urge to reach out and touch. "Have you been eating?"

"Sometimes." Emma starts moving as she speaks. Not pacing. It's not direct or deliberate enough to be pacing. "It's nice." She moves like a boat on water. Constantly rocking with each ebb and flow of the ocean's whims. "Comforting." There's something restless in her. Something jittery and untamed itching to claw its way out. "But it's not necessary."

Emma's at the bed and then the window and then the closet. The bathroom, the bed, the dresser, the closet, the bed again. "I don't have to."

It's enough to make Regina dizzy.

She shakes off the feeling. "Yes you do. You need to take care of yourself. I know you're immortal now, but immortal doesn't mean invulnerable."

"No," Emma agrees. Her head tilts, and there's something in the stiffness of the motion that reminds Regina of Cora just hours before. "I have one weakness." Her gaze is sharp. "Where is the dagger?"

Regina takes in the stilted question. Formal and direct and so utterly not Emma it makes her heart clench. And then her eyes trail over her. The hard lines in her face. The tight set of her jaw. The gleam of desire deep in her eyes.

"It was you," Regina breathes as realization washes over her. "You were searching for it. You're the one who tore everyone's homes apart."
"Where is it?" Emma presses.

There's something inherently dangerous about this new Emma. She's wild. Her restless aura overpowering. The magical energy radiating off her in pulsating waves intoxicating. But still, Regina can't bring herself to be afraid. Not of Emma. Not even in this form. Not when just a short while ago she'd molded herself against Regina and wove their magic into something bright and beautiful.

"Safe," she dares. "It's safe."

For a minute, she tenses at the darkness that flickers across Emma's features. Wonders perhaps if she's wrong, if Emma is different enough to fight her for it. If she might lunge and grip Regina by the throat and pin her down until she's gasping for air.

Instead, Emma just takes a breath and frowns and says, "I hope so," before turning her attention back out the window.

"She wants it, doesn't she?" Regina prompts as she settles more comfortably on the bed, legs crossed almost childishly. "That- that thing in the forest, whatever she was."

Emma's on the move again. Prowling the room like a caged lion. She doesn't look at Regina, won't meet her gaze.

"What is she? She looked like my mother but she was too young and too-" Regina falters, hunting for the word, "too inhuman. I've never felt anything like her before. Not even in the old world."

"I've protected the house." It sounds like the words are meant to be comforting but Emma's voice is too robotic, too hollow. "She can't harm you here. And that fight was draining for all of us. My power hasn't returned fully, that should mean hers hasn't either."

"She'll be back soon though," Regina says. Maybe this new entity isn't the mother she knows, but there's certainly something of Cora within it. And Cora never gives up. Regina knows that better than anyone.

"What is she?" Regina tries again. And it's almost like the other woman didn't hear her. Like she's distracted by someone else's words.

"Emma?"

Emma moves to the window. Stares out it blankly into the rapidly approaching night. "She's a Cora from another universe. Another timeline. One where you were never born."

"That's not possible." Regina can't bring herself to feel shock at the information, because she can't wrap her mind around its existence. Nobody can just cross the boundaries of alternate universes. Even in the texts of the highest magics written by the old masters the ability is only ever theorized about. Traveling realms is difficult work enough. This is just beyond belief.

"It is," Emma allows. "But then, your mother always had a way of making things happen, hasn't she?"

God, Emma still won't look at her. Why won't she look at her?

Fine, Regina will bite. "What happened to her? Why is she like this?"

"In the universe she's from, she didn't learn magic from Gold and move on to her revenge. She posed
as a willing student to perfect her craft, found his dagger, and stabbed him in the heart. Once she was the Dark One, she worked tirelessly towards building her power. Her studies had her looking outwards.

"I haven't been able to replicate whatever she does to achieve it, but she's learned how to break through the divide between realities. Since then she's been meticulously travelling through every universe she can breach, hunting down that timeline's Dark One."

Well, that certainly sounds like Mother.

Regina shifts forward in bed. "To what, wipe them out? Get rid of the competition?"

"When you slay a Dark One with their dagger, you take on their curse, and all the power that comes with it." Emma's shoulders sag with her heavy breath. "She's collecting."

Ice stabs through Regina, sharp and biting. "She can do that?"

"With each Dark One her magic absorbs she grows stronger still, loses more of herself to the curse. Very soon now, she'll be utterly unmatched. If she isn't already."

Oh.

"I felt her," Regina whispers, the true horror of what she had faced now dawning. "She was- she was so much. It was like magic was just pouring out of her. Like her body couldn't contain it. I-" Her voice breaks. "I couldn't even dream of standing up to what she is now."

"I might be able to."

Regina's head snaps to Emma back at the window. "What? You're-"

"One of the most powerful Dark Ones in existence." No pride or arrogance. Fact. Simple fact, that's all. "She's desperate to have me."

Regina can't help but wince. "I know she's not exactly my mother, but could we find another way of phrasing that maybe?"

Emma laughs like she's forgotten how. At last, her gaze flickers over Regina with fondness, but as quick as it comes, it's lost. Her face sours like she's just remembered something unpleasant, and Regina hates that with their shared history it could be any number of moments between them.

"Emma-" Regina slides off the mattress slowly, cautiously, like approaching wounded wildlife. Words buzz within her, just under her skin. Everything she's obsessed over for two months now. All the things she promised herself she'd say if only she could see Emma again.

Emma who charged towards her into a swirling vortex of darkness and sacrificed everything she could possibly give.

A hand raised, Regina chances a step closer.

Eyes wide, Emma takes a step back.

"Keep your distance." Her voice is tight. Her words clipped. "Please."

Shame rockets through Regina as she takes in everything her dearest friend has become because of her.
"I'm sorry."

Emma rocks on her feet, fingers dancing against her thighs, face turned away. "It's not your fault."

Regina feels like she's about to throw up. "Of course it is."

Emma shakes her head, turns away completely so Regina's left staring at her back.

"I'm not sure what she's planning beyond taking me, so keep on your guard. I would guess you were safe, to this Cora you're little more than a stranger, but still, be careful."

Regina drops her gaze to the floor. Brings her arms up around herself and tries to swallow down the clear rejection. There will be time to mourn this new blow to their relationship later. For now, professionalism is key.

"How do you know so much about her? About what she wants? What she's done?"

"We share-" Emma hesitates, raises a hand to tap at her temple. "I can hear it." She turns, lowers her hand to her heart. Presses her palm flush over her chest. "Feel it. I've known her desires since the very moment she stepped foot in this realm."

"You're connected by the darkness?"

"My best guess. Though now I'm doing my best to fend off any links between us. Information goes both ways, I'm sure."

A bitter laugh bubbles out of Regina unbidden. "This is insane."

"Most things in Storybrooke are."

There she is. Emma Swan.

Regina flashes a strained smile, but Emma doesn't seem able to meet it. She takes another step back, fists clenched at her sides. Nervous and jittery.

"Where have you been, Emma?" The words just fall out of her. Regina can't hold them back. "We've been looking for you. We-" Regina swallows down her shame at what she'd let Hook do all those months ago when they'd been so frantic and desperate and the wound was so, so fresh, "we called you."

Emma's jaw clenches. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Just explain."

Emma doesn't respond to the prompting. Doesn't say anything at all. Her gaze stays fixed on the window. Her hands curling and unfurling by her sides until Regina cracks and give in. Releases a heavy sigh before slumping back down on the edge of her mattress, toes digging into the carpet in her frustration.

"I know I might not be any sort of match for her magic," Regina murmurs, "but that doesn't mean you have to do this alone."

The movement is so stealthy, so swift, Regina barely registers it. All she really grasps is one moment Emma's standing at the other end of the room and then the next she's just in front of Regina, kneeling at her feet. And as she looks down on her Regina's taken back to her long off reign as queen of a kingdom she'd never had any sort of interest in ruling.
"I think Cora assumes I have my dagger. She'll be after me until she realizes I don't." At last, she looks up, catches Regina's eye. "Do you think you can keep it hidden, keep it safe?" Her gaze is intense. Deep and knowing. Years upon centuries upon eons of knowledge Emma Swan has never possessed reflecting back at Regina.

"I-" Regina swallows, licks her lips. "Yes." She sits taller at the acceptance in Emma's eyes. "Yes I can."

Emma Swan's essence, the entirety of her being, everything she is or was or ever could be.

Regina will keep it safe. Will keep her safe. Just as Emma had done for her two months ago.

"All right." And there's a softness about Emma when she nods that Regina can't seem to resist.

She raises a trembling hand. Dares to reach out. But as soon as the tips of her fingers touch Emma's cheek, Emma jerks away from her violently. Rears back as though she's been burned with a cutting, "Don't."

Regina's chest tightens, her heart aching. "I'm sorry."

Emma just stares at her, looking almost horrified, and then she's gone without another word. Vanishes in a swirl of murky darkness. It's so different than the shining light she'd once created, and as Regina sits alone in her bedroom, she can't help but think about how this is all her fault.

How she's the reason any of this is Emma's problem instead of Gold's.

And how it seems like Emma knows it too.
Regina hesitates outside of Henry's door. He'd want to know Emma showed up again. She's sure of it. No doubt. And she doesn't want any secrets between them. Not anymore. But-

Her fingers curl around the doorknob. Squeezing so tight her knuckles go white.

What does she say?

Emma came back. You're right, she looks awful. She could hardly meet my eye, didn't ask about you, and couldn't seem to get away fast enough. She's barely eating. She doesn't seem to know how much time has passed. Also, there's an immortal monster out to consume her soul. One she doesn't know if she can beat.

What kind of mother does it make her to tell him?

What kind of mother does it make her to hide it?

In the end, a phone call saves her from making the decision. Regina hurries back to her bedroom at the first ring and gracelessly clamors across the mattress to snatch her vibrating cell from the bedside table.

"Hello?"

"Regina." There's no bright spark of discovery in Snow's voice. No hope at some grand secret revealed. And so Regina already knows what she's going to hear before Snow even utters the words.

"Gold doesn't know anything. Nothing about this new Cora or Emma or anything." There's a slight wobble in her voice. The tremor of defeat. "He didn't even know they were here."

Regina's not sure if her news will lessen or enhance it. "Emma came back."

"What? Is she there? Let me speak to her, please."

"She's gone," Regina soothes. "It wasn't exactly a lengthy visit."

Snow's quiet for a long time.

At last, she sighs. "Hold on, David's driving." The words are hollow. Listless. "I'll put you on speaker."

Regina gives them the cliff notes version of her and Emma's discussion. Explains what Cora is after. How she'll be keeping the dagger so that if Emma is defeated in a scuffle, Cora still won't be able to claim her. How Emma hadn't given any indication where she was going or what the plan was moving forward.

Both David and Snow don't have much to say when she's through. They're silent and pensive and Regina can feel the disappointment at once again missing their daughter radiating through the phone.

"We're going to Granny's to pick up Neal and then we're going to pack a few bags and come over," Snow declares at last. "We shouldn't be separated right now. If Cora figures out we're Emma's family any of us could be targeted. We should stick together. Strength in numbers."

There's an element of truth to her words, even if Regina's certain this is more about Snow making sure she's able to catch the next Emma sighting rather than looking for protection.
"That's fine by me. I'll have Henry ready to let you in."

Their goodbyes are abrupt, and Regina doesn't waste any time connecting her next call. After close to thirty years of monotony nearly everything about Storybrooke is etched in her brain and she's able to punch in Gold's number by memory alone.

He answers on the first ring, as though he's been waiting for the call. They both know that even free of its curse, Rumpelstiltskin is still the town's resident expert on the strange and mysterious powers of the Dark One.

He takes fairly well to her hurried explanations, though she shouldn't be surprised. Gold's lived through centuries of magical nonsense. He's far more used to this than any of them.

The only thing that seems to truly surprise him is Cora's miraculous reality breach. But now that Regina knows the basics of the story, she's far less interested in the mechanics. Not when she has more pressing things on her mind.

"Emma said she's one of the most powerful Dark Ones in existence."

Gold hums over the line. His voice is softer now that he's free. Slower. More thoughtful. Amiable, even. "I haven't seen her myself, but I'd believe it."

"How?" Regina asks, even when she's sure she doesn't want to know. This curse, it isn't a gift, no matter how strong Emma has become.

"Well, look at me. My power was great, but all that was at play was the darkness. Before I took on the curse, I was the average man. Emma on the other hand, was already one of the most powerful magic users in our realm, if more than a little unpolished. She never came close to reaching it, but that potential has been inside her all along. It's incredible. I know you've felt it."

"Envied it," Regina admits.

This new, gentle Gold has her tongue feeling looser these days. Finally someone to commiserate with without fearing a knife in the back all the while. They have an understanding between them that nobody else in Storybrooke shares. And now that the malice has been drained from his bones, Regina finds something like safety in his presence. Someone who knows the worst parts of her intimately and shares in that guilt.

"Yes, well, add the power of the great and terrible Dark One on top of it and you've got a whole lot of magic channeling through a very confined vessel. A recipe for disaster without a master at the helm, I would think."

Regina snorts, a pang of sorrow stabbing through her at the fond memory of a bumbling sheriff, struggling to work out the most basic of charms, features pinched with frustration. "Emma Swan is no master."

"No." Gold hesitates for a moment. "How did she seem to you? Was she different? Beyond the obvious."

"She was-" Regina worries her lip as she thinks of Emma, prowling about her room without direction, "restless. Intense." Hard eyes and hard lines and hard words. "Maybe a little angry."

"So not much has changed then, has it?"
Something warm and defensive bubbles up in her chest at his soft laughter. And Regina fights it back down. She can't scare him off, not when he still might help her work through everything. Not when she still has to ask-

"It was amplified. Like she was ready to bolt from the room any second. And-" She falters, cheeks heating a bit at what she doesn't want to admit she'd noticed.

"What?"

"It was almost like-" Regina's shoulders sag. She knows exactly what it was. There's no point in beating around the bush. Trying to delude herself or soften the blow. "She resents me. I could feel it."

"How?"

"She barely looked at me when she spoke. She wouldn't-" Regina rolls her eyes at herself. "She wouldn't let me touch her."

"Interesting," Gold hums.

It's a mixture of humiliation and frustration that has Regina snap, "Not really," sharp and cold. "It's not exactly a hard riddle to crack. I'm the reason she's in this mess. It makes perfect sense she would resent me for it."

"I wouldn't be sure." Through the phone, Regina hears a light tinkle, like a chime. The door to the pawnshop maybe? "I might have some theories on that."

"What do you mean?"

"Another time. I seem to have company."

"Cora?" Regina bursts, heart pounding. "Is she there? She's after you?"

His chuckle is grating against her ear. "Belle. Now if you don't mind, I have a lot of making up to do." His hum is fond. "Get some rest, Regina. From the sound of things, your magic will need to be running at peak efficiency."

Regina lets out a warning growl but it only has Gold laughing harder, and then he's gone.

She slumps down on her bed. Collapses on her back, eyes to the ceiling, arms outstretched. What the hell is she supposed to do?

They're up against an unbeatable foe. They have no reliable way of getting in contact with Emma. Regina's in sole possession of her one lifeline. And they don't have any idea what Cora's plot is beyond taking Emma's power. This may only get worse before there's even a chance of it getting better.

Fuck.

With a deep breath, Regina forces herself up on her elbows. The first thing she needs to do is find a hiding spot for the dagger. Cora is stronger than her. Much stronger. If she keeps it on her person like she has been, it could easily be wrestled away. Hiding is the only option. Somewhere only she would think to look.

Not her home or her office or the vault or the loft.
With everything buzzing through her, it's not as though rest is really in the cards for Regina anymore. Instead, she has Henry help her downstairs and sits at a stool in front of the kitchen counter to set about pulling something together for dinner. There are going to be plenty of guests tonight, so it's good sense to get a head start.

They quickly find the situation hopeless though. The kitchen empty and barren save for a handful of canned goods, some flour, some sugar, a little bit of rice. Not enough for a meal for four.

"Henry, why don't you run upstairs and grab my credit card? We'll order in a couple of pizzas."

Two months ago his features would have lit up in delight and he'd have pumped his fist with a triumphant holler before sprinting for the stairs.

Two months ago Emma Swan would have been right at his heels.

Regina shifts her attention to the dirty dishes she's let pile up in the sink and tries not to think about the teasing looks Emma would send her over his shoulder as they scampered away. She's halfway through loading the dishwasher when David and Snow arrive, baby Neal bundled up for the cold night.

They leave him with Henry and set about straightening up the mess Emma made of the dining room. It's in passable enough shape for a quick meal by the time the pizzas arrive. And they've just about wrapped up dinner when there's another knock at the door.

It's sharp and urgent and everyone is instantly on alert. They haven't been expecting anyone else and Emma's proven that these days she isn't one to wait around and knock.

David is the one to get up and creep to the front window. He's tense as he cautiously pulls back the curtain and peers out into the night.

Regina holds her breath until his shoulders sag.

"It's Hook." David heads quickly to the door to let him in. "Hey, did you find out anything?"

"Yes." Hook's expression is hard as he Marches into the dining room to pin them all down with an irritated glare. "I got to hear secondhand at the diner about everything that's been going on after I left and how's there a little slumber party happening here to wait for Swan."

Regina sees the look of shame that flits across Snow's face at having forgotten him. She doesn't share in the feeling.

"Well," she drawls, arms crossed, "now you know. Off you go then."

He scowls at her. "Listen here-" he glowers, looming overhead, but Snow is quick to try and defuse the tension.

"Killian should stay."
Regina shoots her a nasty look. "I'm sorry, is this not my home?"

"We're staying together to stay safe," Snow says and reaches a soothing hand out to pat at Regina's arm. It takes everything she has not to jerk away from the touch. "Killian's in just as much danger as any of us if Cora figures out his relationship to Emma."

Regina grits her teeth at the smug smile Hook pins her with. "Our relationship being what it is," his eyes never leave her, "I might just be in more danger than any of you."

Henry sighs heavily at her side.

"It's the right thing to do, Mom," He says, but he doesn't sound totally happy about it which is enough for now.

"You'll stay downstairs on the couch," she says with a sniff. And doesn't give him the satisfaction of a punchy retort before pushing to her feet and collecting her plate to bring into the kitchen.

She makes Snow be the one to bring a blanket down to Hook. Picks the oldest, mustiest one from the very back of the hall closet and tries not to think about crusty, dirty pirate socks on her throw pillows.

David helps her set up the guest bed for him and his wife, and they have a little travel crib for Neal that they pop up in the corner of the room.

When she's feeling stronger in the morning, she'll magic them up something a little more stable and permanent. Something tells her this new villain won't go down quickly.

She's finally settling down, teeth brushed and pajamas on, when Henry knocks on the door and steps into the room with a sheepish, "Hi," that's so breathtakingly Emma.

Regina manages a smile for her precious boy. "Is something wrong?"

He's in his pajamas too, his pillow tucked under his arm. "I was wondering, I mean, if it's okay with you, if I maybe stayed in here tonight?" His cheeks are a dusty pink. "I know I'm kind of too old for this so I don't mind being on the floor-"

"Of course you can stay, sweetheart." She's already pulling back the covers on the other side of the bed for him. "Come here."

He hurries over and climbs in beside her, all hesitance gone. In different circumstances, Regina would savor this moment. Likely one of the last childish indulgences they'll share together before he gets too old and too 'cool' to snuggle against his mother. But with the weight hanging over them these days, she finds herself needing the comfort as much as he does.

She lies back and Henry shuffles closer, rests his head against her shoulder.

"I'm sorry Hook keeps being such a jerk to you about everything."

A bitter hum escapes her as she brings up a hand to run absent fingers through his hair. It's getting a little shaggy. He's due for a cut. One of the many things she's been letting go of late. She'll have to make more of an effort to do better by him. Henry deserves it, especially now.
"Don't you worry about that." She sighs, fights the urge to roll her eyes. "I suppose your grandmother would say it goes both ways. I'm not exactly welcoming him into the family with open arms."

"I guess," Henry needles. "I just-" he huffs and shakes his head against her. "Nevermind. It's stupid."

"Henry," she looks down at him, lifts his chin until he meets her eyes, "nothing you say or feel could ever be stupid to me."

His cheeks are red now, but whatever he wants to say is apparently weighing on him enough that it supersedes embarrassment. "I just, I don't like that Emma's with someone who doesn't get along with you."

Regina winces. "To be fair, I don't think many people in Storybrooke would be interested in getting along with me."

"That's not what I mean. It's just, like, we're all together and it's awesome but then he comes in and it's like this big divide between everyone. I hate that I can't just relax and enjoy time with my family all together without a fight breaking out because Hook showed up."

Shame pools low in her belly. And Regina hates it - even just the very idea curdles her blood - but god, she can fix this for her son. "I'm sorry, Henry. I promise I'll make more of an effort to keep the peace. That hasn't been fair to you, or to Emma, or to any of us."

"It's not just that." Henry ducks his head, squeezes against her.

"What is it then?"

"It makes me feel like a baby just to think about it," he grumbles petulantly. She can't help but chuckle. "Well my bickering with Hook at every turn certainly isn't mature. I won't judge."

He lets out another sigh. Says the words quick and quiet like he hopes she won't catch them. "When it's just me and them together I feel like Emma doesn't pay attention to me as much."

Oh, Henry...

"I know that's really dumb and childish but it just makes me so, you know," he winces, "mad at him. Cause it's not like that when he's not there, you know? She's different. And we hang out and talk about stuff, real stuff. And then he'll show up and everything has to stop and it's all about him all the time and I just- Just-" He releases a little whimper of frustration, "I'm kinda sick of going out on the boat. It just smells so bad, Mom."

A laugh bubbles out of Regina before she can contain it. And she slaps a hand over her mouth in shame because she's the adult here and Hook is important to Emma and she should be building bridges between everyone like a responsible parent. Working hard to make a functioning, healthy unit for Henry to flourish in.

But Henry senses weakness and props up on his elbow. Looks down on her with bright, bright eyes, barely tamping down his grin. "He smells so bad. I know you think so too, Mom. I can tell."

She squeezes her eyes shut and shakes her head but a snort escapes from behind her palm and her shoulders are shaking and now Henry's giggling too.
"I think he only owns one outfit. It's been months and I haven't seen him in anything else."

"Henry," she tries to scold, but it's weak and half hearted because he's laughing into her shoulder now and they haven't had anything even remotely like this in so long.

It's good.

So, so good.

And so instead of correcting him, she gathers him close against her and laughs with him until their giggles peter out and sober up. When they do, she leans back to smooth the hair from his eyes.

His voice is quiet when he speaks again. Mirth fading. "Sometimes I wonder if she thinks it too." He sounds a little ashamed of himself. "Sometimes I hope she does. And then we could go back to how it was. Just us. Before all this bad stuff."

Regina wraps her arms around his back and presses a kiss to the top of his head. "Henry," she starts, careful and slow, "I think if you were ever upset about anything like that, Emma would want you to talk about it with her. I'm sure you're worried about hurting her feelings, but I promise you she'd want to know rather than find out later you've been hiding it from her." She catches his eye again. "And I'd want to know too, just so we're clear."

He shakes his head at her obvious prompting. "It never feels like that with you and Robin. It's different."

She sighs because he says 'different' and it doesn't sound like better or good. It sounds like wrong, just in another way.

"Tell me about it," she says. And when he hesitates she adds, "Please," soft and soothing.

"He just kinda felt like a stranger. Still does. He's always really nice to me, it's nothing bad like that. I don't dislike him or anything. It's just," Henry shrugs, "awkward. We don't know anything about each other. And whenever he's around he just kind of focuses only on you. Not that that bothers me," Henry quickly throws in. "I just mean that's why I feel like I don't really know him."

"I'm sorry, Henry," she sighs out.

"I didn't mean for you to be." Again, his shoulders shrug against her. "I guess I just like it best when it's us. Just the three of us. That's my favorite."

He gets quiet then, too shy to elaborate, but Regina understands because sometimes they're on Regina's comfiest couch in front of a Marvel movie at Henry's behest - working through their second pizza at Emma's - and both women sit back and watch their son mouth along to his favorite films with so much love that Regina can't help but let her mind wander to how nice it is to be with someone, a partner, whose heart resides exactly where hers does.

She swallows and admits it to both of them at the very same time.

"That's my favorite too."
They're woken by Neal screeching in the guest room around two in the morning, and she and Henry lift their heads to share commiserating grimaces before dozing off again. Regina falls in and out of sleep, her body exhausted, but her mind wired. She knows what she has to do, and she's focused enough on the task that she finds herself waking again at three, then four, then five. The sun hasn't risen yet when she finally gives up and heads to the bathroom to get dressed, so this makes it as good a time as any.

Regina stands in front of the bathroom mirror flexing her fists. She's feeling much better now. Not back to one hundred percent, but there's magic running through her veins again. It's enough for her purposes at least. Regina takes a breath and then retrieves Emma's dagger. Tucks it inside her jacket, safely hidden away.

She creeps carefully downstairs. Hook's loud snores ring through the house, the perfect cover to let her slip into the garage unnoticed. Regina tiptoes to the door and waves a hand over herself. Magic shimmers against her skin. A simple invisibility spell. Easy to use, hard to detect.

Stealing herself, Regina opens the door and steps through. The trowel is easy to find, carefully organized with all of her other gardening tools, so she snatches it before slipping outside.

The early morning is quiet. There's a soft breeze, autumn on its way now, and the light hum of crickets, but all else is still. Regina bundles her jacket close around herself and heads off. She keeps to the grass rather than the walkways or streets. Careful to make no sound. To leave as little evidence of her presence as possible.

It's close to a half hour before she arrives at her destination.

The surrounding street is empty, but Regina moves slowly. You can never be too careful. She steps past the fence and over the pathway. Sticks to the grass and hedges around the small yard to the farthest piece of furniture. A small, round patio table.

Regina studies the deserted street one last time, just to be sure of her solitude. Right, left, then right again. When she's certain as she can be, she takes hold of the lip of the table and slides it across the grass. Then she falls to her knees and starts digging, pausing every few moments to do a scan of the surrounding area.

The ground is growing hard now that summer is on its way out, so Regina digs as far as she can until the dirt won't give. Without ceremony, she pulls out the dagger and drops it in.

Some whispered words.


She's meticulous as she packs the earth back down. Presses it in hard. Ensures the grass is returned to the top. Does her best to make the ground look as undisturbed as possible. Then she stands and wipes the dirt off her knees and drags the table back over it.

When she's finished, she stands back and studies the scene. Makes sure it looks just as she'd found it.

The night is growing hazy. Fog rolling in as the sun begins the first stages of its climb. Nodding to herself, Regina declares her job done and heads back home. Confident that unless she was somehow seen, the only way anyone will be able to get their hands on that dagger will be to torture the
information out of her.
And she's found she holds up rather well under torture.

Misty morning light follows her as she walks. Creeps higher and higher and she picks up the pace, desperate to get home before anyone wakes up to find her gone. Henry especially. To protect the dagger she can't tell anyone where she's been, and if he questions her, she'll be forced to outright lie. Lying to Henry needs to be avoided at all costs.

Regina hears the murmured voices before she even rounds the corner of the hedges lining her yard and sees them, Hook and Emma. She falters at the edge of her property as she takes them in.

It's ridiculous, but she can't tamp down the hot spike of betrayal that stabs through her at the sight. They're talking.

Just talking like it's any old day. Emma's standing there in her yard, easy and relaxed. She's changed her clothes at last. Dark jacket, dark jeans, dark boots. Dark. Dark. Dark. Her hair looks like it's been washed and she's talking.

Talking like she hadn't been able to talk to Regina.

Talking like she isn't desperate to get away.

Like she wouldn't rather be anywhere else in the world.

And Regina knows there's a valid reason for Emma to resent her and there shouldn't be any strain on her relationship with Hook but it still hurts. Hurts in a way she can't put a name to.

She doesn't want to know what they're saying.

Can't.

Filled with the sudden desire to get away, Regina hurries forward. If she transports herself into the house by magic, this new, senses-heightened Emma will spot her in a second she's sure. The only way is to creep forward as quietly as possible.

One foot on the lawn and Emma's head immediately snaps to her invisible form. Gaze hard over Hook's shoulder, eyes narrow, she shoves past him and towards Regina and Regina doesn't have a chance to react before grey magic swirls around her, sends her lurching through space.

When she blinks the smoke away, she's back in her bedroom, Emma sneering down at her. "Where the hell have you been?" she hisses.

"Swan?" A muffled call from Hook down in the yard.

"Keep your voice down," Regina whispers, eyes darting to Henry on the bed where he's buried under her thick comforter.

Emma ignores them all. "I tell you that you will be safe from her here, in this house, and you leave?
"Ma?" Henry's sitting up on the mattress, hair mussed and eyes bleary as he blinks in the early morning light.

Emma's eyes goes wide, horrified. "No, I-" Her gaze is fixed on Henry. "I didn't-"

And then there's a shift.

There's a shift, and Regina's blood runs cold.

It's a dark, hungry expression that flits over Emma's features as she looks upon her son, and on instinct Regina finds herself stepping between them, breaking Emma's line of sight. A quiet gasp slips out of Emma as Regina fills her vision and she stumbles away, back slamming into the far wall.

"I didn't-" she splutters again. "I wasn't- No." She curls into herself, sinking down the wall, head frantically shaking. "No, I- No-"

"Mom, what's-?" Henry tries from behind her but Regina cuts him off.

"Stay quiet," she murmurs.

Emma's squatting now, hunched over, hands in her hair. Fingers curled like claws, digging into her scalp. Eyes screwed shut. "Please don't," she's chanting under her breath as she rocks. "Please, please don't."

"Emma?" Regina dares a cautious step forward, any fear that had been brewing lost to concern. She tries again at the lack of response. "Emma, can you hear me?"

"Please don't. Please stop."

Regina swallows as she creeps closer. "What's going on?" She reaches out a trembling hand. "Are you okay?" Her fingers are so close, just inches from touching Emma and-

Emma's head snaps up, her glare like daggers as she barks out a harsh, "Stop."

And just like that, in a swirl of grey, Emma's gone.

Regina stares dumbly at the empty space she leaves behind.

What the fuck is going on?

"Uh-" Henry pulls her attention. Shakes her out of her stupor.

She turns around to face him, mouth open but words lost to her. Regina doesn't know how to explain this to him, how to soothe his fears and ease his mind. She doesn't even know what they just witnessed.

At her clear confusion, his lips pull into a grimace.

"Maybe we don't tell Grandma about this last visit, huh?"
It hurts her heart how good Henry is at pretending. His life shouldn't be like this. He shouldn't be falling apart at the seams on the inside and at the same time having to force a grin at his grandfather over french toast. He shouldn't have to lie to his family to get through the day.

It's different, she knows. So, so different. But still, Regina can't help but think of hiding men's riding trousers at the bottom of her trunk and climbing in through the back window just in the nick of time for tea and sneaking off to the stables every free minute to steal secret kisses.

Ever since the curse broke, that was the kind of life she promised herself Henry would never have to live, and yet here they are, sitting next to Snow White and smiling like they haven't just witnessed her missing daughter break down.

- 

It's Sunday, so following Emma's orders to stay at the house will be easy. David gets a couple deputies to cover at the station, and the rest of them are free to do as they please. It's a quiet and terse morning for the most part, but Regina takes some comfort in the fact that Hook looks rather grumpy. Likely confused and upset with Emma's sudden vanishing act. Brooding over this new, mysterious form his love has taken on.

Well, Regina supposes, for now she'll just have to resign herself to the small victories.

She can live with that.

Regina spends the day replaying her quick conversation with Emma again and again. Something is very wrong with her, something beyond merely resenting Regina, and Emma is just stubborn enough to resist help and get herself in some real trouble over it. Regina needs to figure out what's going on and fix it fast.

Her other concern is Hook. She would expect him to be gloating over the fact that Emma had chosen to seek him out over anyone else in the house. Rubbing their noses in the slight. Reminding them all of his importance. Of his perceived relevance.

Hook though, has been quiet. Surly and brusque, yes, but otherwise mostly silent. He hasn't brought up Emma once, let alone mentioned their early morning meeting. It's killing Regina not to know what was said. If Emma had told him anything important, had left any hints or clues as to her plans. But she's just petty enough not to ask.

The less she's forced to interact with Hook, the better.

Neal is fussy and Snow is clingy and David's in the mood for theorizing and it isn't until late afternoon that Regina can finally sneak away and get some time alone. She hides herself away in her bathroom and calls Belle.

Gold is softer now that he's free, kinder, yes, but she doesn't think he's one to go out of his way to help people when he doesn't have much personal stake in the matter. She'll need an in if she wants Gold to come for a proper discussion, and Belle, who has been unreasonably forgiving despite the long history between them, is just the one to give it to Regina.
Rumpelstiltskin is a man. A real man. Human. With goals steeped in love and life and with sights trained forward.

He's remembering compassion. He's relearning empathy. He's dedicating himself to proving his worth to a wife he never deserved. And he runs a pawn shop on the corner of Main Street.

It's there the new Dark One finds him.

There's no familiar tingle of the bell over the door. Emma appears in a swirl of magic. Too much magic for such a simple spell. Wasted energy rippling out from her, disturbing the air.

No, he fends off a wry smile as Regina's words run through his mind, Emma Swan is no master.

Despite the show of power, there's no aggression in her stance. Just that restlessness he's heard of. That wild, frantic sort of look about her.

Rumpel goes for calm and composed to compliment it. "It's good to see you again. You look-" his eyes track over her dark clothes, the clench of her fists, the hard set of her jaw, and settles on, "different."

"I am." Emma strides towards him and even with the front counter safely between them, it's a struggle for Rumpel not to instinctively take a step back. "I need your help."

A grimace pulls at his lips. "Historically, dealings with Dark Ones haven't been good for my health. I'm afraid I'll have to politely decline."

"Please, I-" There's something so utterly Emma in the strain of her voice, the savior shining through the darkness. "It's just a few questions. That's all I want to do, just ask you a few questions."

Rumpel releases a weary sigh, shoulders drooping. Further refusal could have him on the receiving end of some nasty dark magic, and, he supposes, with everything she's been to him in his life, he could grant Emma a few answers. It's what Belle would do, after all. And he thinks that in this new life he's been given, he'd like to be someone like Belle. Someone he finds worth loving.

It'd be nice, wouldn't it? To find something good in himself after so very long?

"What sort of questions?"

Relief washes over Emma. Her body relaxes some, her features soften. She licks her lips. "Belle," she murmurs. "How did you never-?" she falters, desperation in her gaze, unable to say the words aloud.

Of course, he should have known. Henry.

"I gave in." He swallows tightly. These are memories he'd rather leave behind. "That's all they want. I gave in, and she was safe. They stopped. They didn't care about her anymore."


The heart in his chest that's still learning how to beat again clenches.
Empathy.

It's getting easier every day, isn't it?

"But in the end, it didn't matter," he continues, in case she starts getting any ideas. "I destroyed her - us - anyways." She raises her gaze to meet his and he manages a soft smile. "Maybe now, if she's gracious enough, I'll have a real shot at a second chance. As me this time."

"A second chance," Emma murmurs, more to herself than anything. She refocuses on him. "Do you think it's possible to fight indefinitely? Or is it inevitable? Is it giving in or nothing? Lose yourself or-" she breaks off into a frown.

"I can't answer that question. The only certainty you have now is what you will do if you let your guard down. That responsibility is enough, I would think." He tilts his head, considers her carefully. "For now, at least."

Emma's sigh is heavy. "I dream of ripping their heads off. I close my eyes and I can see the skin tear along their necks." A smile flickers at the corners of her lips. "It feels so good just thinking about it."

He chokes back the bile. Spits out a sharp, "I remember." Because he does. He remembers. So well. Dark dreams of peeling the flesh off her bones like the skin off ripe fruit.

She blinks, shoulders trembling as though shaking herself out of a trance. A step back, then another. Another. A thick swallow.

"I hope you get that second chance," she says, more genuine than a being who calls themselves the Dark One has any right to be. "Make it stick this time." She hesitates, then adds, "Please."

"I'll do everything in my power," he vows.

Emma nods, and then in another clumsy display of far too much magic, she's gone.

Rumpel stares after her, lost in the mistakes of the past until a few minutes later when Belle enters the shop, eyes determined and bringing with her a request from Regina. It makes him smile, her righteousness. Her determination to be good, to do right even by those who have hurt her most.

It makes him proud of them both, and he surprises her by immediately agreeing to taking a trip to Mifflin.

Because for the first time in centuries Rumpelstiltskin is a man. A real man. A human. With goals steeped in love and life and sights trained forward.

Forward, forward.

Always forward.
"Henry, I think you should stay upstairs and keep an eye on Neal." Snow is the one to say it, thank god.

Because Regina knows how frustrated he will be. How angry and resentful. But the more she thinks of Emma's reaction to the mere sight of him, the more she thinks whatever Gold is coming over to explain to them is something he shouldn't hear.

Henry stands defiant, as expected, eyes hard. "Why can't I watch him downstairs?"

"You've gotta trust us on this one, kiddo." David stands firm behind his wife, a supportive hand on her shoulder. "It's for your own good."

Henry scoffs at the familiar phrase. Then his gaze shifts on Regina, turns wide and pleading. "Mom?" The title is said with complete faith, because they're each other's person. They're a pair. Always on the same team, always at each other's backs.

Regina purses her lips, bites back the instinctual acquiescence. Fights all of herself. "I'll let you know when it's okay to come down, sweetheart."

Betrayal flashes over his features before he scowls and whips around to stomp up the stairs. He slams his door and behind her, Hook lets out a low chuckle. As though Regina's dismay is more important than the fact Henry's upset.

It takes everything she has to tamp down the urge to set him on fire.

"He'll understand," Snow assures her, sweet and sincere. "He just needs some time."

All Regina can do is pray she's right.

---

Gold sits at the head of the table, Belle at his side. Regina, Snow, and David crowd together at the other end with the baby monitor in front of them, children awaiting their story. Hook remains standing. Broods against the wall as far from his 'crocodile' as he can get.

It's all very dramatic.

"Technically everything I'm about to tell you is speculation. I'm drawing purely from my own experience, but based on all I've been told, and what little I've seen, I'm fairly confident Emma is going through many of the same things I did."

"Which would be?" Hook presses, voice rough.

Gold spares him a frown. "Henry and Emma share True Love. They proved that by breaking the dark curse."

He's one of the few people in Storybrooke that doesn't refer to it solely as Regina's. She likes to think it's his way of shouldering his share of the blame. No doubt she's the more guilty party between
them, but for that particular curse, there was most certainly a castor and a creator.

"Nobody is arguing that," David says.

"I only mean," Gold soothes his impatience, "there are two ways to destroy a Dark One. One, the darkness isn't so worried about. The other, it very much is."

"You say that like the darkness is alive." Snow's nose wrinkles in disgust. "Like it has preferences."

"The curse is very much alive, in its own way. How else do you think it catches hold of you so thoroughly? It seeps into you slowly, grows until it's certain of its survival. It doesn't care about the individual host, only that it has one, always. And that whoever the host is, they are completely devoted to it."

"Like mind control?" Belle prompts and Regina pities her, still desperate after all this time to find a way around Gold's capacity for evil.

His smile is sad. "No, not quite." He turns his attention back to the rest of his audience. "The curse doesn't have any sort of goal beyond existing, at least, not to my knowledge. It gets the host in a vulnerable enough position that they'll do anything to protect it, and then it takes a back seat as soon as it's secure. It's not mind control, not really, but it's," he sighs, "persuasive. It reaches out to you. Whispers. Licks at the darkest corners of your mind. Isolates you until it's all you have left. Until you would rather die than give it up."

"It speaks to you?" Snow's horror is evident in her voice.

"Sometimes you can't hear anything else," Gold murmurs, getting lost in some far off memory.

"Yes, well, that's all very Edgar Allen Poe," Regina snaps, forcing him back to the present, "but what does that have to do with my son?"

A gentle hand on the shoulder from Belle, and Gold shakes himself out of his reverie. "The Dark One can be defeated in two ways. If they are slayed by their dagger, their power passes on to their attacker. The curse isn't bothered by this. It has a host still, it's perfectly happy. The second way though, True Love's Kiss, frees the host and destroys the curse entirely. And the curse does everything in its power to make sure that doesn't happen. It will try and push you to any extreme."

"It's threatened by Henry," Regina whispers, chest tight. That means the curse wants to--

By extension *Emma* wants to--

To--

"Oh, god," Snow breathes.

"Bullshit." They all turn to face Hook where he slouches, arms crossed, smug smirk plastered across his face. "Don't trust a thing the old croc says. I'm not sure what it is, but he has some sort of agenda. Listen to him, going on when he's got his wife right next to him. If any of this was true they would have broken his curse a thousand times over by now, hmm?"

In the past, it would have been enough to have Gold on his feet. But this new man is more passive than he's ever been. "When I first developed feelings for Belle," he keeps his eyes firmly away from her as he explains, "the curse was very interested in her. It became something of an obsession. I made an effort to keep her at arm's length, but it didn't matter. The curse wanted her gone. Out of the picture," he swallows thickly, "entirely. I fought those desires for quite some time until--"
"I kissed you," Belle murmurs.

He nods, eyes downcast, clearly still afraid to meet her gaze.

"It was working," she says. "I felt it. The curse was breaking. It would have broken but-

"I had a choice. Let our love be true, let it fill me and chase away the darkness, or hold onto the curse and the power that goes along with it." His shoulders sag. "I willingly pushed Belle away, and when I did, for all intents and purposes the curse became my True Love. All my devotion and desire belonged to it."

There's a moment of quiet and then Belle lifts a hand, places it tentatively on Gold's. They share a long look, and he releases a sigh.

"After that, she was no longer a threat. The voices stopped and once we were reunited in Storybrooke, Belle and I were able to be together without my curse breaking. I had given myself over completely. It was safe in the knowledge that no other bond I forged could ever be stronger than the one I shared with it. I had the capacity to care for Belle, but when push came to shove, it knew where my loyalties lay."

He looks from Snow to David to Regina. "As it is now, Emma hasn't made a choice. The curse doesn't know if she will choose it over her family. I believe that is why she's staying away from Henry. The darkness wants a complete hold over her as it had over me. And so it will do everything in its power to sway her. It's very likely now she's consumed with thoughts of destroying him."

"Destroying?" Snow squeaks in alarm while Regina grits her teeth.

"Yes. Before I committed myself completely to being the Dark One, I wanted very much to kill Belle." Regina sees her squeeze his hand. "It was most all I could think about and it only went away the moment I rejected the healing of her love. Emma is being smart and protecting her son. She's keeping him safe from herself."

"Tell that to him," Regina grits out. "How do I explain this to Henry without letting on that it's because Emma wants to. She can't say the words out loud. That would crush him."

"We'll tell him Emma's asked for space because she doesn't trust herself around any of us at the moment," David offers. "What else can we say?"

Regina shakes her head. "It's Henry. Tell him Emma doesn't believe in her ability to fight off the darkness and what's the first thing he'll do?"

Snow sighs, fondness and frustration melding. "Go and try to prove to her she's a hero."

Elbows on the table, Regina drops her head in her hands. "I guess I'll just have to play the bad guy. Tell him I'm not comfortable having them around one another while she's cursed."

David nudges her with an elbow, flashes a cheeky smile. "At least you've had practice?"

Regina rolls her eyes and sends over a little jolt of magic that has him yelping in surprise. Nothing painful, just a playful buzz like a static shock. Snow doesn't even tell her off for it and David grins at her as soon as he's recovered.

His goofy smile is so eerily Emma she has to look away.

"If a kiss is the thing to free her," Hook bravely steps forward, chin raised, "I'll do it. There's no need
to put the lad at risk."

Regina bites back her scowl while something like amusement flashes over Gold's features.

"Noble as your intentions are," Gold drawls, a touch of his old condescending air leaking through, "even if your kiss was the thing to free her, I don't believe that is the smartest course of action for the time being. I'm sure Emma would agree with me, were she here."

Nausea stabs through Regina as she catches on to his meaning. Her stomach churns at the very idea. "We can't use her like that."

"We might not have a choice," Gold replies, solemn.

"What?" Snow presses, voice tight. "What choice? Use her how?"

"Emma is the only one strong enough to stand up to Cora," David murmurs, realization dawning.

"So long as she's imbued with the curse, yes," Gold agrees.

"No." Snow's on her feet, palms slapped on the table. "No. If we have a way to free her we're not going to let her suffer just so we can use her as a weapon to save ourselves. I won't do that to Emma." She shakes her head, tears in her eyes. "Not again."

"We don't have a choice. Cora must be stopped."

David glares at Gold, stands beside his wife. "She wants the curse, not Emma. If we break it there won't be any reason for her to stay. She can move on to another universe. Everyone here will be safe."

"Have you never met Cora?" Hook's laugh is cold. "I doubt she'll passively accept her plans being destroyed and let us go along on our way unharmed, mate."

"He's right," Regina bites out, though it kills her to do it. "She'd kill us all with a flick of the wrist and Emma wouldn't be strong enough to stop her."

"Regina," Snow gasps, appalled she'd even consider doing anything but helping Emma as quickly as possible.

"Our own lives aside," Gold cuts in, "there are bigger things at stake. Say the curse breaks and Cora does move on without harming us, we'd hardly be out of trouble. Right now, something is happening that is bigger than any of us can comprehend."

Goosebumps tickle over Regina's skin. She remembers Emma shouting something very similar at Cora in the woods. It's true. If this goes any further-

"To my knowledge, nothing like this has ever happened before." There's a weariness to Gold's words. A deep set exhaustion. "We have an entity breaking into worlds and timelines they don't belong to and eliminating what should be constants in those realities. Can you imagine the havoc that's wreaking? Can you imagine what may happen if we let it go on unchecked?"

"Universes could crumble. Events could unravel. We could all be wiped away from basic existence."

The words hang heavily in the room. Weighing on them all. There's no easy way out. No third option. Either they stop Cora or they walk away, decide it's not their problem, and hope for the best.

Gold heaves a heavy breath. "If we have even the slightest chance of stopping Cora, of keeping any
of that from happening, we have a responsibility to do it. We have to see it through."

"You keep saying we," Regina drawls, "but this is falling on Emma's shoulders. Not any of ours."

"We can't ask this of her." Snow's words are high and desperate. "Please, she's not like you were, Gold. It's Emma. We can't make her do this when she could lose herself to it."

"We're not asking her to lose herself," Gold defends. "Keep her away from Henry, and she won't have to make any sort of decisions or choices. She can focus on Cora and when that's over we'll either all be dead, and it won't matter, or her son can give her a celebratory kiss on the cheek. What happens after that, is up to her. She'll be free, or she'll cement her role as this timeline's Dark One."

"What," Hook spits out, "and she'll live forever until someone else gets greedy enough to stab her in the heart?"

Gold blinks up at him. "Yes."

There's little sympathy in his words, but Regina's not sure if it's that or the situation in general that sets Hook off.

Either way, he lunges. Shoves past Belle and grabs Gold by the lapels of his jacket. Snatches him up and shoves him against the wall, chair toppling over with a clatter. His face is red and his eyes are hard and angry.

"Once again," he spits, face inches from Gold's, "you've managed to take everything from me and-"

"This isn't about you." Henry is standing in the archway to the living room, brow furrowed, tears staining his cheeks. "It's about my mom. We're supposed to be trying to save her." Head lifted, shoulders back, unyielding and defiant with a tremble at the corner of his lips like he's also more than a little devastated.

Like he's heard just about everything.

"Henry Daniel Mills," Regina's chair squeals as she pushes to her feet, anger overriding her heartache in a desperate attempt not to crumble under her son's obvious despair, "I trusted you to stay upstairs and-"

There's a wailing over the baby monitor on the table, a shrill cry. Sharp and panicked. Scared.

Henry's eyes go wide, face pale while David and Snow scramble past him for the stairs with shouts of, "Cora!"

He was supposed to be watching. Henry said he'd be up there watching and now-

Regina dashes after the panicked parents, Henry hot on her heels as they charge up the stairs to the guest room. Her heart thunders in her chest as her feet pound up each step. This won't happen in her house. Not to Neal. Not again. Not after what she's already done to Emma so many times over.

"Oh."

She hears Snow's sharp gasp of surprise before she comes to a halt behind them and is able to peer over their shoulders through the open doorway into the guest room. The bed is neatly made. Their clothes carefully folded in open bags. The sturdy crib Regina had magicked over from the loft for them is tucked into the far corner of the room. And Neal is in the center of it all, red faced and
squirming in his big sister's grasp.

He hiccups a little, eyes screwed up tight. Cheeks wet and arms flailing until Emma offers him a finger to latch onto with chubby, grasping hands. The faintest beginnings of a smile play at the edges of her lips as she looks down on him.

"Emma," Snow breathes, voice thick and words watery.

Regina feels Henry move up behind her, instinctively press into her side. And her heart feels like it's splitting as she reaches for his hand to clasp it in reassurance.

Emma won't hurt him. She never would. She couldn't. No matter what Gold says, it's just not possible. He has to know that. Regina has to make sure he does. That he never forgets or doubts that one simple truth.

"He started crying." Emma doesn't look away from Neal as she speaks. Focuses on the baby with an intensity that betrays her difficulty being here at all. "I told you I protected the house as best I can, but that doesn't mean he should be left alone. He's more vulnerable than any of us."

Snow dares a tentative step forward, a trembling hand outstretched. Emma's gaze flickers up for a moment, and her features are hard, but not accusing. She shifts to hold Neal out to his mother and Snow quickly gathers the baby close.

"Emma," she says again, "you're-" Snow falters as her eyes tracks over Emma's closed, guarded stance. A reservation more severe than what she showed in even her earliest days in Storybrooke. At last, Snow swallows, and says, "I'm so happy to see you."

"We've missed you so much," David adds, inching closer himself, fingers flexing at his sides with the urge to reach out for his daughter.

In all honesty, Regina's proud of them for their reservation. They've always been good, kind, but incredibly selfish in their love. It's a trait Regina herself shared back in her early days with Henry. Back before everything had changed.

She'd had to learn to grow past it and, despite everything between them, maybe even because of it, she finds herself glad to stand aside and watch them do the same. To learn how to give Emma space and time and not bombard her with the fairy tale happiness they'd always envisioned for their family.

"Swan!" Hook shoves past Regina into the room and she supposes it's too much to expect that to be a lesson everybody has learned.

He's up in her space and reaching out but Emma smoothly steps out of his fumbling reach. "Maybe we should bring the party back downstairs." There's no amusement in her voice, despite the quirk of her lips. "I may not have been invited to the discussion, but I have a bit of information of my own to share."

She's so formal. So stilted. So utterly not Emma Swan.

"We didn't know how to contact you," David rushes to explain, desperate to stay in her good graces.

"Or if you even wanted us to try anymore," Snow adds, soft and almost shy.

She's so scared of rejection, Regina knows. Of the day Emma finally snaps and refuses her and throws all the hurt she's caused back in her face. It's yet another fear Regina shares with her former enemy. She's spent breakfasts and dinners waiting for Henry to fall back into old resentments, lunch
breaks and afternoon walks waiting for Emma to condemn her for all she's done.

It's a haunting sort of anxiety that never fades for long.

"Desperate measures," is all Emma gives them with a pained grimace. She gestures to the hall, pointedly ignoring Henry tucked behind Regina in the open doorway. "Shall we?"
The Trap

Snow and David can't take their eyes off their daughter. They steal two seats at the table, leaving the one between them pointedly empty, and watch Emma with wide, hopeful eyes.

Emma chooses to stand.

Everyone else, even a surly Hook, sits, looking to the Dark One for direction. Not much has changed since the days of Rumpelstiltskin, it would seem.

Henry takes the chair next to Regina and scoots it as close to hers as he can manage. When he's settled, Emma starts moving. Prowling the space between the table and the archway to the kitchen.

"I've tried drawing attention to myself out in the woods, but Cora hasn't taken the bait."

Gold heaves a heavy sigh. "She doesn't think you're carrying the dagger anymore."

Emma shakes her head. A short, jerky movement. Her gaze darts over them as she paces, but never settles on any one person for more than mere seconds at a time. "Not that it really matters. Even if I get the upper hand, I couldn't exactly stop her for good."

Immortality. Right.

Because nothing's ever easy with them.

"So we find her dagger then," Hooks cuts in. ""You said she's a Dark One, no? She must have her blade. We take it off her and plunge it into the witch's heart."

"Unless she's hidden it somewhere," David says. "This isn't the Cora we know. How are we supposed to figure out where she'd put something so important? We could be searching for months and in that time-"

Emma's laughter is sharp. Maybe even a little cruel. "We know exactly where it is. The only place it could never be used to hurt her."

They all watch her, quiet and confused. All except Belle.

"Her own universe," she murmurs, more to herself than any of them. "It's the only thing that makes sense. As far as we know, Cora's the only one who has ever achieved the ability to travel like this. She knows it too. So if she's immortal, nearly invulnerable, why would she bring along the only thing that could possibly stop her?"

"So it's in another realm?" Hook presses, clearly struggling.

Regina rolls her eyes. "Another universe. The one place we could never possibly reach it. Which means we're back at square one."

"Not true." Gold folds his hands on the table, leans forward in his chair. "If Emma's strong enough to subdue her, we can get her contained. Snow, if you can convince the fairies to help us, we might have a chance."

"I'm sure they'd be more than happy to do whatever they can," Snow assures him.

It takes all of Regina's willpower not to snort. Blue and her army of bugs have never been willing to
offer much aid in her experience, but then, Regina was never the 'beautiful and fair' princess of the White Kingdom. Maybe this time she'll be surprised.

"Good." Gold drums his fingers against the table as he plots. "The magic they deal in is pure. Untainted by selfishness."

This time Regina can't hold her scoff back.

Gold ignores her.

"Once she's weakened by Emma, it will nullify her dark magic and we'll be able to imprison Cora indefinitely."

"So we'll just keep her around forever?" Regina wrinkles her nose. "Pass gate keeping down through the generations?"

"Better than the alternative," Gold replies.

"I need to lure her out into the open." Emma's gaze is locked on the far wall. Seeing past it. Beyond. "I need to be sure she comes. I need bait."

- 

"It doesn't have to be you."

Snow and David are out on a solemn mission to rally the fairies. Gold is stiff and pensive in the living room, Henry beside him on the couch while Belle coos over a fussy Neal. Hook broods by the window, glaring out into the dark lawn, and Emma is in the study with Regina, hovering around her, eyes hard and mouth set.

"I have the best chance of defending myself if things go wrong," Regina maintains. She does a rather admirable job of keeping her voice even, if she does say so herself. As much as she wants this to be over, to get Emma out of danger and back to normal, she's not looking forward to facing down Cora again. All that heavy, buzzing, malicious energy.

Emma will be taking most of the heat, but still, there's a telling tremble in Regina's hands. Fingers twitching, tapping lightly against her thighs. Heart high in her chest, fluttering like a bird.

"I suppose." Emma's gaze darted over Regina's shoulder for a moment and then she scowls, brow furrowing before she turns away completely. "Shut up," she mutters under her breath, and it would be insulting if Regina wasn't so sure the words were meant for somebody else entirely.

She glances over her shoulder but finds the room empty behind her and her heart sinks. The curse speaks to its host, Gold had said. Wants to ensure it has complete and total devotion. She can't imagine what it's conjuring up for Emma to see.

Emma clears her throat and holds out a stiff hand. "You said you have a letter opener?"

Regina nods. She retrieves the short knife from her desk drawer and brings it to Emma. A wave of murky dark magic and it shimmers, elongating into a curved blade, Emma's named etched into the cold steel. It's a decent enough replica, passable from a distance, but that won't be the thing to lure
Cora out.

Emma holds the decoy and closes her eyes. Pumps her energy into the fake dagger until it's near shining. Her magical signature works its way over the blade. Weaving through it until it's undeniably hers. A piece of Emma Swan.

At least, it will feel that way to stranger like Cora.

"Good?"

Regina glances up to catch Emma's eye and for a moment they're transported back to their days at the bottom of a dusty vault. Regina the long suffering teacher, Emma the overeager student, desperate for approval.

She swallows at the unexpected wave of emotion that rises in her. "Perfect," she manages.

"Are you going to be okay?"

No, Regina almost says before she can pull herself together. "Why wouldn't I be?" She says instead, tilts her head. "I'll stay out of your way, unless there's some way I can reasonably help you."

Emma frowns. "I mean about your mother."

"You're the one who told me she's not my mother, didn't you?"

"Yes," Emma allows as she presses the fake dagger back into Regina's hands, "but she looks an awful lot like her, no?"

Despite herself, Regina bristles a bit at the implication. "I can separate. I won't relish in seeing her imprisoned, if that's what you mean, but she's different. She feels differently. Speaks differently. And she's young. Younger than any Cora I've ever known as family. Besides-" Regina falters.

Emma's not listening to her. She's not even looking at her. Her brow is furrowed and she's glaring down at the floor. Fists squeezed tight at her sides and jaw clenched, muscles working beneath her hollow cheeks.

She looks so angry.

So enraged by some unseen force.

"What?"

Regina blinks at the quiet word she forces out. Unsure if she really heard it until Emma manages it again.

"What?"

Maybe she is listening after all.

"It's silly," Regina says. "Childish. But the hardest thing about facing my mother was always her eyes. They knew me. The whole of my life they knew me. Except when this version of her looked at me it was just-"

"Empty," Emma finishes for her.

"Yes. There's nothing between us. My mother is dead, what's in front of me now is just a bad dream."
I can separate."

Emma studies her, features pulled tight as though she's warding off a bad smell. At the other end of the house, the front door swings open. David and Snow hurry inside and - by the sound of the soft lilt of Blue's voice mixing with theirs - return victorious.

"I won't let you get hurt," Emma says quickly before they're interrupted once more. "Just stay calm and trust me."

The vow hangs heavy in the air between them and, suddenly uncomfortable, Regina shoots for levity. "Words I never thought I'd hear from a Dark One."

There's a pained flash of sorrow across Emma's face and Regina instantly regrets speaking at all.

That hadn't been reassurance from a Dark One. That had been a promise from her friend.

"Let's just get this over with then." Emma heads for the hall to meet up with the others. Pauses in the doorway only long enough to shoot a glance over her shoulder, eyebrows raised. "No heroics, your majesty."

Still such a brat.

- 

"Remember," Emma tells Blue before they leave, "let me wear her down first. If you try to contain her too quickly she could easily slip away. She has to be weak and exhausted and completely off guard for this to have any hope of working."

Regina is in awe as she traverses the empty streets of her town. Even taking into account that night has fallen, it's the quietest she's ever seen it. Almost eerily so. Snow and David had sent out word through Ruby's gossip chain so most everyone knows to stay indoors tonight.

If all goes according to plan, it will be just Regina and Cora out and about in Storybrooke, Emma and Blue concealed by magic somewhere in the shadows around them.

Regina has a fake errand to run for this particular operation. They'd decided against aimless wandering. Cora might be from the old world, but she's never been stupid. And she certainly has a mind for plots. Instead, Regina's set herself some fake - believable - goals.

A long, slow walk to town hall. Some late night paperwork at the office. A long, slow walk home.

A handbag thrown over her shoulder all the while. One with a fake dagger inside.

Emma's energy radiates from the magical blade, washing over Regina as she walks down silent streets under dim lamps.

Back at the full house she hadn't been sure, but here in the dark, seemingly alone, Regina's suddenly positive Cora will heed its call.

She steps off Mifflin onto Park Lane, the hairs on the back of her neck snapping to attention as a cool breeze washes over her. It's getting colder now. Fall and the rest of the world churning on while Storybrooke has been stagnant in its grief. Mourning the loss of their princess.
But now she's back and they've speed back up to reality and found nothing but cold, dark truths. Danger and desperation with no easy fix.

Leaves skitter over the sidewalk in front of her.

The trees lining the road shake in the wind.

Somewhere a crow caws. Sharp and harsh.

It takes to the sky.

The crickets are quiet.

Everything is quiet.

She's here.

Regina grips the strap of her bag tight and keeps a steady pace despite the eyes she feels on her back. She's being hunted, but she has the advantage of awareness.

The advantage of awareness and friends.

Friends somewhere in the shadows.

Blue probably won't abandon Regina to Cora's mercy this time, right?

Hopefully.

"I won't let you get hurt," Emma had said.

Just stay calm and trust her.

Blue doesn't matter.

Emma is here, even if she's invisible and inaudible and utterly vanished. She's here.

Trust her. Trust her. Trust her.

Regina looks both ways before cutting across Drury and onto Wolf Harbor. Does her best to keep her step from faltering. To ignore the tickle skittering up her spine. The warning. The waves rushing towards her from behind, quickening her pulse and turning her breath shallow. Power.

That power is back.

Strong and suffocating. A blanket of raw force threatening to bury her completely. To wipe out everything in its path.

Just keep moving.

Wolf Harbor to Claymont.

She's closer now. Her presence heavier.

Keep moving.

Claymont to Spruce.
A rustle in the trees. Wind. Probably.


Spruce to Lincoln and finally onto Main, town hall standing proud in the distance and-

"Hello again."

Regina goes rigid at the end of the sidewalk, a startled gasp slipping out at the sight before her.

Cora stands in the middle of the road - right in the center of Main Street - looking like a sunken, rotting corpse. Something deranged and terrible out of a horror movie. Out of Regina's darkest nightmares. She's a ghost of herself. Gaunt and almost skeletal, like she was in the woods. But there's something new about her pale, paper-like skin now.

Regina can't look away from the rough, jagged lines of darkness etched across her face. Sharp and ugly and pulsating slightly. Shuddering. Beating, like a heart. Like there's something dark and dangerous behind them, just under Cora's skin. Biding its time until it's ready to break through.

Bile rises in Regina's throat and she struggles to swallow it down.

"You seem to have some part to play in all of this after all, don't you?" Cora holds up a hand, a photograph clenched between her fingers. It's too dark to make out the imagine from this distance, but Regina already knows what it is. Henry's picture of them with Emma. Proof of a link. A bond.

Regina's heart beats faster in her chest. If they don't settle this tonight, Henry could very well be the next target. And Cora getting her hands on him is as good as her getting her hands on the real dagger. There's nothing Emma wouldn't sacrifice to keep their son safe. Even her very being.

"You're quite powerful," Cora muses. "Impressive, for a mortal. I can see why you were entrusted as protector."

Regina jumps as an impressive flame suddenly bursts from Cora's fingertips. It eats its way up the picture of her family until there's nothing left but stray ash, flitting off in the wind.

"Though I'm afraid you're more than a little outclassed."

Cora takes a step forward and Regina, legs shaking, stumbles a step back.

Where the fuck is Emma?

"There really isn't any point in resisting." Cora's smile is wide, bright teeth striking against dull lips. "You may as well hand the dagger over now, hmm? Save yourself the struggle."

Despite the fact it isn't real, Regina finds herself instinctively gripping her bag tighter. Clutching it close to her chest and shirking away.

Cora's smile falters. Her features harden. "Well," she clucks her tongue and raises a glowing hand, "have it your way then."

And then there's a great rush of energy like a billowing gust of wind and Cora is sent soaring across the road.

Emma steps up behind Regina, voice low, "Get back to the house. Wait with the others."

"Like hell."

Before Emma can even open her mouth to protest, Cora is back on her feet. Tattered cloak flicking around her ankles, wild hair frizzy and unkempt, eyes like fire and hatred and malice.

Her gaze tracks over them and Regina can see her reading the situation, calculating her next move. Determining whether this is a fight she can win or if she should retreat and reevaluate.

Emma must see it as well.

"Don't take off." She steps forwards, arms out wide. "You have me, you have the dagger. All you have to do is grab it and land a single hit." She laughs a little, mocking. "Easy enough for the most powerful force in all the realms, no?"

Cora's scowl is twisted. Inhuman. "You have no idea who you're dealing with." Her body tenses. Winds up like a coil, ready to spring at any moment. "You're completely outmatched."

Emma doesn't so much as flinch under Cora's growing power. "Prove it."

An animalistic growl and Cora lashes out. Red magic bursts from her splayed palms. Rips through the air like jagged lines of lightning.

Before Regina can think to react Emma has an arm around her waist and transports them both in a flurry of murky magic. When the smoke clears Regina finds herself on the roof of Granny's diner.

"At the very least stay out of the way," Emma grits out, clearly livid. But there's no time for arguing and she knows it. Emma tugs at Regina's bag until she relaxes her hold. Snatches up the fake dagger and shoves it into her belt. "Keep your head down."

And then she's gone.

Regina hurries to the edge of the roof to peer down at the street below. Emma's already taking up the offensive, hurling jolt after jolt of buzzing magic at Cora. It's a magnificent show of force, but Cora's combating it well, giving just as good as she's getting.

Emma cries out in pain at a sharp blast of fire to the shoulder.

Cora screeches in rage at a strong zap to the side.

They hammer on one another relentlessly. Exchanging blows back and forth. Their bodies absorbing each impact, vulnerable only to the stab of a single blade. The only thing ever wavering is their stamina. Their energy. Draining them slowly with each magical feat.

Emma is strong. Impossibly so. Perhaps even stronger than Cora. She's got raw natural ability and physical strength on her side. Lean and muscled. Faster than Cora can keep up with and tenacious. Able to take a hit and keep coming back for more.

The problem is she's an absolute novice.

Regina's heart leaps in her throat as she watches the inevitable. Cora catches on to Emma's speed, her strength, and so falls back on her own skill. That tactician's mind must be something she boasts in every lifetime.

Cora pulls back. Reigns herself in. Takes to putting all her energy into dodging. Avoiding. She lets Emma wear herself out slowly, whittling away at her awesome reserves until Emma is left a sluggish, panting mess, stumbling through her every attack.
It's then that Cora lunges.

One long, sweeping motion.

Emma leaps forward, fist on fire, and sends it hurtling towards Cora's head. Completely open. Completely exposed. Cora ducks to the right and dances around Emma. Rips the dagger from her belt and raises it high.

And even though Regina knows it's a decoy, a fake - completely harmless to Emma beyond temporary pain - cold dread still overwhelms her. Just the image alone.

Cora, her mother, doing this - again - standing over a person Regina cares for, ready to blindly destroy in some insane pursuit of power.

It just- It's-

She can smell horses. Horses and straw and blood and-

The dagger comes down. Plunges straight into Emma's back.

And Regina's mind knows it's a fake. Knows it's okay. It's not over. It's not the end. Not again. But when Emma staggers forward and drops to her knees Regina's body acts on its own. Her magic instinctively reaching out for Emma's, pulling her over in a cloud of deep violet so she's there on the street. Ready to catch Emma before she fully falls.

"At last." Cora's laughter is high and manic.

Regina looks up at her from where she kneels in the middle of the road, Emma sagging heavily in her arms, breathing labored. Cora stands over them, watching her hands, ready for the magic to begin. To feel the slow seep of energy winding through her body, merging Emma's power with her own. Ready to become utterly unstoppable at last.

"Take it out."

Regina shivers at the hot breath against her neck. Her eyes flicker to the dagger stuck proudly in Emma's back. A gruesome display. "I can't." Her voice wavers. "I-"

"You have to," Emma mutters into Regina's skin. "I can't heal while it's in there. You have to before-"

Emma's power wavers and the dagger shimmers, shakes, and then it shrinks. Compresses back down into Regina's simple letter opener once more.

"You-" Cora's eyes are wide in confused horror and everything slows as realization dawns. Her features harden, twist into something ugly and hateful and oh, Regina hasn't seen that expression in so long.

Not since she was a young girl refusing to marry a king.

"You." The word is different this time. Not a question. An accusation.
And Regina is hit with the sudden certainty that if something doesn't change very soon she is going to die.

"Blue," she screeches and grasps wildly at Emma's back. Ignoring the slick blood coating her fingers, she wraps them around the hilt of the blade and tugs with all her might. Rips it from the wound, leaves Emma gasping in her arms.

It's okay. She'll heal.

She'll heal. She'll heal. She'll heal.

Blue explodes out of the alleyway between the general store and the bakery, a blast of fairy dust aimed straight for Cora. But it's too late. Cora is already onto their ploy and is moving.

She dives from the dust's path and it falls to the street, nothing more than a pile of glitter. No better than a child's craft.

Fairies are hardly built for battle and their magic is innocent. A blow from Cora is all it takes for a defenseless Blue to crumple.

Emma shoves Regina away. Pushes shakily to her feet as Cora turns on them once more. The dark curse is already setting to work. Regina can see it through the tattered hole the blade left in Emma's jacket. Her back is healing. Raw skin stitching together at impossible speed.

"Coward," Cora spits, eyes like fire.

Emma throws a jagged, fizzing burst of magic Cora's way. It's easily deflected and her body sags at the effort.

At the very least Cora is straining too. And she's rattled. Her eyes darting about the empty street, on high alert for any more surprises.

Maybe Regina can give her a few.

She scrambles to her feet and musters up all of her energy. Standing beside a wheezing Emma, she summons fire to her palms. Great big flames, crackling and licking at the air.

Cora sneers at her, but takes a half step back as Emma too pulls together enough power to have her hands alight.

Just feet away, Blue stirs. She's groggy and slow, but she's rising, and Regina watches the brief flicker of humanity that flashes in Cora's gaze. Her wide eyes growing wild with fear as she stands, outnumbered.

She's going to run. It's obvious. All she needs is an out.

Cora's gaze falls over her and Regina knows what's about to happen before the jolt of harsh, red magic is even sent her way.

She and Emma move as one. Both throwing up barriers, their magic merging together to create a sturdy shield of light. Cora's power beats against it but can't break through.

That's not what the old witch is after though. As soon as they're distracted, she's off. Weaving down the street at a full sprint, hands outstretched.

There's something heavy in the air. Magic. Building. Churning up the world around them. Pulling
together just yards in front of Cora. It's humming. Buzzing. The wind picking up and everything closing in as a bright light forms.

Emma drops the shield and rushes forward. "Don't!" Her words are harsh, desperate, as she charges after Cora. "We can't let her-

A portal snaps into reality. Bigger than any Regina has ever laid eyes on. A swirling vortex of raw energy leading into some unknown existence.

Cora leaps and Emma dives after her, throws everything she has into it. She's far - too far - but Emma manages to wrap her grasping fingers around the tattered ends of Cora's cloak. Latches on tight as she falls to the hard pavement. Still-

It's too late.

Cora's through the portal. Into the vortex and onto another realm. As soon as she's through it snaps shut behind her. Blinks out of existence completely so it's just Emma there in the middle of the road. Splayed out on her stomach, arms outstretched towards nothing, a grubby piece of fabric clutched in a tight grip.

Everything is still.

"No."

Regina's heart leaps in her throat at the terror in Emma's tone. At the anger.

"No. *Fuck*."

"Emma-" she tries, but Emma's on her feet, eyes wild.

"*Fuck*!"

"It's fine," Regina soothes. "It's done. If she comes back we try again-"

Emma whips around on Regina, lips pulled into a sneer. Out of the corner of her eye, Regina notices Blue take a couple steps back.

"If?" Emma barks, high and sharp. "If."

The way Emma storms up to her, gets right up in her face, darkness leaking from her very being, it's- Well, she's never felt so big before. So imposing.

So dangerous.

Regina stands tall even in the face of Emma's spitting frustration. She won't back down. Not because of a temper tantrum.

"She's out of this universe." Emma jabs a finger behind her where the portal had opened. "She created a gateway from *nothing* and broke a hole in the fucking universe. She's going to collect more, and then she's going to come back."

"We don't know that," Regina says even though they very much do.

Emma leers down at her, haughty. Ugly. "She's going to come back, and she's going to be unstoppable."
Of course she is. Regina would be an idiot to deny it.

"I told you to stay on the roof."

Anger bubbles up in Regina, hot and itchy. Dark One of unfathomable power or no, she's not going to stand here and be Emma's punching bag.

"I did," she snaps, meeting Emma toe to toe, right up in her face like they're arguing over Henry's affections all over again, "until you went and got yourself stabbed. Why did you even take the knife? That's the only reason she got the better of you."

Emma's eyes darken at the challenge. "I-I-" Her teeth grit, she shoves past Regina and stomps up to some invisible agitator. "I'll rip your throat out, Analath." The words are a vicious growl that stands Regina's hair on end.

Who the fuck is Analath?

"Emma," she murmurs, anger deflating under the weight of her sorrow, "there's nobody there."

That doesn't stop Emma from standing in the middle of Main Street, glaring at thin air.

Blue cautiously moves up behind Regina, whispers a quiet, "perhaps it's best for us to return to the house and regroup rather than risk agitating her further. She's clearly-" the fairy falters before settling on, "unwell."

Regina ignores her. "Emma?" She dares a few steps forward, slow and nonthreatening.

Emma glances over her shoulder, eyes dull. "She's going to find easier prey. Weaker Dark Ones she can consume and build up and she'll be back as soon as she's certain there's no chance I could possibly stand against her."

"It doesn't matter." Regina's fists clench tight at her sides. Nails digging into soft palms. "She'll never have your dagger so she'll never win. I won't let that happen."

Emma's features soften. "I took the knife because if you still had it and I went down, she would have moved straight on to you."

It's too much. All of this is. Horrible thing after horrible thing piling up on Emma. For years now. Burying her under misery and strife. Every single one seemingly leading back to Regina.

To fight Regina. To defy Regina. To escape Regina. To protect Regina. To save Regina.

Every single thing. All her fault.

Always.

From the very start she's been nothing to Emma but poison.

A walking, talking, breathing curse.
Regina Mills has to walk through the doors of her home a failure.

No Cora. No Emma. No answers.

She leaves it to Blue to handle the report. Sits and stews beside Henry on the couch while she's forced to relive the experience from a bug's perspective. Blue explains Cora's escape and what it means and how Emma had disappeared with nothing but a few cryptic words and the frayed edge of Cora's cloak. Snow and David are clearly distraught at the idea of once again having no idea where their daughter is or how to contact her.

It's Hook who stands, chin in the air. "I'll find her. She's somewhere in Storybrooke, we know that. We tried the Crocodile's way and it didn't work, so now we try my way. I'll find Swan, free her from this curse, and together we'll find a way to stop Cora once and for all."

Snow opens her mouth to protest the ridiculous plan, probably to remind him there's no way in hell he'll find Emma unless she wants to be found, but Regina cuts her off. "At this point, there's no reason not to try everything we can."

Hook studies her in surprise, clearly suspicious of her support, but she manages to keep a straight enough face he buys the ploy. It's Henry snickering at her side that almost breaks Regina, but she manages to hold it together until the pirate finally marches out of her house.

"Regina," Snow scolds, though it is rather halfhearted.

"What? Cora's no danger to him and he's not exactly helping the cause. A fool's errand is just the thing to keep him out of our hair. Besides, if we're going to be working with Gold in the future this will make things a lot smoother."

"You won't hear me complaining," Gold says, a grimace tugging at his lips.

"So what now?" Belle looks between them. "Did Emma say what she planned to do next? What can we do to help her? We can't just wait for Cora to gather strength and return. She might not be able to kill Emma without her dagger but Emma can still feel pain. There must be some way to stop her."

"Is it really impossible to travel between universes, Grandpa?" Henry's bright eyes are focused on Gold.

"Clearly not, if Cora can manage it, but as far as I've always known before now, yes. I've never heard anything beyond theories."

"The fairies have no knowledge of such things either," Blue supplies.

Regina crosses her arms and slumps back against the couch. "There are ways to replicate spells. To take the lingering energy and restructure it using one's own magic and create a mimicry."

"Not for something of this magnitude." Gold shakes his head. "That sort of power is beyond even you."

"What about Emma?" Regina presses. "She can do it if Cora can. Going blow to blow I'd say at this point she might even be stronger than Cora. At least from what I saw."
"I don't doubt it," Gold agrees. "But as I said before she's unpracticed and undisciplined. She has no idea how to control herself and if you ask her to pour her full energy into reopening that portal there's a good chance she'll blow up half of Storybrooke."

"Teach her to control her magic then," David urges. "She can learn and then-"

"By that time Cora's signature will have faded. The lingering energy will be gone and there will be nothing for Emma to work off of for recreation."

David looks to Regina for support and she offers him an apologetic frown. "He's right. Emma is just about starting from scratch in terms of restraint. It would take too long. The last traces of the portal would be gone by that point, and Cora may even have returned by then. It's not realistic."

"It's better than doing nothing." Tears are welling up in Snow's eyes. "I'm not going to just sit here and wait for her to come back and take Emma."

David puts an arm around her while Henry moves to sit at her other side. He leans a head against her shoulder and Regina's so proud of him. Putting everything aside to focus on his family, to offer comfort, even so young.

"That's not what we're going to do," Regina assures them all. "We'll figure this out, like always."

It's late. Blue leaves them before long and Snow and David are still huddled up on her couch whispering sweet nothings to one another, so it's up to Regina to walk Gold and Belle to the door. Belle heads out to the car, but Regina catches Gold in the doorway before he can slip away.

"Who's Analath?"

Eyes falling shut, he breathes deep through his nose. "I'd hoped I'd be done with hearing that name."

Regina glances over her shoulder to make sure nobody is listening in then steps outside fully, pulls the door shut behind her. "Emma said it after Cora escaped. Like she was talking to someone who wasn't there."

Gold doesn't seem particularly interested. "Did she now?" His gaze trails longingly to the car where his wife sits waiting. Engine running and heaters on full blast to fend of the chilly night air.

"I'll rip your throat out, Analath. That's what she said."

To her surprise, Gold actually laughs. "Good. She deserves it."

"Who is she?" Regina presses.

The mirth fades from Gold's eyes. His shoulders sag. "A child," he murmurs. "A young girl whose sense of justice got the better of her." His gaze flickers up to meet Regina's. "Not unlike another girl I knew, once upon a time."

Regina's stomach twists in discomfort, her cheeks warm. "Just cut to the chase."

Gold laughs again. Softer this time. More sincere. "It's a sad story from a long time ago. One that
faded into legend. Analath came before my time, though that's not the title she chose to be known by once she rose to power. Called herself the Princess of the Dead."

"The Princess of the Dead?" There's something familiar about the name but Regina can't quite place it in her mind.

A snort slips out of Gold. "She always did have a flair for the dramatic." His smirk is teasing. "I've found that's what happens when such power falls into the laps of children so young."

Regina's fingers twitch as she fights the urge to send him sailing across the lawn. Focus, Regina. Focus.

"So, this princess, she was actually a Dark One? And now she's speaking to Emma through the curse?"

The question is enough to sober Gold up. "She spoke to me," Gold says. "Just as often as the others."

Oh Emma.

"How many?"

"Four. Though, if things work as I suspect, I'm sure I'm now bouncing around in Emma's head as well." He frowns when Regina opens her mouth to question him further. "I'm afraid anything else you'd like to know about them you'll have to look into on your own. They weren't exactly there to give me lessons in their personal history."

No, apparently they were there to whisper to Gold about how satisfying it would be to murder Belle. Regina suppresses a shudder.

"Well, I suppose I'll leave you to get Belle home." She hesitates before deciding to be the bigger person, maybe for the first time in her life. "Thank you for helping how you can. I know things are different now, and I'm sure you're here for Henry's sake but still, it means something."

"Henry." Gold tilts his head, a wry smile on his lips. "You know, I was trapped for hundreds of years watching myself do things, says things, be somebody who was a complete stranger to me. I betrayed the trust of my son and of my wives. I lost all sense of honor or compassion or justice. I was imprisoned inside myself, screaming and clawing with no hope of escape." He breathes deep, his features soft. "And then Emma came and took the darkness from me and I was saved."

Throat tight, Regina swallows. Intentional or not, she's not the only one Emma sacrificed herself for that night.

"Be careful around her." Gold catches her eye, solemn and serious. "Emma is strong, but she's not infallible. Nobody is, and whatever comes next, when you're with her, Regina, it's going to fall on you to make sure nothing goes wrong. You need to be calm, when she's out of control. You need to be patient, when she can't focus."

She manages a nod. "I'll be sure to pass the word along."

"You, Regina," Gold presses, a light hand on her arm. A gentle squeeze the likes of which Regina's never felt from him before. "You, more than anyone, need to be careful. Don't let your guard down."

It's unsettling, the way he smiles so softly at her. She's still getting used to this new man. A Gold who speaks to her without fifty layers of sarcasm and malice between them.
"You know, Belle seems set on the idea of our personal reconciliation." He drops his hand with a wistful sigh. Shifts heavily on his cane.

"You and me, personal?" Regina raises her eyebrows while she fights back a laugh.

"Yes. She keeps suggesting lunch. An apology of sorts." He chuckles. "You for the years of the curse. Myself for putting you through my, hmm - let's call them teaching methods."

Regina can't believe what she's hearing. And even though she might comfortably call Gold an ally right now, no way in hell is she ever going to be sitting down across a table from Rumpelstiltskin at Granny's for a reconciliatory lunch. "I think we've reconciled enough for the time being."

His laughter is actually pleasant. "I told her you'd say as much, but I was pestered into at least mentioning it."

A smirk tugs at Regina's lips. "You're welcome to say I accepted and we had a wonderful time. Your secret will be safe with me."

Gold hums. "All things considered, I think I'm done with secrets." A tip of the head and then he turns and limps down her front walk to the car were Belle waits.

There might be something like pride in her chest, warm and soft and steadily growing. Maybe, way down the line when her family isn't threatening to fall apart at the seams, a short lunch date wouldn't be the complete end of the world.

-  

Regina hums an absent tune to herself as she locks up the door behind her guests. David and Snow will be staying, no doubt. Cora may be gone for the time being but there's no telling when she'll be back. And even if she wasn't a threat, they certainly won't leave when there's a chance Emma could pop back into the house at any moment.

"Maybe you should leave a key hidden outside for Killian. Just in case he'd like to come back for the night."

Regina raises her eyebrows as Snow approaches her in the hall, soft eyes wide and fretful.

"It's not as though he doesn't have his own place to stay," Regina defends. "I didn't banish him to the forest. He's free to go where he pleases so long as it's not on my own personal property." She heads for the kitchen, Snow close on her heels. "Since when have you turned into his personal champion anyhow? He's a grown man, you don't have to be watching over him like you do."

Snow takes a seat at one of the stools lining the island while Regina rummages through what little is in the fridge. Chasing down her Mother has left her stomach in knots but it won't do her any good to starve herself. She should force down a little something.

"It's not Killian. It's-" Snow falters, sighs. "It's Emma. I didn't want her to come back and feel like we just erased her from our lives."

"What?" Regina forgets the fridge and moves to the counter, hard gaze on Snow.
"I didn't want her to come home to find we pushed out her only solo link." Snow's words are tight and pleading. "David and I are married and have a baby. We both have a strong history with you. Henry is our grandson. You're Henry's mother. But-

"But Killian's only real link to the rest of us is Emma," Regina sighs out.

"I know it's silly, but I didn't want to just cut him out and have this neat little package leftover. Like we could possibly be whole without her. I wanted her to come home to a clear gap. A big gaping hole that only Emma can fill." Snow's gaze is wide and watery.

Despite everything, the sight still has the power to make Regina's heart ache. She blames those damn, doe eyes.

"It's not silly." She reaches out and gently places a hand over Snow's, gives a soft squeeze. "But Emma doesn't need Hook to be a part of this family."

"Of course not," Snow whines. "I know that. But sometimes I feel like she-"

"If she doesn't know that," Regina cuts her off, "then we damn well better start doing everything in our power to prove it to her."

Snow grips her hand tight, a wide smile pulling at her lips. "You're right." She choked out a wet laugh and then moves to wipe at her eyes. "Of course you're right. You're always right."

"Oh, now she understands." Regina rolls her eyes, earning another laugh before she heads for the cabinet beside the fridge. "I don't think I'm up for food, but maybe some hot chocolate wouldn't hurt."

There's so much affection in Snow's gaze when she turns around that Regina struggles to meet it for very long. "That sounds like a great idea to me."

Regina sets to work. Emma will settle for anything, but she always prefers when Regina pulls out all the stops. Forgoes the tiny packets of powder and the microwave and heats up some milk on the stove.

That's what she'll do tonight. Just the way Emma likes it.

Snow sighs a little. "Now there's a tune I haven't heard in a very long time."

"Hmm?" Regina doesn't look up from the drawer she's hunting for spoons in.

"The song you're humming. Some of the kitchen staff's girls would play that ghastly hand game that went along with it. I never got on board with it," she mock shudders, "too gruesome for my tastes."

Regina hadn't even realized it, but she'd started humming the same song she had in the hall. The one she couldn't quite fully latch onto, but also couldn't get out of her head since her conversation with Gold.

She clears her throat. Doesn't so much as glance up from the stove so as to appear only vaguely interested. "Right, how did that go again? I can't quite pin it down in my mind."

Snow laughs. "You want to practice the clapping pattern with me?"

Regina shoots her a look over her shoulder. "I meant the song, obviously."

A teasing grin. "Sure."
Little Snow White sure has gotten cheeky lately. Nothing a good apple turnover couldn't spook out of her. Regina smirks to herself. Maybe they'll have an eventful family dinner once Emma and Cora are sorted out.

*If* they're sorted out.

Her amusement wavers. She clears her throat. "So do you remember?"

"Hmm." Snow worries her bottom lip. "Like I said, I never enjoyed the game myself. It was something like, Guard your grave and your tomb, watch out, doom and gloom. All that nasty stuff." Snow waves her off.

Regina freezes as the memory comes back to her. Children from the old world. Young commoner girls that Regina used to envy, curled up in the grass under shady trees and giggling as they clapped their hands together.

"Guard your tomb, hide your grave," she murmurs, "Princess wants a brand new slave."

"That's it." Snow snaps her fingers in childish excitement. "uh- uh, oh- In the ground, where they, uh, where they fester? She will snatch your old ancestor."

"Great," Regina corrects. "Great ancestor. Say goodbye to Grandpa Gil, Grandma Esther, Great Aunt Jill."

The Princess of the Dead.

That's it.

Regina had completely forgotten the made up story from the old world. A powerful, immortal witch with a penchant for necromancy used to scare fussy children into early bedtimes.

Except according to Gold, she was real.

Analath, a long forgotten Dark One.

"Another 'guard your tomb, hide your grave,' again and I think that's it." Snow's nose wrinkles. "Like I said, gruesome. Why did that pop into your head?"

"Guess I'm feeling nostalgic," Regina mutters. She twists off the heat on the stove and gracelessly slides the pan off the burner. "Snow, I'm going out. Tell Henry I'll be back by morning but I don't want him waiting up for me."

"Where are you going?" Snow tails her to the front hall. "Is it something to do with Emma? Let me help. Please."

"I'm just satiating my own curiosity," Regina promises as she pulls on her coat. "Nothing dangerous or even helpful. Please, make sure Henry gets to bed."

"All right," Snow allows, though she doesn't look happy about it. "You'll let us know if you need anything?"

"Of course."
Once she's outside Regina transports herself to the graveyard by way of magic to save on time. She hurries down into the crypt, only pausing for a few moments to graze gentle fingers along the side of her father's tomb with a whispered hello.

When she's down in the vault, Regina sets about hunting. Past the spell books and notes on magical theory and her own writings on potential craft is her personal collection of more historically minded texts.

Emma had grinned when she found the books. Looked delighted for some reason Regina couldn't possibly comprehend before gleefully calling her a nerd.

The funny thing is, it's not true. Not in this sense at least.

Regina's extensive collection isn't one of personal pride to her. She appreciates it at moments like these, but it's more genetic than anything. A compulsion passed on through her mother to hoard as much knowledge as possible at all times. To always be the one with the upper hand. To never fall behind.

Still, as much off the mark as her friend had been, Regina hadn't minded the playful accusation.

She shakes off the memory of Emma's teasing laughter and sets to work. A simple search with magic will suit her needs just fine. She closes her eyes, hands alight, and whispers, "Princess of the Dead."

When she opens her eyes, three books in the massive collection are glowing with her magic. A soft purple haze emanating from the cracked bindings. She snatches them all and settles down in the cold tomb to set to work.

The first book relays the poem she and Snow had worked out. Talks about the princess in purely fictional terms. Describes her as the spooky story Regina remembers her being.

The second text is much the same. Just a historical record of the song and the short story surrounding the princess. A tiny paragraph in a chapter dedicated to children's games of the time period.

The third book is where she finds some luck at last. It's older than the others. Pages crisp and yellowed and the binding near falling apart in her hands.

The entire novel is dedicated to legends and myths and lore. It goes into detail on the princess' tale. Tells the story of a young girl forced into servitude for a wicked queen. Of how she grows tired of her cruel mistress and plots revenge. Sneaks into her bedchambers at night and sticks a blade in the queen's back while she sleeps. Steals the queen's power and takes over her rule, commanding legions of the dead to do her bidding and wreak havoc on the world.

Well, that certainly sounds like the transference of power between Dark Ones.

It's strange. Regina knows this hunt for information isn't really doing anything. There's no goal she's trying to achieve here beyond basic knowledge. But still, for the first time in a long while she feels good. Like somehow this might lead to being of some sort of use to Emma in her struggle against Analath and whatever else is swimming around in her head.

She puts the books aside and summons up her magic for another search. "Analath."

Two books glow.
One is clearly another woman entirely. An Enchanted Forest fairy tale of an old spinster woman who lives in the woods and finds a wood nymph while walking. There are morals about living alongside forest spirits peacefully and lessons on treating nature with care. Nothing that Regina is looking for.

The other may just be her girl. A passing mention in the records of the great warrior Boolan. Hero of his village and slayer of demons. The name rings a bell and Regina finds herself opening her book of legends back up.

The Boy Who Bested Evil.

Boolan is portrayed more than a little differently here than in the other book. A cowardly, meek child, but one who loves his family very much. When his village is set upon by an evil witch, he overcomes his fear to save his loved ones.

He faces the witch in battle with nothing but the rusted old sword of his great grandfather. The witch is slain, and the evil within her is released into the world. To save humanity Boolan sacrifices himself. Absorbs the evil into his body to contain it.

It tries to overtake him but he is strong of heart and hides himself away from the world to keep everyone safe. Banishes himself to an eternity of solitude so the rest of the kingdom can live out their days in peace.

Not everything fits, but legends change with each retelling. They’re fluid, the details constantly shifting for dramatic effect. But change a great grandfather’s rusted blade to a curved dagger, a witch to an immortal princess, and Regina may have just found a link in the chain of the dark curse’s history.

She’s not quite sure what that information could possibly do for them, but it’s exciting nonetheless, and she finds herself eager to piece together more of this story.

Four, Gold had said. Four voices. Five including his own. This is feasible. She can stitch together their history and make it whole.

"There you are."

Regina startles at the sound of Emma’s cold voice. She glances up from the floor, books scattered about around her.

"What are you doing down here?" Despite her best intentions, Regina can’t help but be a little suspicious. Not of Emma, but of whatever the curse is whispering in her ear to make her think she needs to be rooting around Regina's vault in the middle of the night.

Emma frowns. "You weren't home."

Oh.

"What are you doing?"

Regina stiffens and tries to casually hide the book title from view. "Just some trouble sleeping." This isn't a secret she's eager to keep from Emma, but there's no telling how the darkness will compel her to react if she finds out Regina is researching its origins. Something tells her it won't be pleased. "Were you looking for me for a reason?"

Unfortunately, Emma doesn't let her change the topic. She cranes her neck to catch a look at the titles stacked beside Regina. "You read Enchanted Forest mythology when you have trouble sleeping?"
"Would there be a problem with that?" Regina snaps, unable to help herself when she's feeling so cornered.

The crease of Emma's frown deepens. "There wouldn't be if you weren't lying to me."

Regina sighs. Gold's warning pops into her head. She has to be the cool and collected one now. Great.

They're all doomed.

"I'm not trying to lie to you." She keeps her voice soft and as far away from accusing as possible. "It's just, private is all. Can't that be okay?"

There's a strained beat of silence until-

"Of course," Emma says, though it looks like it pains her to force the words out.

That right there is a clear case of Emma Swan shining through the darkness.

Regina flashes her a gentle smile. "Thank you."

Emma can't manage to so much as look at her.

"Tell me what you need." Regina tosses the book aside and pushes up to her feet. She dusts at her pants to regain some semblance of the dignity she always strives for in front of Emma. "Anything."

Emma's fingers clench at her sides. Fists tight, knuckles white, she heaves a heavy sigh. "So far I'm able to keep up with Cora in terms of raw power, but she has me beat in skill."

Honestly, Regina's just relieved she isn't the one who has to tell Emma. She nods along.

"When she comes back, I'm going to be completely overwhelmed unless I manage to catch up somehow." She lifts her gaze to catch Regina's. "I need a good teacher."

Regina worries her lip. "Emma, I'm going to be honest, I saw what was going on out there and though it pains me to admit it, I am not able to keep up with anything that was happening. There's nothing I can teach you that could possibly affect her."

"I may have passed your strength," Emma presses, eyes wide and hopeful and looking something like Snow's, "but to keep up with her I need your talent. Strategy. Precision. Discipline. That's all you."

Such obvious flattery. A wry smile steals Regina's lips. "Haven't we gone through this a few times?"

Emma tilts her head. "Yes, but this is the first time I've been under threat of having my soul devoured. The motivation's improved."

It's almost funny.

Almost.
The Vow

It's a new day.

Regina doesn't know where Emma goes to, well - lurk - at night, but she's waiting at Regina's vault bright and early come the next morning, ready to be molded.

David and Snow were more than a little excited at the new development. They'd forced a healthy breakfast into Regina before urging her on her way with barely contained glee. Henry was a little more hesitant about sending her off to spend hours alone in a secluded crypt practicing frustrating magic with a temperamental Dark One, but had given his blessing to the plan as well.

When a bad idea is all you've got, it's hard to be rational and say no.

"The thing you need to work on most is control." Regina stoops to stick some tape to the floor. A small 'x' to use as a marker. "You waste too much energy with every spell. It's like you don't know the meaning of the word restraint when it comes to magic or food."

Emma doesn't laugh like she might have back when she was fully human and whole, but there's a glint of something in her eyes and Regina likes to think she didn't just imagine the corner of her mouth twitch.

Regina straightens. "Control. Discipline. It's rooted in the rudimentary."

"Meaning?" Emma raises her eyebrows.

"Meaning we go back to the basics." A flourish and some magic and Regina has a paper cup in her hands. She moves a few paces from the tape marker and sets it down. "Move it over the tape."

"You can't be serious." Any amusement Emma might have had is definitely gone. "I know how to move a cup. This is pointless."

Arms crossed, Regina hums. "Prove to me it is and we'll move forward." She waves off Emma's incredulous glare. "Go on then. Show me up."

The sound that slips out of Emma is close to a growl, but she complies. The barest flick of her wrist and the cup is sent clattering over the marker. Too far and too fast so the lip is just barely touching the tape.

It has Regina in awe of how utterly unpracticed Emma is. How much power seeps from her with each minute task. How wasteful her every movement seems to be.

"There," Emma spits out, as petulant as Henry on his worst days, "happy?"

Regina takes a deep breath. This is going to be more work than she thought. Throw in Emma's bad attitude on top of it and they're both in for a very long lesson.

"I'll be ecstatic when you drop the arrogance and remember you're the one who asked me for help. I'm not doing this for my health."

Emma's shoulders droop a little and she frowns. Good. Eagerness to please is all Swan, nothing to do with the curse. That means she's still in control.

"Reign in your power." Waving a hand, Regina uses her magic to gently slide the cup across the
floor until it softly knocks against the toe of Emma's boot. "Only use the force necessary to complete the task."

Regina lazily moves the cup back to the tape. It slides over and covers the marker perfectly. "Anything more is wasted energy and you lose all precision." Again, she sends the cup to Emma's feet. "It's not a race or a contest. It's just a simple task. A cup covering some tape. That's all."

Emma takes a breath. "All right." She raises a hand and gently mimics Regina. Slides the cup across the tomb until it covers the tape. Calm and cool and collected.

There's still excess energy seeping out of Emma as she works, but it's a start.

Her eyes find Regina's, hunting for approval as always.

"Good," Regina allows her, low and smooth. "Now that you've got your head out of your ass, maybe we can get some work done."

That time Emma does laugh.

- 

"How about you spend less energy on whining and more on actually finishing?"

"I'm telling you it's not possible."

"Why would I set you a task you weren't capable of doing? That's ridiculous."

"Because you're a fucking sadist."

Dark One Emma is proving to be much more free with the name calling. Regina just rolls her eyes and refocuses on the book in her lap. She's not going to dignify this petty behavior with a response. If Emma wants her attention she can get it like an adult.

"I knew this was a mistake," Emma grumbles under her breath, but she doesn't leave. Instead she stoops to pick up the basketball and steps a few paces away from the tabletop Regina had cleared of magic paraphernalia for her.

"Gentle," Regina reminds her without looking up from her reading.

She's searching through her legends and fables thoroughly now, marking down anything of note in her phone that could possibly be related to the Dark One's history.

There have been a few possibilities - evil emperors, twisted lords, cruel nobles - but nothing concrete. Between her mounting frustration and Emma's constant moaning, it's proving difficult to keep the composure she promised Gold. "Be gentle. It's all about being gentle."

Eyes squeezed shut in concentration, Emma's dark magic curls around the basketball until it vanishes.

A few feet away, it reappears on the table for mere seconds before rolling off and bouncing across the tomb.
'Son of a bitch!'

"Gentle," Regina snaps. "You need precision. You're magicking it too far above the surface of the table. There can't be any space or it will roll. You have to be exact."

"I'm trying." Emma's glare is dark and dangerous as she turns on Regina. "It just isn't possible."

Regina pushes to her feet with a scoff. Scooping up the ball on her way, she moves to the table and gently places the basketball down. She keeps a hold of it for a few seconds before slowly, carefully, moving her hands away. There are tiny grooves in the surface of the wood. Small enough that the ball shifts side to side as it settles, but prominent enough that it eventually stills, cradled safely far from the table's edge.

She raises her eyebrows and looks to Emma with a triumphant smile.

"You did that with your hands."

"Yes," she says, sickeningly sweet, words dripping with condescension, "and now you're going to do it with your magic."

"It won't-"

"If you're going to continue to act like a child throwing a tantrum," Regina grits out, "maybe you should look for a mentor down at the convent. I'm sure Blue would love to coddle you and soothe your ego while teaching you how to throw glitter at your problems."

It all happens very fast.

The way Emma's eyes grow darker. The way her lip curls into a hateful sneer. How she charges Regina. How she storms up into her personal space, hand raised, curled fingers grasping for the exposed skin of Regina's neck while growling out a near inhuman, "Well how about we-"

But she freezes.

Emma stops herself.

As soon as her palm presses against Regina's throat and Regina's back hits the hard stone of the crypt's wall, Emma goes completely still. Utterly rigid. Eyes wide, clearing into something lighter. Hard hatred giving way to bright fear.

"I-" Emma gasps out, soft and horrified. And then she's gone.

Regina stares into the smoke she leaves behind, chest heaving as she processes what just happened. The way Emma had so suddenly lost control. The way she'd charged and grabbed and-

And just how close Regina had likely been to dying.

There had been no compassion in Emma's eyes. No empathy. No humanity. She'd been empty.

Completely empty. A husk for the dark curse to work through without resistance.

Holy shit.

Regina sags against the wall, a heavy breath escaping her. What does she do now? Will Emma come back? Apologize to Regina and beg to return to her lessons? That has been her M.O so far.
What if she comes back angry? A flurry of magic and malice and that emptiness in her hard gaze, sights set on Regina.

She should run. Return to the safety of her home and the others.

But how can she step into that house and face their eager, hopeful faces? How can she tell them what happened?

Despite repeated warnings she'd gone and pissed Emma off, was almost murdered, and now Emma has taken off yet again and Regina has absolutely no idea where she might be.

No, she can't go back. Not after failing them yet again.

It takes a few moments for Regina's shallow breath to even out. She slides down the wall until she's on the floor, sitting like a child, legs to her chest, arms wrapped around herself. Emma should have known better than to ever look to her for tutelage.

Regina should have known better than to accept.

She lets her head bump back against the wall with a dull thud.

_Stupid_.

Yet another burst of light flashes through the trees. The air crackles with energy, humming. A flash of white, of red, of green, of blue. It's unnatural, clearly born from magic.

Robin creeps slowly through the woods, crossbow raised, grateful that tonight, at least, Roland is back at camp. Sometimes he walks with his father on weekend mornings, devoted to their mission with the solemn severity of a child granted a task usually deemed for adults.

Regina hadn't asked for help finding Emma after the night she'd taken on the curse. But as the days turned to weeks Robin had watched her grow small and sad and withdraw from him completely. They were still just getting to know one another and already he had felt as though she was slipping away from him. And so, with the help of the Merry Men, he'd taken to scouring the forest in which they'd set up camp, hunting for the lost savior.

Now with Regina threatening to pull away from him completely, he's more determined than ever to bring Emma home to her family. It's the only way to save Regina from herself.

This magic flashing deep in the woods is the first lead he's had since starting his search weeks ago. And so he steals himself and braves a few paces forward, treading slowly over fallen leaves and keeping to the shadows of the trees as he moves steadily to the source. Night is swiftly approaching, the sun dipping low in the sky, and the magic feels brighter with each step.

White.

Blue.

Yellow.
Red.

Green.

Like spell after spell is being shot off at random, no care as to intent or purpose.

Falling to a crouch, Robin presses himself against the trunk of a wide oak. His breathing shallows as he musters up his courage. He can feel the power of the light now, washing over him, the earth shaking beneath his very feet. Trembling with each blast. The tree sways a bit behind him, but holds strong and, ever so slowly, Robin peers around it to look upon the scene.

It's her.

Emma Swan crouching in a darkening forest. Legs bent, shoulders hunched, palms splayed flat on the ground. Her features are pulled up tight with the clear exertion of magic, teeth grit, sweaty and pale as she pumps her power into the earth. Blast after blast after blast. The light of her spells making the air glow around her, but the dirt absorbing all impact.

She doesn't pause, doesn't stop to gather her energy like he's seen Regina do. She just keeps going. Going and going until her limbs are shaking and her chest is heaving and even in the dark she looks close to passing out.

What the hell is going on?

Robin squats under the safety of the trees, mind racing. Regina. He needs to call Regina. She'll know what's going on here, how to put a stop to it. And if she doesn't, if this is some malicious plot by the new Dark One, then surely he should be spreading the word anyways. Whatever this is, no doubt Regina will wind up involved somehow and she needs to be prepared, to be warned.

Robin clumsily wrestles the phone she had insisted on him having from his pocket. He'd been resistant to what she'd called technology at first, but now he finds himself grateful. His finger rests over the button that will summon her voice, Regina's name highlighted on the screen.

If he calls for her, she'll come. No question. But-

He lifts his gaze to watch Emma as she savagely beats at the earth, wave after wave being shot into the dirt, some untouchable monster devoid of any humanity or sense.

There's no telling what the Dark One would do to Regina if she showed up now. He has every confidence in Regina's ability, but to see this-

If a fight broke out she'd be ripped apart. A spare bit of parchment overwhelmed by a hurricane.

With a heavy heart, Robin shoves his phone back into his pocket. Tomorrow. He'll go to her and tell her what he'd seen tomorrow.

Tomorrow when the Dark One is long gone and done with this mindless rampage.

-

It's getting late. Close to dinner time.
Regina does her best to keep her full focus on the book in her lap. Research is the best distraction she has now. With no other leads to follow beyond pestering Gold for more information, Regina's taken to reading without discrimination. Hunting through chapter after chapter of old tales from the Enchanted Forest, marking down absolutely anything that has even the barest hint of possibly connecting back to Emma's curse.

Despite her motivation though, she's distracted and struggling. Progress is painfully slow.

A Treasure of-

What if Emma was so out of sorts when she ran off that she ended up hurting someone?

No, Regina would have heard news by now if Emma had went on a rampage through town, surely.

A Treasure-

What if Emma just ran off for good? There had been guilt in her eyes before she'd vanished. Shame. What if she hid herself away again and then Cora returned and took her and they never knew about it? What if they were always left wondering if she was alive or dead? What if they never saw her again?

That's ridiculous. Emma's made it clear that she needs their help. And Cora can't take her so long as the dagger is hidden.

A Treasure of-

Of course it's ridiculous.

A Treasure-

Emma is safe.

A Treasure-

She has to be safe.

A-

Fuck

A growl of frustration rips out of Regina as she throws the book across the room. Palms wiping at the tears that had finally spilled over, she sniffs, cursing her own stupidity. All she had to do was stay calm. Just stay calm and keep Emma levelheaded and-

She'd never heard the clatter of the book falling to the floor.

Regina looks up and Emma is there in the center of her crypt, frowning at the now crumpled pages of the heavy book she'd caught. "A Treasure of the People?"

Despite herself, Regina shifts back against the wall a bit, unsure if Emma's returned to apologize or take things even further this time. She looks unsteady where she stands. Paler than normal in a sweat soaked tank top and her jeans smeared with dirt at the knees. Her features are weary and she sways a little on her feet, as though she's close to utter exhaustion.

Emma's gaze flicks up to meet Regina's, an unspoken question shining through.
Regina swallows in an effort to keep her voice even. "From what I remember it's mostly about true fulfillment in life coming from love and community and money being an unimportant temptation." Her lips curl. "You know, something nobles peddle to make peasants forget the fact that they're in extravagant palaces getting fat off farm labor while the common man struggles to make it through another winter."

"Ah," Emma nods sagely, snapping the book shut, "our realms aren't quite as different as I thought." She smiles a little when Regina laughs. It's strained and barely there, but it's real.

She approaches Regina slowly then, as though not to spook her, and crouches in front of her. Sets the book to the side and reaches out. Places a tentative, trembling hand on Regina's cheek, the very tips of her fingers just barely brushing her skin as she commands Regina's gaze. Catches her eye the way she has seemed to actively avoid since becoming the Dark One.

Regina doesn't move. Hardly dares to so much as breathe.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Emma vows. Her thumb wipes gently at the sticky trail left behind by Regina's tears. "Ever."

It takes a moment for Regina to find her voice. "But you want to."

Emma doesn't respond. She just stares for a moment, soft and sad, brow pulled together like she might be hearing something she doesn't want to. Like there might be someone talking to her- Trying their best to sway her into-

Into-

A thick swallow and Emma pulls back, takes both of Regina's hands in her own. Holds them gently like they're something delicate as she pulls Regina up to her feet. This time when she speaks, her gaze is averted, focused intently over Regina's shoulder at the wall behind her.

"I wasted some magic out in the woods. Tired myself out a bit, got my energy levels down."

Regina looks down at where their hands are still clasped together between them. There's dirt under Emma's nails, the cracks and crevices of her fingers lightly stained with it, and Regina can't help but wonder what Emma 'tiring herself out' entails.

"I think that might help with-" Emma falters, she gives Regina's hands a little squeeze before dropping them and stepping away. "I need to stay calm," she says, eyes still averted, "and I think being more- relaxed might be the best way to do it."

Regina's fingers clench uselessly at her sides at the loss of contact and she fights the impulse to close the distance between them once more. Instead she settles for a curt, tight, "That could work."

"So," Emma keeps her eyes to the ground as she sheepishly rubs at her neck, "back to the ball?"

A strangled laugh escapes from Regina. "Maybe let's ease back into this. How about something a little simpler?"

There's clear relief in Emma's face and, despite everything that has happened, the sight makes Regina's chest tighten with affection.

"Simple sounds great."
Regina is sure to make the boundaries that Emma must remain within during her next task very generous as she tapes them up on the wall. It'll be good for the both of them if Emma can snag an easy victory. Their collective spirits could use the boost.

"Okay." Regina steps back from the neat square she's made about halfway up the wall. "I've given you some breathing room, but I won't be lenient about line crossing." She tosses one of her lighter texts onto the floor beneath the marker. "Why don't you get it in the center to start us off?"

"Right." Emma takes a breath and lifts her hand. Magic crackles around the book for a moment before it shoots straight up into the air and slams into the ceiling. "Shit," Emma squeaks in surprise and the novel drops back to the floor with a dull thud. "Wha- I- I didn't even-"

Even under the weight of the curse, there's something horribly endearing about Emma's wide-eyed befuddlement. Something so very familiar.

"Unbelievable," Regina says, even though she's laughing a little. "That's what you're putting out when i ask you to restrain yourself. Do you see now?"

Frowning, Emma glares across at the open square on the wall. "I guess."

"Try again," Regina urges. "Maybe with a little less enthusiasm this time."

Emma shoots her a glare before casting the spell once more. The book flies up much too quickly, but Emma manages to halt its progress before it reaches the ceiling.

"That's it. Pull it back now. Control the flow of magic." Regina steps away, watching as the book slowly lowers. "That's it. Nice and easy until you pass over the line."

It lowers and lowers until it's beneath the top line of tape. Safely within the predetermined bounds marked on the wall.

"Okay," Emma's features are pulled tight, her voice a little unsteady, "and now?" The book wavers where it hovers, shifting up and down as Emma struggles to reign in the energy pulsating through her body.

"Now hold it there. Half an hour."

"You're serious?" Emma snaps.

"Very. I'm setting a timer." Regina sets one up on her phone, ignoring Emma's childish sounds of protest. "Anytime it crosses over a border, up or down, the clock goes back to zero."

"Jesus," Emma mutters. "Maybe I should have gone to Blue for a good coddle."

Regina flashes her a sickly sweet smile. "Probably, yes."
Emma is just over fifteen minutes into her current timer - they've had to reset it twice when Emma had lost focus and let the book float over the border - when Regina's phone buzzes.

"That the timer?" Emma needles hopefully.

"You wish." Regina opens the text to find a message from Snow asking if she and Emma will be coming back to the mansion for dinner. It's a thinly veiled effort to make sure Emma hasn't run off again and Regina's still breathing.

Emma glances over at her little snort. "What?"

Regina flashes her the screen. "Interested in dinner with your parents?"

Henry will be there too, but Regina's not about to imply she doesn't trust Emma around him. It's not as though the two would be completely alone together, and Emma's proven that as long as she's not being antagonized she's not likely to snap and attack anyone.

This is her choice, Regina won't push her either way.

"I-' Emma frowns, "I don't think that's the best idea. You can go. I'll keep working here."

"How about we order in?" Regina suggests instead.

Emma tilts her head, brow pulled together in her confusion and Regina just laughs.

She holds up her phone. "I know a wolf."

Ruby is nervous and flighty as she approaches the crypt. Emma's still riding out the remainder of her time on the clock - they'd had to start the timer over yet again when she'd sneezed and the book had been sent flying across the room - so Regina heads out into the world to pick up their order alone.

"Thank you for coming so far out," Regina says as Ruby hands over the paper bags. "I know this isn't ideal."

"It's fine," Ruby assures her, though her eyes dart around the cemetery like she's expecting an attack at any moment.

"Are you all right?"

"It's just hard, to feel her, I mean. It's a bit overwhelming, even when I'm not a wolf."

Regina wonders if Emma even realizes how far her absence has stretched. How deep it has cut.

"We'll set her right soon."

"I hope so."

-
Regina refuses to open the bags of food until Emma makes it through at least one full timer. A lot of whining and moping ensues, but eventually the first step of Emma's new training is complete. That's good enough for a makeshift dinner in Regina's eyes.

There's something comforting in the way Emma all but inhales her grinder. It's so familiar to sit across from Emma and huff over her lack of manners while picking at her own small order of pasta. For a blissful few minutes, it's almost like the curse doesn't exist.

As always, Emma is done with her meal long before Regina gets through hers. While she finishes up, Emma wanders over to the forgotten basketball and starts to casually dribble it about the tomb with surprising control.

"Where did this come from? Henry never struck me as a sporty kid when he was younger."

"He wasn't. But I wanted-" Regina falters and rolls her eyes at herself, "I was actually a little obsessed with him having the option to be. Every option, really." She heaves a heavy sigh while she twirls up her angel hair on the cheap plastic fork Ruby had brought her. "I grew up within some very strict guidelines. I never wanted that for him."

Emma doesn't look at her, she keeps her eyes trained on the ball as she smoothly bounces it between her legs. Back and forth and back again in a clearly practiced pattern. "Well, you did a great job of letting him turn into a total nerd."

"Emma," Regina scolds, more surprised at the teasing nature of her tone than anything else. A little surge of hope flutters in her chest at this sudden ease between them.

"What? He seems pretty proud of it." Emma still won't look at her, but there's a smirk tugging at her lips when she throws the ball against the far wall and lets it bounce back into her grip. "Must take after his mother."

She holds the ball up, lets it spin on the tip of her finger. It's a clumsy effort, and it quickly wobbles before falling out of the turn, but Regina's impressed she managed to last as long as she did.

"Where did you learn to do all that?"

Emma shrugs, goes back to her absent dribbling. "You know, around. There were never many games or toys or bikes sent my way when I was growing up, but you could usually find a ball lying around somewhere in pretty much any neighborhood. That was pretty consistent."

Regina watches Emma for a moment longer before she wipes at her mouth with a napkin and stands. "Back to it then?"

"Sure thing, Boss."

The food seems to have helped relax Emma even more. She feels softer after their meal is done. More human, even. Regina tries her hardest to keep her wits about her, but this familiarity settling between them once more, it's intoxicating in a way. It's been so long since she's had to feel on guard
in front of Emma, it's surprisingly difficult to slip back into those old patterns, no matter her better sense.

Regina sets up a new boundary line for Emma higher up on the wall. She'll have to let out more energy to sustain the book without letting out so much it crashes into the ceiling again. Now that she's practiced, Emma takes to the task fairly well. There's a few mishaps getting the book into position, but once she gets it there, Emma holds it steady for the required half hour.

Stirrings of pride bubble up in Regina as she watches Emma progress so quickly, but she's fully aware she's saved the hardest version of the lesson for last. When the timer goes off, Regina stoops and sets up a border down at the bottom of the wall, just inches from the floor.

For any other student, this would have been step one, just barely levitating the book and struggling to keep it afloat at all. But for Emma, who pours out raw power effortlessly, maintaining such a low output for an extended period of time is the true challenge.

They're in for a long night, but as long as Emma is willing to learn, Regina's willing to teach her.

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"Regina?"

"Hmm?" She barely glances up from the story she's reading, the tale of a young boy who succumbed to pettiness and in a thoughtless act of juvenile revenge unleashed a horde of spider-like demons upon his village. Certainly nothing to do with any sort of Dark One, but at the very least, it's moderately amusing. Besides, Regina is one to be excruciatingly thorough in her research.

Emma has just over eighteen minutes left on the clock so she has the time to spare.

"You can use just about any item belonging to a person to find them, right? Even if it isn't something that has sentimental value to them?"

That catches Regina's full attention. She studies Emma where she stands, hands outstretched and brow furrowed as she fights to keep the levitating book at an even level.

"You mean like a locator spell?" At Emma's nod she shrugs. "It's certainly easier if the object has value to the owner but if you have a decent enough mastery over your magic I doubt it would be too difficult."

"What about across realms? Is there a locator spell powerful enough to find somebody that way?"

Regina frowns. "I've never seen or read of one that was strong enough to do so, but I suppose in theory it could work. You'd have a better chance than anyone with your level of power." She hesitates, wary of pissing Emma off by probing, but eventually dares, "You want to hunt down Cora?"

Emma shakes her head. "By the time I caught up to her I'm sure she'd already be beyond me. I would have to boost my own strength too to be of any sort of match." Her voice is soft, her eyes growing distant as she speaks. "There's only one way," she murmurs. "The portal is the thing. I have to make a portal."
Regina breath catches in her throat as the words register. Emma wants to bulk up her own reserves of magic, something that just isn't possible. She can learn better control and method and strategy, but nobody can learn greater strength. Not unless they have an outside source of power to supplement their own.

So Emma couldn't - she can't - not unless she-

Regina swallows, her fingers curling into the thick binding of the book on her lap.

Not unless Emma mirrors Cora. Not unless she finds a way to break into other universes and starts collecting Dark Ones of her own until they're evenly matched once more.

Emma doesn't want Regina to teach her control to increase her chances of surviving another encounter with Cora. She wants to learn enough control to open a portal of her own, wants to travel between universes, hunt down people - living, human, people - stab curved daggers in their backs and suck up their souls until her power is all consuming, hunt Cora down and destroy her utterly and completely, once and for all.

Regina sits and stares, wordlessly watching as Emma concentrates with all her might, puts her all into completing the task set out before her.

They're going to lose Emma to this curse.

Maybe they already have.
Regina's eyes flutter open and it takes her a minute to place herself. As soon as she blinks away the last foggy remains of sleep she recognizes that she's still in her vault, just moved to the little hidden area she'd made for herself in case of emergency. Behind her magic supplies, tucked away, a tiny room. A safe haven for when the town inevitably turned on her and everything went wrong.

A bed, some food stores, clothes, a passable bathroom. So far, she'd only had to use it for a mere couple of hours back when her real mother had invaded and turned the others against her. Fingers crossed that remains true.

Regina sits up on the stiff mattress, the dusty comforter pooling around her hips. She must have nodded off while reading and Emma brought her in to get some proper rest.

A dull bouncing rings out, followed immediately by a muffled curse. Regina can't help the smile that tugs at her lips.

Her jacket is folded neatly at the bottom of the bed and her boots stand up on the floor beneath it. She pulls everything back on and heads into the main room to find Emma standing a few paces away from the empty wooden table, basketball in hand, still hard at work.

She doesn't look over when Regina enters, but she does acknowledge her. "I hope you don't mind that I used your phone to text Henry." She nods her head towards the small ledge along the wall where Regina's cell sits. "I let him know you're okay. I would have used mine but I didn't have it on me when I took on the curse, I'm not sure where it ended up."

"Your parents took it back to their place, I believe." Regina sticks her hands in her pockets, not quite sure what to do with herself. Especially not when Emma talks about sacrificing her soul for Regina so casually. "I can probably get it back for you if you don't want to ask them yourself."

"No, it's all right." A bitter sort of smile steals Emma's lips. "I don't think I'd be making many calls anyhow."

She magics the ball to the table and it's still too high, too fast, too hard. It rolls after it's short fall and winds up bouncing slowly across the room.

The grating sound makes Regina wince. "How's it going?"

"Horribly."

Regina raises her eyebrows. "Well you seem to be keeping a cool head about it, at least. I'm impressed."

"Trust me," Emma's laugh is cold and without humor, "burning the whole place down has crossed my mind more than once." Another burst of magic. The ball reappears, only to roll off the table and onto the floor once more.

Emma's eyes snap shut and she takes a deep breath. In through the nose, out through the mouth. When her chest settles, she opens her eyes and moves to retrieve the ball.

"That was an Archie Hopper anger management technique if I ever saw one."

Instead of laughing, Emma shrugs. "I was seeing him for a little while. You know, before."
"You never told me." It sounds too accusing, but Regina can't help herself. They've spent long nights over wine talking about her own sessions. It stings a little to know Emma never trusted her enough to return the courtesy. At the very least she could have mentioned she was going.

Hook probably knows. Maybe Emma had been confiding in him instead. Rolling her eyes at herself, Regina swallows down the sour taste in her mouth. She promised Henry she'd try and be better.

"It doesn't matter," Emma dismisses the clear question in Regina's tone. "I had some frustrations to work out, and now there are bigger things at stake. It was stupid."

"I doubt that."

Emma glances up and her whole being seems to soften as she looks at Regina. There's a gentleness in her eyes. A quiet hint of emotion ill suited for the hard features of a Dark One.

Regina's chest warms under the weight of that gaze.

"You're right," Emma says and, small as it is, Regina knows her smile is genuine, "it definitely wasn't." She looks ready to say more, but her head snaps up suddenly and her eyes are hard as she glares towards the ceiling. Her entire demeanor shifts, her posture tense. "Someone's here."

Regina stiffens, her good mood fading fast. She hurries to Emma's side on instinct, fingers flexing at her sides, ready for a fight. "Cora?"

Emma shakes her head, but she doesn't relax. "No magic. Just-"

And then there are footsteps on the stairs, a dull sound echoing about the bare stone walls.

"Regina?" It's Robin who steps into view. He freezes on the bottom step, his foot hovering in midair as his gaze moves quickly from her to Emma. "Oh."

Regina releases all of the built up tension in one heavy sigh, but Emma doesn't seem to share in her relief. She merely meets his wide eyed stare before letting out a little huff and returning her attentions to the basketball. Regina steps away to give her the room to keep practicing.

"What's going on down here?" His brow is furrowed in genuine confusion.

Regina forgot how removed he is from everything that has been going on. She moves to pull him aside for a semi-private conversation so Emma can focus. "Emma needed some help with her magic."

That's really about all Regina has the patience to get into. Robin's bow won't be any use against the might of Cora's magic and he isn't in danger so long as he keeps his distance. Giving him all the details will just get him involved. It's better to keep it short and simple for the sake of his safety.

The response seems to worry him. "I was hoping to speak to you, if you have the time to spare."

Eyebrows raised, Regina gestures for him to continue.

He frowns and leans in closer, voice low. "Somewhere more secluded might be prudent."

Oh no, this can't be about their conversation at the diner, can it? Regina's stomach twists in discomfort. She doesn't have the energy to deal with this right now. Can't Robin see that?

"I don't really have the time to spare," Regina says as delicately as she can manage, hoping that's enough to get out of this with both their egos intact. "Maybe sometime in a few days we can-"
"Now would be best." Robin stands firm before her, unwavering.

Regina is tempted to let her irritation take over and send him away, but there's an earnestness in his gaze she feels guilty about stamping out. Besides, a quick glance over her shoulder finds Emma looking a little too interested in their conversation. It's better to just get him outside and let him say what he came to say before any trouble starts.

"All right then." She urges him back up the stairs. "Just a few minutes." She follows Robin up and feels Emma's hard gaze on her back until she's out of view.

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It's a relief, the fresh air on her face after hours underground, even if she's surprised that night has clearly passed. Regina squints in the early morning light, looking around the misty graveyard. "What time is it?"

"Must be past eight by now," Robin says.

So she'd had a proper sleep then. She'd been out for hours.

"Everything is okay, right?" Robin steps close as soon as they're free of the crypt. "You're not in any danger? You're here of your own will?"

"I agreed to help her," Regina says carefully, not wanting to lie, but not wanting the dramatics that will come with admitting Emma has threatened bodily harm more than once.

He doesn't seem happy with the cagey response, but at least he doesn't try to argue. "I saw her last night. In the woods. She was-" Robin falters, shakes his head. "I don't know what she was doing, but it was dangerous, Regina. It was something dark. Something evil."

That must have been when Emma had run off, murderous and violent. "That was part of what we're working on." It's a half lie. Regina can live with that. "Emma needed to get rid of some excess energy somewhere she wouldn't hurt anyone."

"That's what she told you, at least."

Regina bristles at the implication but he carries on before she can retaliate.

"She's dangerous, Regina," he pleads with her, a hand coming up to grip her arm. "That much power- no matter her intentions, she can't control it indefinitely. Something is going to give, and when it does I don't want you to be in the cross hairs."

"I'm well aware of the danger." Regina gently pulls free of his grip. "We both are, and we're doing our best to keep each other safe. There are things going on that you don't understand. Something that Emma and I have to do together."

He sighs, shoulders sagging in defeat. "Of course it is."

There's more to the statement than Regina can grasp, and Robin must realize that because he chuckles a little, affection in his gaze. "Just be careful. That isn't the same woman who left us."

"Trust me," Regina breathes, "I'm well aware."
Emma is waiting for her when she returns. She's sitting on the edge of the table, legs swinging while she absently dribbles the ball.

"He told you about the forest, didn't he?" Emma shrugs at Regina's clear surprise. "He was watching me. I could feel it." Her eyes are wide when they catch Regina's, desperation shining through. "I didn't lie to you when I said I was just letting out some magic. I swear."

They're a bit ridiculous, the pair of them. Children dashing about the schoolyard to tattle on one another.

"I know you didn't," Regina soothes. "Robin just didn't know what he was seeing and wanted to make sure I was staying safe. That's all."

Her features grow stony and the dribbling stops. "I'm not going to hurt you," Emma promises again, but this time it sounds almost petulant.

"I know that too," Regina assures her.

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A quick call into the office to let them know she won't be in, and then Regina is free to shower and change. Snow and David will take care of Henry getting to and from school, so the only thing she has to worry about for the day is Emma.

There's a bakery in town that Emma always went nuts for, Regina has seen her put away two bacon and egg sandwiches from the place in a single breakfast. So she magics herself onto Main Street and walks the rest of the way to stretch her legs a bit.

"Traitor."

Regina's stepping out of the shop and struggling to balance her haul - a couple of sandwiches for Emma, a croissant for herself, a pair of coffees - when she hears the voice. Instinctively, she's on the defensive. Features hard and body tense as she readies herself for a fight. But when she looks up, it's Ruby she finds, and the girl is playfully grinning, her eyebrows raised as she takes in the logo on the bakery's bag.

Tension immediately fading, Regina rolls her eyes. "Most people would say it's my duty as mayor to patron a wide range of the town's small businesses."

"As long as we're still your number one." Ruby's eyes widen mockingly.

Regina hums. "And what about you?"

"Hey," she holds her hands up in defense as she sidles around Regina towards the door, "I had Granny's coffee every morning for twenty-eight years, I'm allowed to branch out now and again." Her features turn grim. "Just don't squeal, huh?"
Regina laughs when Ruby gives her a hammy salute before disappearing inside. She shakes her head and heads down the street and around the corner before using her magic to take her back to the cemetery.

She tries to use magic as little as possible when in public. Plenty have accepted it as a part of everyday town life, but there are others who can't seem to hide that flash of old fear whenever they witness a spell. That's why she sticks to driving and walking for the most part, it's easier to blend in.

What isn't easy, is getting Emma to agree to another food break. She has focused in on the simple lesson with a laser like intensity that Regina doubts is healthy. Still, she figures it's better to be unhealthily focused than murderously frustrated, so she doesn't point it out. Instead she simply threatens to throw Emma out if she doesn't eat at least one sandwich.

Emma devours both.

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The rest of Regina's morning is spent spread across her hideaway bed in the hidden room, books stacked up around her. She loses herself within the legends written. Dragons and witchcraft and legions of great fighters. Fables about creatures of the forests and tall tales about ancient lost treasures.

In the background Emma keeps at it, the ball bouncing across the tomb and soft curses slipping out every so often.

Regina transfers the most promising of her notes onto paper. Works out timelines for the Dark One and scratches out any tales that she can't make fit. It's impossibly frustrating, so much of her work being conjecture.

Educated guesses that could easily be debunked by the right book, but Gold deserves the right to be free of this hell and Regina can't risk incurring the wrath of Emma's curse by asking. She's on her own in this journey.

A good three hours in and she feels like she's made significant progress.

She already knows the tale of Rumpelstiltskin, old as it is. He's been the curse's host for over two hundred years. Had taken it from the Dark One Zoso.

From there, Regina works backwards.

Zoso's dagger was controlled by the Duke of the Frontlands, a major player in the tale A Lord's Most Trusted. A short story about warring lords. One who was kind and good and the other an evil magic user. The good lord wanted to free his subjects from the malicious attentions of the other and held tests to find the greatest warrior in his lands to assassinate him.

There are morals and messages about strength of character overcoming strength of body but Regina has no interest in that. Instead she cares only about the ending, the chosen warrior taking on the magic of the evil wizard and using it to serve his lord until the end of his days.

The Duke must have sent Zoso after a Dark One, which is how he received the curse before it was passed on to Gold. And as far as Regina can tell, that Dark One was Honrae. It's the only story she
has come across that fits in both era and content.

Honrae was a noble, a treasure hunter driven by greed. His is meant to be a cautionary tale. The more he fills his coffers, the emptier his heart becomes. One day he hears tale of an ancient blade hidden deep in the earth and guarded by a horrible demon. Arrogance overcoming him, he travels miles upon miles through countries and kingdoms until he comes upon the demon's lair to slay the beast and steal the dagger for his collection.

The demon is nothing but a metaphor in the story. A physical manifestation of Honrae's greed that - though he manages to slay - he's unable to overcome. He retrieves the sword, but loses his soul in the process. Becomes a monster much like the one he had faced. And so, in pursuing his treasures, he lost what it means to be human.

Except Regina doesn't believe that demon is simply a metaphor. She's almost certain it's a boy. Boolan, who took on the curse from Analath to save his village, then hid himself away so as not to harm anyone ever again. He was good, and kind, and meek. Easy prey for a ruthless treasure hunter.

And so that brings Regina back to Analath. All voices are accounted for, in theory, but something's not right. That can't be the end of the trail, because Analath's tale is one of murder. Of revenge.

Analath had murdered someone to take on the curse, just like everyone else.

Her mistress. An abusive queen who pushed her serving girl too far.

There's no record of her that Regina can find beyond Analath's story. No lead to follow. She's just there in the story to be murdered. Possibly the very catalyst of the Dark One's curse. The one that started it all.

So why then, for over two hundred years, was her voice absent from Gold's head?

Four, he said. Four voices. Not five. Did he misspeak? No. That's not the kind of mistake Gold makes. And she hardly thinks one would forget how many cursed souls were haunting them for centuries.

So what does this mean?

"Regina, I've got it."

Regina's head snaps up. "What?" She scrambles off the mattress and hurries to the other room.

Emma stands by the table while the ball rests right in the center. There isn't that twinkle of mischief in her eye she used to get in those rare moments when she got the better of Regina, the curse won't allow for that, but she stands a little taller than usual, chin in the air.

"Holy shit," Regina can't stop herself from saying, "you did."

Emma's brow furrows. "Why do you sound so surprised?"

Regina winces. "To be honest, I wasn't sure it was possible."

"What? But you've done it before, right?" Emma's jaw goes a bit slack at Regina's sheepish expression. "Oh my god, you can't do it."

"Why do you think I kept physically demonstrating instead of using my own magic?" Regina crosses her arms, eyebrows raised. "It takes extraordinary finesse. At best I was hoping you'd eventually
grow so frustrated with your practice you'd give up but I'd still be able to show you how much the exercise helped you improve."

Despite her accomplishment, Emma doesn't look too happy, so Regina hurries on before another fight can break out.

"It's been barely a day since we've started and in terms of control, you're already leagues beyond where you were. You have this natural ability with magic, Emma. I've never seen anything like it."

Proud as she is, maybe she's a little sour too. Regina had struggled so much in her youth, fighting to draw even the barest hint of power from her body. Yet here Emma stands, a virtual novice with the raw talent of a practiced master.

She shakes the pettiness off and heads towards the overstuffed shelves lining the far wall. Past flasks and potion ingredients and herbs and artifacts. There are some journals here, absent thoughts and musing from some of her few quieter moments in the Enchanted Forest. Before she'd let herself become completely corrupted, Regina had taken interest in the more theoretical side of magic. Experimentation. Discovery.

Once, long ago, Rumpelstiltskin had told her she had a knack for crafting spells and mixing potions that rivaled his own ability. A natural talent for it that she hadn't been able to find for actual spell casting. That had been acquired through years of discipline and hard work, but these? The ideas written in these journals had come to her late at night in bed or far out in the woods, riding atop Rocinante.

Regina pulls down the smallest of her collection. Spells that were never completed. Potions that never came out just right. Ideas that she hadn't been able to pull together into something of practical use. She beckons Emma into the other room and returns to the bed, sits cross-legged on the mattress and waits for Emma to join her, journal open between them.

It's been a few years, so it takes some time for her to hunt down the proper pages. "I might not have anything that can help you face Cora blow to blow," she muses as she flips through the delicate, aged paper, "but I think maybe I can give you the edge you need to survive an encounter." She lands on the proper section at last, her tight scrawl filling page after page with her theoretical spell.

"You wrote this?" Emma's hand shifts forward a bit, but she doesn't touch the book. There's an odd hesitation about her.

"Many years ago," Regina says. "We know when Cora comes back she's going to be stronger than you, there's no getting around that. And no matter how much you practice with me you can't go beyond your own limits of power. Nobody can, that's why she had to add outside sources to her own. So I think if you can't match her in strength, you take her down with the skills we've been working on and," she spins the journal around to face Emma, taps the pages with her finger, "speed."

"Speed?"

Regina nods. "We make you so fast she won't even be able to touch you."

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Ruby loses herself in the music pounding in her ears as she jogs through the long winding hiking
trails scattered throughout Storybrooke's forests. Her feet are sore and her back is sticky with sweat but she keeps at it, ignoring the information when a quick glance at her watch shows she's been at it for close to two hours now.

The full moon is a little over a week away, and despite her control over the wolf, there's still something restless in her blood that always has her anxious around this time. It makes her want to move, no matter how her exhausted body complains.

She catches a familiar scent on the wind and a smile tugs at her lips. Veering off trail a bit, Ruby cuts through shrubs and over rocks until she tracks down the source. Pongo stands before her, tail wagging. He gives a happy bark at the sight of her.

"Hey, boy." She squats down and he pounces at once, sloppy tongue lapping at her cheeks. Ruby laughs even as she bats him away. "Get off, come on." It takes him a few moments to settle down. "Got away from poor Archie again?"

There's a tightness in her chest as she says it. She shouldn't be the one stumbling across him way out in the woods. It was always Emma who brought him home. Red faced and grouchy with leaves in her hair and dirt on her cheeks as she carried the squirming dog back into town. It was Emma's favorite thing in the world to talk about how much she hated that 'damn dog', and yet every time he got loose she'd drop everything to be out on the chase.

Patting his head with a watery smile, Ruby stands, a hand on Pongo's collar. "All right, boy, let's get you home, huh?" He complies easily to her direction, but they only make it a handful of steps towards the trail before Pongo freezes.

She feels his body stiffen against her fingers, his hackles raised. A low growl sounds deep in his throat and then suddenly he's barking, a harsh, frantic sound.

"What is it?" Ruby follows his gaze to the empty sky. There's nothing she can see. No bursts of magic or cackling witches on brooms. Beyond Pongo everything is peaceful. Calm.

And then it happens.

A pinprick of light in the sky, just barely over the trees. Small, but bright, and steadily growing. Pongo doesn't let up and Ruby watches in awe as it spreads. A scar, sharp and fragmented, like the air is a bowl that's been cracked. She watches until it stops, settling into shape. Almost looking like a bolt of lightening frozen in mid strike. A menacing omen of ill fates to come.

"Well that can't be good."
"I was never able to do this. I exhausted myself trying. But you have an impressive reserve of magic and unbelievable stamina. You were working for hours on end and hardly needed time to rest. If this is possible, I think you're one of the few people who can do it."

She might be laying it on a little thick, but at least Regina can tell she's captured the attention of her audience. Emma is sitting across from her, solemn with genuine interest. Maybe Regina's never been able to make this work in the past, but now, there might be some hope.

"I want to be clear, this is all hypothetical. I will only be able to give you so much direction, the rest is on you to figure out."

Emma nods her understanding.

"So," Regina takes a breath, "transporting oneself by magic is sluggish, you've seen that. There's something of a delay. It takes time to focus your power. And it's flashy. Dramatic. Theatrical. Definitely not conducive to stealth. I tried to combat these flaws by devising a theory for rapid movement and nearly undetectable magic. Something more helpful for battle situations."

"Rapid?" Emma's brow furrows.

"Faster than can be seen," Regina clarifies, then adds, "hypothetically." Because she never really got past stage one in the spell's development. "I don't know if what I've envisioned is possible. Like I said, even back in the Enchanted Forest I was never able to manage it. I didn't have enough power."

"That's where I come in." There's a faint tugging at Emma's lips. Not cocky, something else, and her gaze is bright as she looks upon Regina's journal. "What do I have to do?"

Regina clears her throat. "It may be difficult to explain."

Their eyes meet and Emma smiles at her. Smiles like none of this is happening, like Regina isn't the reason everything has gone wrong, and Regina is so full in that moment. Breathless and warm and-

And Regina finds she wants to touch her. That urge that's slowly been building since Emma's return. Soft, but consistent. The light bump, bump, bump of a sensation that mimics her heartbeat.

"I'll do my best to keep up," Emma says.

Regina swallows and forces her mind clear of everything that isn't them in this singular moment. She focuses on herself. On sharing her passion with someone intent and eager. That's what this needs to be.

That's all this can be.

"Okay. So, as I was saying, my thinking was magical transport is too, hmm, laborious for fast paced combat. It takes a fair bit of energy to cast and, more importantly, too much focus. You have to be able to tune out everything else that is happening around you and zero in on where you want to end up. That's not easy, or particularly smart, when you're in the middle of a fight. But what if we could transport - evade - as easily as physically moving?"

Regina scoots forward a bit, old excitement bubbling up. "I wanted to combine simple physical momentum with, well, I suppose we can call them a form of pseudo micro transports."
"Micro?"

"Hmm." Regina drums her fingers on her thighs in thought. "All right, so, somebody comes at you, let's say you dodge to the left. You lunge that way and start running but their reflexes are good enough they can keep up with you. Well, the same idea applies to magic. Disappear here, show up there, but they have every opportunity to get a shot in during your recovery period. Between the smoke and the energy drain, there are at least a few seconds where you're completely vulnerable. Even someone as powerful as you. But if you combine physical movement with just a bit of magic, you can spend a small amount of energy transporting yourself in rapid succession over minuscule distances."

"So," Emma's brow furrows as she works it out in her head, "it's basically just like a speed boost. You're moving on your own, and the magic just jolts you forward a bit?"

"Yes." Regina nods quickly and shifts a little, sitting up more fully. "It takes almost no focus because with your physical forward momentum you're practically already in the location before you transport there. Your body knows where it's going, your magic is just forcing it along more quickly. With a big enough pool of magic to draw from, you could get quite far. And with enough practice, if it becomes second nature to you, I think, hypothetically, you could get to the point where you have the ability to move at speeds beyond human capability without a full body transport."

Emma looks a little like she wants to laugh at her and Regina flushes. "What?"

"Nothing." But Emma's looking at her with so much blatant something it has her more than a little self conscious.

Regina fiddles with the corner of a page, cheeks warm. "Anyways, it was just a theory and I was quite young and new to magic when I would daydream and waste time coming up with such things."

"I don't think it's a waste."

"Where the hell are you guys?" Ruby's voice seeps in from the other room.

Emma and Regina share a wary look before rushing out to the main area of the vault to meet her.

"Ruby?" Regina takes in her pink cheeks and mussed hair, clothes damp and dirty. "Are you all right?"

"We gotta get out to the woods," she pants, chest heaving and eyes wild. "You gotta see this."

Word has spread quickly and when Regina and Emma tail Ruby into the small forest clearing Archie and Pongo are already there, Gold and Blue off to the side.

"Any change?" Ruby asks.

Archie shakes his head. "None that I've seen." He pushes his glasses up his nose and flashes Regina a timid smile. "It's nice to see you again, Madame Mayor."

Pongo wanders over and noses against her palm until she gives in and pats him. He keeps a
noticeable distance from Emma.

"Regina," Gold calls her over to where he's huddled up conversing with Blue, "if you would?"

She heads over to them, Emma at her heels. "So what's this abo- oh." She follows their eye line skyward and finds a large streak of what looks like pale lightning breaking up the sky. It's low enough it can't be seen from everywhere, and relatively small, but instinctively she knows it's born from magic.

And unknown magic that suddenly appears in Storybrooke has never meant good news for any of them.

"What the hell is that?"

"I believe we're seeing the first signs of influence from Cora's actions." Gold shakes his head, leaning heavily on his cane. "The more she disturbs the separate universes the more she destabilizes them."

"So what, they're literally just cracking open?"

"It would appear so," Blue murmurs, features tight as she looks upon what might be a faltering seam in the shield blocking one world from another.

This is so absolutely ridiculous. If they survive this, Regina is just about ready to retire and pack up with Henry to head for somewhere sunny down South.

"We're running out of time," Emma speaks for the first time since Ruby had interrupted them in the vault. She's glaring up at the sky as though it's her greatest enemy. "She has to be stopped. Regina, do you think I have enough control over my magic to open a portal without putting the town in danger?"

Regina's heart leaps into her throat. This is it. Emma wants to go after the Dark Ones to take down Cora. Regina has to sway her, has to help her figure out another way. One where she doesn't lose herself completely to this darkness.

"Yes, as long as you focus I'm sure you can, but." Regina falters under the curious stares from the people surrounding them. Gold and Blue looking eager. Archie confused. Ruby concerned.

"Come here," she murmurs and reaches out for Emma's arm to tug her away for some privacy.

Emma is stiff in her grip while Regina tows her through the forest. "Please don't do that," she murmurs when they come to a stop, looking a bit ill.

"Sorry," Regina quickly releases her with a grimace, "It's just that, what you're planning to do," Regina leans in close and keeps her voice low enough the others won't overhear, "that's what Cora is doing. That's what I would have done. Don't you see? This isn't you Emma. This is the curse. I know it seems like this is the only way to beat her, and maybe- maybe you're right on some level. Maybe it's the fastest way and the smartest way. But this can't be the answer for us. It can't be your answer."

Regina reaches out for her again. Slowly this time, gives Emma the chance to back away before taking her hand and squeezing. Pleading with all the goodness that is left in her friend to understand.

"If you start taking Dark Ones like her, you'll start losing yourself too. Just like she has. You'll start fading and even if you win, there might not be any way to get you back. So please, don't do this. I'll
help you. We'll find another way together, I promise. Just please, not this."

Regina clings to Emma's hand tight, staring up at her, begging her to listen. Because if she doesn't, if she decides to walk this path, Regina isn't strong enough to stop her. Nobody is. And she has to push this, even at the risk of upsetting the curse.

Except Emma doesn't look upset. If anything, she looks mildly amused.

"Regina," she says, that softness in her eyes again, "can I show you something?"

For the second time today Regina finds herself shifting, face warm, though she's not even sure why just yet. A thick swallow and she nods, watching carefully as Emma uses her free hand to tug a tattered piece of fabric from the tight pocket of her jeans.

"This is a piece of Cora's cloak. I grabbed it to try and pin her down, but she was far enough inside the portal that it didn't matter. She got away. The portal closed and severed off what was still in my hand."

Regina nods. "I saw, and I get it. You want to use it as a link to hunt her down when you're strong enough. I know how it works. You're going to use it to guide you to wherever she is."

Emma's smile is gentle. "I'm going to use it to guide me to where she was."

What?

Oh.

"Oh."

"Her original universe," Regina breathes, relief flooding through her as she works out Emma's true plan.

The smile Emma's wearing is closer to a smirk at the embarrassed flush that spreads across Regina's cheeks. It's Emma who squeezes Regina's hand now.

"We're going to figure out how to break into her world and bring her dagger home. She'll be stronger when she's back, but I'll still be immortal, and when we have her dagger in our hands she won't be."

"We?"

"I've been to the Enchanted Forest twice now," Emma says with a laugh, dropping Regina's hand and stepping away. "Neither visit has gone smoothly. It'll be helpful to have someone with a little experience tagging along."

Self consciousness forgotten, a new determination fills Regina. "I can do that."

"Good."

Like everything else in Storybrooke, once Snow White finds out about it, it seems like the whole town knows. There's only a select few Regina feels compelled to speak to, but by the time they're
ready to leave there's a sizable crowd gathered around Main Street.

Regina ignores the rubberneckers and focuses on smoothing Henry's collar. "Now remember, this is no excuse to start slacking off. I don't care how long we're gone, as long as that school is open you are going to be in it."

"Yeah, Mom," Henry whines, "I heard you the first time."

Usually the sass wouldn't fly, but she knows he's struggling. Left out of conversations and plots and now rejected when he so desperately pleaded to travel with them into Cora's universe.

"Be good," she murmurs and is grateful when he allows her to press a kiss to his forehead without resistance.

"I'll make sure he sticks to the books," David assures her, a hand on his grandson's shoulder.

It's all Regina can do to keep from rolling her eyes. It's no secret David's not much of a scholar, and he's weak around Henry. One offer of a Mortal Kombat tournament and he'll forget all about schoolwork. It will be Snow that Regina relies on to make sure her son remains focused.

Regina steps back and turns her attention to the only ones in the crowd she specifically asked to come. Maleficent stands beside her daughter Lily, the Blue Fairy present as well, but keeping a healthy distance and a wary eye on her old enemies.

"If Cora returns before we do, you'll be the town's greatest defense."

"I'll certainly do my part," Blue says with an important sniff, chin in the air.

Lily rolls her eyes while Maleficent flashes the fairy a sweet smile. "And you've been so very helpful in the past, I'm sure we're all feeling very relieved."

"Mal," Regina warns as Blue bristles.

Maleficent softens as her gaze returns to Regina. "I can play nice when I have to, you know that. You'll find my corpse before you see this town fall."

A nod, and then Regina makes to leave, but Maleficent reaches out and takes hold of her arm, tugging her back. She jerks her head, eyes focused over Regina's shoulder.

When Regina follows her gaze she finds Emma a few yards away from the crowd, standing in the middle of Main Street, locked in a quiet argument with Gold. Her shoulders are tense and her features are hard and Gold looks more than a little apprehensive.

"Be careful with that one, darling," Maleficent murmurs before releasing her. "She's restless. I don't like the feel of her."

"We're going to be fine," Regina assures her, and not just for Mal's sake. She would be lying if she said she wasn't nervous to be doing this alone. Holing up with Emma at the vault when the rest of their friends and family are a phone call away is one thing. But an indefinite period of time in a strange universe with Regina acting as Emma's only support?

It's an idea she would scoff at if only they had any others.

Maybe she does all right for Henry when the situation calls for it, but nobody has ever accused the Evil Queen of having a soft touch. Keeping the curse calm and Emma on task is a job for the likes of
fair and just Snow White, not a petty old witch.
Still, Emma had chosen her, and Regina won't take that lightly. Speaking of-

"I better go rescue Gold before he sets her off."

Regina only makes it about a third of the way across the street towards the still bickering pair before her focus is pulled yet again.

Robin is in front of her, gaze soft and a frown on his lips. "I found out a bit about what's happening from Snow."

Regina sighs as she gestures to the murmuring peasants milling about around them. "You and the rest of the town."

His answering smile is weak. "I only came to wish you luck, I promise. And to ask you to be careful. I may not have known any for long, but I've seen enough of the Dark Ones to know they hurt the people they love."

"Her family will be safe here," Regina reminds him.

"Right." He shakes his head with a fond smile. "You know," There's a hesitation that betrays itself in Robin's eyes before he seems to pull together the courage to continue. "I was always scared of Emma, even before all this."

"What?"

"Kind, helpful, honorable, brave. It makes it hard to dislike her, doesn't it? Even when you know you should."

Regina swallows. Yes, she remembers those days. Emma pulling Henry out of mines and Regina out of fires and Regina desperately clinging to whatever she could of her hatred as it threatened to crumble to pieces and sift through her fingers like fine grains of sand.

"There's something threatening about that sort of power," Robin continues. "That innate goodness that can make who should be your enemies - rivals - grow to care for you. Despite my resistance, by the end she won me over."

Regina struggles to stitch meaning to his words. "Why- what was your problem with Emma?"

"Robin Hood, friends with a sheriff?" He laughs when she rolls her eyes. "It goes against my very nature." He soars quickly, but still manages a smile at Regina's apparent confusion. He reaches up and gives her shoulder a squeeze. "Take care of yourself out there. Emma too."

When Regina walks away from him this time, it's different. She feels lighter. Like there's a weight off her chest.

It could be good for her, she thinks, having a friend like Robin around.

By the time she interrupts, Gold and Emma's whisper fight is already drawing to a close. Regina catches the tail end of it though. The sharp hiss of Emma's defiant, "I can do this," and the way Gold shoots back a somber, "don't forget that for a long time I thought I could too," before turning to greet Regina.

"Are you ready?" he asks. "Time is of the essence. Every minute we waste Cora grows closer to her
goals, whatever they may be, and our world grows more unstable."

"I'm going too."

Regina startles a bit at Hook's sudden interjection. She hadn't even noticed the man lurking about. She should have known though, he always did have the unfortunate tendency to slither about in Emma's shadow, waiting to intrude. God, if he does tag along they'll all be in trouble. If she and Hook don't kill one another, their incessant bickering will make Emma snap and doom them anyhow.

Before she can even open her mouth to protest, Gold steps up to save the day. "Right now the only solid fact we know about Cora's universe is that Regina wasn't born. That means Emma wasn't born either. They are safe to move about the world without fear of recognition or mistaken identity. Your time was long before Cora's. There is every possibility that some version of Captain Hook did or, depending on your choices, still does exist."

"What should I care?" he growls, features pulled tight in his frustration.

"The barriers between universes are fragile enough already." Emma doesn't look at Hook while she speaks, and there's a pettiness inside Regina that smugly sings about how good it is not to be on the other side of that avoidance for once. "We shouldn't be forcing unnecessary disruptions to the natural order by taking pointless risks."

Betrayal flickers across Hook's features. "Pointless," he repeats with a sharp nod. "Right." A tight laugh slips out of him. "Pointless." Shaking his head, he retreats, shoves his way through the ever growing crowd until he's off the street and out of sight.

"I'll be keeping an eye on that one," Gold mutters under his breath.

"He'll be fine," Emma says. She refocuses on Regina. "Any last minute pointers?"

"Try not to blow up my town."

Rolling her eyes, Emma lifts her hands and starts to pull her magic together. The people around them murmur with renewed interest. Shifting back a bit in apprehension, but eyes on the display, waiting for the magic to begin.

"Wait!" Snow White's shout carries over the rabble. "Hold on! I'm here." For a benevolent ruler she certainly is rather rough as she shoves her way through the peasantry.

"Of all the-" Gold grumbles at the continued interruptions.

Snow is breathing heavily by the time she reaches them. "You were going to leave without saying goodbye?" Her eyes are wide and a little watery.

Regina scoffs. "Goodbye, Snow," she drawls, and though the words are simply dripping with sarcasm, Snow smiles brightly at her.

"I brought you this," She holds up one of Henry's old backpacks. It's black with blue accents down the middle and sides and it's full to bursting. "I know you can only summon food and things with magic if you know where they are in the physical world or have the raw ingredients available, but I figured that wouldn't work across realms or universes or what have you."

Eyebrows raised, Regina bites her tongue. Far as they've come, she's not about to admit to Snow White of all people that she hadn't actually considered that. Judging by Emma's impressed hum she
hadn't either.

Regina accepts the bag and unzips it to take a cautious look inside. "You packed us a lunch?" The disbelief is clear in her voice.

"Just a few non perishables," Snow says. "Once you're there I thought you could use replication magic to make it last for however long you might need. You have no idea what her universe is going to be like. The grass could be blue in the sky could be green! Anything could happen. What if their food is poisonous to you?"

Emma peers over Regina's shoulder into the open bag. "I call the Cheez-Its." Amusement rings clear.

Snow doesn't seem self aware enough to grasp it. "I also put in these." Unzipping the front pocket, Snow pulls out two tiny squares of woven wool and a couple of doll-sized pillows. "I didn't have time to stitch up anything fancy, but they should be decent enough that you could enlarge them with magic if you ever have to camp out somewhere during the night."

Regina finds she doesn't have the heart to tell Snow she could have just told her to shrink down her actual bedding. God, Regina really is getting soft.

"Thank you," she says instead of anything mocking, and finds it easier than she would have thought with Snow staring up at her, pure adoration for both her and Emma shining in her wide eyes. It's still a little nauseating, yes, but more tolerable than Regina once found Snow's boundless affections to be.

Well, at least it's tolerable until Snow lunges forward and captures Regina in a tight hug, trapping the bag uncomfortably between them.

"Be careful," Snow breathes while Regina shifts in her grasp to give her an awkward pat on the back.

"All right," she fights to keep her voice civil. "Off you go. That's enough now."

Snow turns to Emma next. She dares a tentative step forward, a trembling hand raised to her daughter's cheek. Emma doesn't jerk away from the touch, but she doesn't lean into it either. She stands, still and rigid, hardly betraying any emotion.

"I know you're all powerful now," Snow says with a wet laugh, "but take care of yourself, all right? Come home safe."

Emma's nod is curt. Stiff. And then she pulls away to return her attentions to the portal. Regina waves Snow off before begrudgingly pulling the backpack onto her shoulders and moving to stand beside Emma.

"Are you okay?"

Emma shrugs. "I'm ready to go." She lifts her hand once more and the air starts to hum with energy as her power pulls together.

"Feel for the remnants of Cora's magic," Regina reminds her, circling. "Let it guide yours into the proper form. What you want is not so different."

Magic crackles around Emma's raised hand while the other clutches the end of Cora's tattered cloak.

"Flood it with intent. Let the token guide you. Pour everything you have into it, but keep it centered, focused on this one clear goal."
The portal takes shape slower than Cora's hastily thrown together escape route. It flickers into existence, weak at first, the barest imprint of a gateway before growing into something solid. The air splits and the magic expands until a swirling vortex of raw energy rests before them, hopefully ready to lead them towards victory.

"Perfect," Regina murmurs while Emma relaxes next to her.

"No explosions yet," comes the weak reply.

The effort has taken the wind out of Emma, but of course the savior is doing all she can not to show it. She allows herself just a moment before reigning in her breathing and squaring her shoulders.

Regina chances one last peek over her shoulder. One last glimpse of Henry standing beneath a grim faced David's comforting arm. Of Snow, teary eyed and waving them off. Of Maleficent, strong and solemn in her duty. Of Lily sulking by her side. Of all her citizens who have feared and cursed Regina for so long, looking upon her departure with interest.

With a tentative hope she has, in some part, helped inspire.

How odd it is to at last, fully and completely, stand before them like this. No schemes or tricks or questions or doubts.

"Ready?"

When she turns back to the portal, Emma is holding out her hand. Nodding, Regina reaches out and laces their fingers together. A soft smile and then Emma pulls her forward into the vortex, tugging her into the unknown.

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Regina isn't sure just what she expected from inter-universal travel. Transporting oneself with magic is usually a full body experience. Swirling smoke and a great surge of energy. It's powerful and dizzying and something of a rush to the senses. This though?

They step through the portal and the trip is instantaneous. One step, something like a great gust of wind, and then that's it. They're through. It's done.

The gateway snaps shut behind them.

Regina and Emma are left standing, hand in hand, in - hopefully - an entirely new universe. One built on parallel decisions and outcomes and lives and it's-

It's-

Breath hitching, Regina scans the barren plains stretched out before them on all sides. Fields reaching farther than they can see, desolated. Destroyed. Nothing but scarce patches of dry, withered grass and the odd shriveled remains of trees, trunks standing with bare branches stretched like hollow bones to the sky.

"Oh Mother," Regina whispers, taking in the wasteland surrounding them, "what have you done?"
Neverland was an adventure hardly forgotten, and Regina is grateful that this time around she had some time to prepare a decent travel ensemble. No heels or heavy blazers. Just sturdy boots for walking and comfortable pants. Flattering dress shirt swapped out for a sensible sweater, protection from the cold but still allowing for decent maneuverability.

Snow apparently has thought along the same lines as Regina. Beyond the food and bedding, she's packed up some practical necessities. Regina digs through the many pockets and sleeves of the bag to find a small packet of tissues, a little squirt bottle of sunblock, a thermos full of water, and even a Ziploc bag stuffed with toilet paper and tampons and a sticky note that says, "Replicate as needed :)" slapped on the front.

It's all very thoughtful, in an overbearing, slightly creepy sort of way.

What really catches Regina's interest is that Snow slipped in a handful of the coins she had brought back from their year in the Enchanted Forest. Memorabilia, she'd said. A reminder of simpler times. Gold and silver and bronze pieces with the royal crest of the White Kingdom pressed into them. So long as the money of this world proves similar, and assuming the White Kingdom still exists here at all, these will be invaluable to them in the days to come.

Regina magics herself a coin purse and replicates the coins until the pouch is near bursting. Then she ties it to her belt and stands, backpack thrown over her shoulder.

"Remind me to thank your mother properly when we get back," Regina says, "and also to give her a talk about boundaries."

Emma isn't listening though, she has her eyes on the horizon, lips pulled into a deep frown. "There's nothing."

"It can't go on like this forever." Regina sets off, pleased when Emma follows without resistance. "We stick to the plan. We'll start where I know to be the village my mother was born in and work our way from there. As long as in this world she wasn't born elsewhere we'll be able to follow whatever trail she left behind to her dagger." Regina speaks with much more confidence than she feels, but with Emma consumed by the dark curse, it's up to her to carry the weight of optimism throughout their journey.

Ridiculous.

"Or to whoever she trusted to guard it," Emma says. "I doubt she left it lying around."

Regina shakes her head. "No, unless this version of Cora is drastically different than my mother, she wouldn't have left it with a person. She'll have trusted her own wits and her magic, that's all. It will be heavily guarded, but not by any sort of human."

"You are the resident expert," Emma allows. She trails behind Regina as they walk, kicking at the dusty ground every so often, hands stuffed in her pockets and shoulders hunched like a sullen teenager.

Not for the first time Regina wonders if the curse is miserable trapped inside the likes of Emma Swan. Someone so fundamentally good without any sort of agenda or existing greed to prey upon. No grand schemes. No malicious plots. Just a temperamental woman fighting every day to do right by her family.
"The whole world can't be like this, can it?" Emma gestures to the nothing all around them. "Everything can't be gone."

"Unless we find someone, we can only guess."

Emma jogs a little to catch up to Regina, clearly catching the edge in her tone. "You sound like you already have a theory."

"This was the last place Cora was before opening her first portal to breach the divide between universes. It was her first try." Regina keeps her gaze averted. "It would have taken a tremendous amount of magic and it's likely it wasn't the neatest process since she would have been so unpracticed."

Falling out of step, Emma stutters to a stop, eyes wide. "You think this is the aftereffects of her portal?"

Regina sighs. She turns to face Emma, voice soothing. "I think we should keep moving until we find someone who can help us get our bearings. That's the only way we'll get any answers."

"Did I-" Emma falters. Swallows. "Storybrooke is-"

"Safe." Regina catches Emma's gaze and holds it, unwavering. "Everyone is fine."

Another thick swallow. "Right," Emma forces out. Her arms hang stiffly at her sides, fingers clenching and uncurling as she does her best to convince them both she hasn't just destroyed everything they're fighting for.

"We'd know," Regina presses. "We'd feel it if he was gone."

That gets Emma to soften. She nods. Too fast. Too frantic. "Yeah, we'd know. Of course we'd know."

- 

Regina has no idea if time matches up between universes, but at the very least the watch strapped to her wrist is good for telling her that they've been walking for a good five hours now. Her choice in career is catching up to her, it seems. Sitting behind a desk for a good portion of the day doesn't prepare one for extensive hiking, and Regina finds herself beyond grateful when the sun sinks low enough in the sky that they're forced to find a place to settle in for the night before darkness blankets them completely.

It's at the base of a withered tree where they come to rest. Emma sets about ripping down some of the dry, dead branches and gets a fire going with her magic while Regina enlarges the miniature bedrolls Snow packed for them.

"We don't have the time for aimless wandering." The light from the fire dances across Emma's hard features as she feeds its flames. "Cora could return to Storybrooke at any time and we could be heading in the opposite direction of her dagger for all we know."

When the fire grows to a decent size Regina steps in and uses her magic to put it in stasis. It will last through the night at full strength without the danger of spreading - though that's not exactly likely in
the dry desert they're traveling - or dying out. "It's not as though we had an opportunity to strategize." Regina settles down on her bedding, leaning back on open palms while the exhaustion of the day seeps through her. "And we had no idea this would be the state of her world."

Emma sits across from Regina, absent gaze glued to the base of the flames, arms dangling over her bent knees like a lost child. "We need to do this quickly. I can't." Emma falters, heaves a heavy breath, "I don't think it's good for us to be here for too long."


Emma doesn't answer her.

Sighing, Regina drags the backpack close and pulls it open. "Do you want something to eat?"

Emma shakes her head. Regina doesn't have much of an appetite either, but she makes sure to drink plenty of water. That too goes rejected when she tries to pass it over to Emma. The Dark One doesn't need it, she supposes. Technically, Emma doesn't need anything. Not food or drink or true rest beyond drains on her magic reserves.

"You don't need to stop." Regina shifts, wraps her arms around herself while Emma frowns at her over the fire. "You could keep going through the night."

"I could," Emma allows.

All of this - the whole concept of setting up camp for the night - it's all for Regina's benefit. She's dead weight.

The thought settles in her stomach like lead.

What is the point in her being here? Magical mentoring?

"I can't keep up with a Dark One," Regina muses. She shakes her head, a bitter laugh slipping out. "And it's clearly a struggle for you just to be around me."

She's a liability. Plain and simple. Her mere existence seemingly driving Emma further into the darkness.

Why bring her along at all?

Night has fully come upon them. The sky is deep and full of stars in a way it never can be back in their world. No light pollution, no people or animals moving about in the land surrounding them. It's like they're somewhere brand new. If not for what they know of Cora, Regina would come upon this world and think it untouched, not the charred remains of what her mother left behind.

It's in that heavy silence they sit, and when Regina can't take the weight of her realization anymore - when it lingers so long between them, unrefuted - she turns away from Emma and lays down to rest. What else can she do? Blanket pulled high over her shoulders, she squeezes her eyes tight and prays for sleep to come quickly.

More than anything, she wishes she was home with Henry.

"You drive them mad, but you keep me calm."

Emma's voice is so quiet, Regina strains to make out the words. She scarcely dares to breathe in fear of missing what comes next.
"I almost feel like myself again when I'm with you. Sometimes. Even if they won't shut up." Her laugh is breathy, forced. "It's worth the trade off."

Regina doesn't turn over to look at Emma. Doesn't think she can. She just grips the quilt on top of her tight, nails digging into the soft fabric. "I'm sorry." Her voice is thick, her eyes stinging.

"I don't want you to be."

-

She's not sure when she dozes off, but Regina must at some point because she rolls over in the night and startles awake at the pebble that digs into her shoulder blade. Grumbling, Regina fishes it out from under her bedding and tosses it into the night. When she settles back down she looks over to find Emma's bedroll empty.

In the distance, nearly out of reach of their fire's glow, she can just make out Emma's outline. Huddled up with her blanket wrapped around her shoulders, neck craned to the sky. A healthy distance between her and their camp - no - between her and Regina.

Hands clenched under her pillow, Regina watches her until she succumbs to sleep once more.

-

Emma keeps her distance in the morning. The comfort she had cultivated with Regina down in the vault seems to have vanished for the time being, and there's that restless energy about her again whenever she gets too close. It makes Regina wonder what the voices of the Dark Ones spent all night whispering in Emma's ear.

Nothing productive, surely.

They both need space, that much is clear, and Emma is right. They can't afford to wander aimlessly. There isn't time to spare. So Regina steps up to take the reigns.

"I think we could use some new perspective. I'll fly on ahead, get a bird's eye view, and find someone who can point us in the right direction. If I'm already headed the right way, I'll reach out to your magic with my own to transport you, don't resist if you feel it. So long as I'm not too far away, I should be able to reach you."

Emma frowns. "So I just wait?"

"This isn't a glamour spell. True transformation takes months - sometimes years - of practice to get right. And when things go wrong with transformation, they go badly wrong." Regina grimaces at the unpleasant memories of her time spent training. "Very badly. You're not practiced enough."

Something close to a growl slips out of Emma. Fists clenched, she stalks off to the charred remains of their fire and sits, cross legged in the dirt.

It's all Regina can do to keep from rolling her eyes at the dramatics. "Why don't you have something
to eat while I'm gone? Maybe it will calm you down."

Emma doesn't respond, but she's glowering childishly at the ground so Regina's fairly certain she heard. Everyone keeps telling her to be careful around Emma, but in moments like these it just feels like dealing with baby Neal during one of his tantrums. Still, best not to let her guard down.

Regina leaves her be and focuses on her magic instead. It's been awhile, so it takes a moment for Regina to remember just how to slip into the correct form. To let everything shrink. Legs thin and feathers light and beak sharp. Magic engulfs her, and when the smoke clears, Regina is a raven hopping about the ground.

In seconds she's airborne, everything coming back to her in a great rush. It's been over thirty years but she remembers this. The wind around her. The open sky in front of her. How being a bird doesn't feel like magic. How it feels like freedom.

One full minute, that's how long Regina allows herself to indulge before focusing on her task. Life. She needs to find some sign of life. Someone to question about Cora or any of the Dark Ones or the state of this world. Flapping hard, she picks up some speed and then glides a bit lower, beady eyes scanning the open landscape.

There's not much around, but now that she has the advantage of height, she can make out that there are trees a few miles ahead. Living trees surrounded by tall grass and shrubbery that eventually lead into dense woodlands. Life beyond the blast radius, creeping back in at the edges.

It's a relief to see. The entire world isn't totaled, and Regina's guess is likely right. The wasteland they'd stepped into was simply the aftereffects of Cora's portal gone wrong. An obscene amount of magic, unstable without a witch to shape it.

Unfortunate, but good news for their task moving forward. People still exist here, they must. Sooner or later they'll find them.

It's a slow progression, but eventually the plants grow thick and the trees grow tall and the rivers run fast. Birds pass her in the sky, and a stag leaps through a field below her. Just minutes later Regina comes along a farmstead. She swoops down to rest atop the barn and inspect the area.

It appears to be long abandoned. The house in disrepair, the fields overgrown. At the very least it gives her hope she's headed in the right direction.

There are other abandoned properties. Another dusty farm. A cottage in the woods, covered with ivy. A mill by the water's edge, the once great waterwheel rotted through and half collapsed.

She's nearly ready to double back to Emma when Regina at last spots something concrete. A wide dirt road below her. Clearly well traveled with deep grooves on the sides where carriages routinely pass over.

Regina follows it until she comes upon a village. Though even that is a generous descriptor. It's more a traveler's rest than anything. An inn, a well, a stable with horses for purchase. The most important thing though is the fact there are people milling about. Plenty of people.

Regina circles low over the small cluster of buildings a few times and counts at least twelve before heading back for the forest. A few yards in, she lights down on the grass and relaxes her magic. Eases the flow until she's growing larger, standing upright and on real legs once more. When she's once again human, Regina breathes deep, sagging against a tree for support.

It's been years upon years since she's exuded so much energy for such a long period of time. Her
limbs feel heavy, her body drained to the very depths of her bones.

"It's tough getting old, girl." Granny's favorite words to grumble on a damp day when her joints are aching.

Regina shoves the thought out of her mind. Despite Emma's many smirking assurances, Regina is not in her sixties. The years of the curse don't count goddammit. Twenty-eight years of suffering through Mary Margaret Blanchard's simpering, "pardon me, Madame Mayor"'s had better have been worth something.

Though it kills her to do it, Regina gives herself a good fifteen minutes to rest and recharge. She may not be sixty, but admittedly she doesn't quite bounce back like she used to.

When she feels as though she has the magic to pull it off, Regina begins reaching out, searching for Emma's energy signature. It's a long way off to their campsite, but Regina knows the general direction and Emma's aura is powerful enough it's something of a beacon in a storm. Pulsing and bright and difficult to miss.

Regina sends out her power, lets it find Emma's, meet with hers. They collide and entwine, old friends embracing. Emma is ready for her, and doesn't resist the connection. She feeds it. Melds her energy with Regina's until there's enough between them that Regina can muster up that last surge of magic to call Emma to her side.

The cloud of smoke Emma appears in has a soft reddish glow. Their combined magic molding into something new.

It only takes Emma a few seconds to shake off the disorientation of such a long transport. As soon as she can focus, her eyes fall on Regina. "What happened? You look terrible."

Regina waves off her concern as she pushes shakily to her feet. "It's nothing, just a longer way than I thought. There's a traveler's rest up ahead. I didn't see too many people but even if nobody there knows anything that can help us, it wouldn't hurt to pick up a horse."

"When you're ready then." Emma gestures her forward. "I think it would be best if you did the talking."
"Odd clothes on the pair of you."

Regina had been prepared to play a long game and get a feel for the other patrons visiting the tavern attached to the inn before pursuing proper conversation with anyone, but the barmaid is open and warm and clearly one to ignore social niceties in favor of blunt observation. She's rather reminiscent of Ruby.

"We've traveled a long way," Regina says. "Would we be able to sit awhile and rest?"

"Course." She leads them to a small wooden table at the far end of the crowded room. There aren't many guests, but the furniture is haphazardly placed and too close together. It gives the bar a claustrophobic feel that makes Regina's skin itch.

"We don't get many women alone on the road." There's a hint of envy in the barmaid's voice, a touch of longing that has nostalgia washing over Regina.

A young girl trapped by circumstance, watching the world flow around her. Freedom perfectly visible, but just out of reach. Regina remembers those days all too well.

They take their seats and Regina orders them a couple bowls of a simple stew with bread to share. She doubts Emma is hungry, she isn't particularly either, but the more money they spend the longer they'll be encouraged to stay and Regina isn't sure how long it will be until she's comfortable broaching the topic of Cora.

Back in her version of the Enchanted Forest, magic wasn't looked upon too fondly unless it belonged to the fairies. Witches and warlocks and the like weren't hunted down by any means, but they usually lived on the outskirts of society. Potion brewers and charm makers that the commoners only paid mind to in times of need.

In this realm possibly devastated by a dark witch though? Well, Regina isn't going to be quick to reveal her own power or the fact that she has interest in the Dark One's history. Asking the wrong question about the wrong people can quickly lead to hysteria in a place as backwards as the Enchanted Forest.

"He won't stop looking at you." Emma leans close to whisper the words, her voice nearly inaudible.

Regina glances over, subtle as she can manage. A handful of tables away a man sits, broad shoulders hunched over his plate. Every few seconds he chances a peek at them before quickly averting his eyes.

"Well we don't exist here," Regina murmurs, "so he can't recognize either of us."

"You do look a bit like your mother."

"Enough for a family resemblance perhaps," Regina allows, "but not mistaken identity. Hold on, let me-" She waits for the man to peer over at them again and she meets his eye. The soft smile she flashes him has him sputtering into his mug, cheeks a bright pink.
"He likes you." Emma shifts next to her.

"Maybe." Regina takes the time to study the man. A good twenty years her senior - physically at least - and in clothes that are well suited for travel, worn from miles upon miles of use. "I'm going to talk to him."

"You're what?" Emma hisses but Regina is already on her feet and moving.

The closer she gets, Regina realizes the man is even older than she thought. There are deep lines around his mouth and wrinkles at the corner of his eyes. His dark hair is streaked with grey and his mustache is thinning a bit in places.

He's near crimson by the time she's standing over his table, and he sputters out apologies before she can even greet him. "I'm so sorry, miss," he starts to ramble in a panic, hands up in defense. "Really I am. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I'm just a long way from home, you see, and you remind me an awful lot of my young niece. Could be her sister, you could. Got me thinking of home and everything I left behind all those years ago and--"

"It's all right," she soothes him with a gentle smile, actually rather charmed. His thick accent coupled with the warm brown of his skin makes her wonder if perhaps he comes from her father's homeland - or whatever the equivalent of it might be in this version of the world. It endears him to her instantly.

He relaxes, shoulders sagging in relief. "I really am sorry, miss." He sighs. "I suppose I let the homesickness get the best of me."

"My friend and I have also traveled far." Regina gestures to where Emma is still seated at their table, stiff and stern. "Perhaps we could offer you a bit of company while you rest?"

Eyes shining, he beams up at her. "Why, I'm sure I'd like that very much."

Emma hesitates for a moment when Regina beckons her over, but she does eventually comply. It's more the a little awkward, the way she greets the man with a curt nod before dropping into a chair at his table without a word, but Regina knows Emma isn't much of a socialite even when her soul isn't consumed by an ancient curse, so she lets it go.

She introduces them both, and discovers their new friend - Carlos - is a very lonely, very kind, very talkative man. Just the sort of person they're looking for.

When the barmaid returns with their stew she doesn't comment on the seat change. She just sets down their bowls and bread and hurries back to the kitchens and leaves the trio to their conversation.

Regina brushes over her and Emma's origins when asked. Steals a bit of David's backstory so that she's the daughter of a shepherd in a neighboring kingdom that left her small village with her friend on the hunt for adventure.

Carlos seems quite taken with them both, despite Emma's surly attitude, and is easily coaxed into tales of his own travels. He is from a family of farmers. Once a young man who dreamed of adventure while tilling the fields, he spent years working and saving money until he was able to set out and see the world he was so desperate to explore. Long, arduous hikes over mountain tops and quiet evenings under the stars in beautiful valleys.

The barmaid joins them when what little lunch crowd there was thins out. Rose, she introduces herself as before taking a seat and hanging on to the man's every word.
He's well traveled, sure, but what interests Regina more is his knowledge of the world. Of its people and history.

"We've come in from the Southeast," Regina says, casually as she can manage. She doesn't miss the way both Rose and Carlos shift in discomfort at the information. Good. "For miles the land was barren. Little more than a desert. What happened there?"

Rose presses her lips in a thin line, gaze flitting to Carlos who sighs heavily. A heavy hand, worn and calloused, drags across his face.

"Bad things," he says. "Dark things."

Emma stops playing with her stew and sits up in her chair, her passive boredom with the conversation forgotten now that she realizes where Regina's been leading them.

"A battle?" Regina presses, even though she knows better.

Rose shakes her head, dark curls bouncing over her shoulders. "Magic," she murmurs, then leans in across the table as though she's a child sharing dirty words, "black magic."

Really there's no such thing. Light and dark magic is the truth twisted to make stories about good and evil sound prettier. In reality magic is magic and intent is what matters. It's evil when one uses it to commit evil, and good when one doesn't. At its base, it's utterly neutral. A manipulation of the energies found in nature, nothing more. It's the outside forces that twist it.


It took years to understand, but it was never Mother's magic that made her so uniquely horrible. It was the spite that filled the hollow cavity where her heart had once resided.

"Who-" Regina starts to ask but Rose shakes her head.

"We don't talk about her, Miss. Bad omens that."

"Superstition," Carlos admonishes with a huff. "That's why these areas see so few travelers now."
He waves his hand through the air as though swatting a fly. "Folks are scared of a ghost."

"Not true, sir," Rose pouts. "She was real she was. Papa said-"

"Of course she was real," Carlos soothes. "You're too young, but the rest of us had to live with her on the loose. I had to watch my entire kingdom be devastated by her wrath. She's only been gone forty years."

Regina shifts forward in interest at that.

"Forty-two," Rose corrects with a sniff, clearly a little put off by the interruption. "Papa said she came through here once."
She leans in over the table, a sneaking conspirator. "Says her horse was run ragged and she was all skin and bones. He never saw someone who looked like that, he said, with eyes that had nothing behind him."

"You mean the Dark One," Regina dares to press. Based on Carlos' words it doesn't seem like it will alarm them to find she has basic knowledge on the topic. It sounds like Cora made enough of a spectacle of herself that her existence is fairly public knowledge.

Rose balks at the name, but Carlos just releases a weary sigh. "That's the title that's passed down by
the common folk, yes. But this one here? From what I heard she didn't answer to any name. She did the talking, see? If she needs something she'll come to you, otherwise she's got no reason to so much as look at anyone. Least ways that's how it used to be."

"Disappeared forty-two years ago," Rose says again. There's still a lingering fear about her, but the glint of excitement is clear in her eyes. Like just talking about such forbidden things has her headed towards adventure. "Papa swears he's the last person to ever see her before she left."

Rose glances over her shoulder towards the bar. There's a man behind it. Broad shouldered and gruff and Regina wonders if that's Papa, caught in the superstitious notion that even the mere mention of Cora will summon the witch back to their realm.

"She stopped here to rest her horse before heading Southeast, just the way you two came in. Then two days later," Rose makes a hissing sound low in her throat, "big wave of that black magic of hers. Wipes out everything for miles. Takes out farms, villages, whole families. Then she's just gone. Vanished. Nobody sees her ever again."

"Oh she'll be back," Carlos assures the girl with a resolute nod. He takes a swig of his drink. "Evil like that doesn't vanish like a bad dream. It lingers."

Regina clears her throat. "You said your kingdom was devastated?"

"Part of the reason I left," Carlos' eyes grow distant. His lips droop at the corners. "That was back when she first appeared. I was just barely a man then, working my father's fields. Word reached us from the city of how the Dark One had changed. How she appeared as if from nowhere. Wielding her magic she invaded the palace and single handedly massacred the entirety of the royal family. Xavier and Camilla and all of their children gone," he snaps his thick fingers, "just like that."

"Prince Henry," Regina murmurs, chest tight.

God. Is there anywhere he's safe? Any universe in which he's able to live out his life untouched by Cora's wickedness? Is there a universe out there, somewhere, where his heart remains beating in his chest and a better version of herself loves him in the way his gentle, innocent soul deserves?

"The whole family, yes," Carlos agrees. "Just terrible. A blow like that, it threw the kingdom into chaos. All these years later we're still scrambling to properly recover."

There's a light squeeze on her knee that distracts Regina from the tightness of her throat. Emma isn't looking at her, but Regina can feel the reassuring weight of her hand on her leg, uncharacteristically tender. A deep breath to refocus, and she's able to relax under the touch.

"Horror of it all is, she wasn't looking to overthrow them. Didn't steal the castle or the crown. Didn't try to rule the people. She just - left."

"Revenge," Regina forces out past the tightness in her throat. "It's because she wanted revenge, not the throne itself. Xavier slighted her, so when she had the power to, she struck back."

Emma flashes her a curious look, but does nothing to warn Regina off outing them, so Regina takes it as permission to continue.

"Sounds like you've heard a rumor or two yourself." Carlos' voice is weighted with knowing, but there's no accusation in his tone.
Regina takes a steadying breath. "We're travelers, as we said, but we're not just looking for adventure. We come from-" Regina hesitates, still reluctant to admit to being a magic user herself, "far away," she finally settles on. "A place that's been visited by your Dark One."

Rose sucks in a sharp breath, fear and delight shining in her gaze. Carlos is quiet by her side. Solemn. Serious.

"She's preparing to destroy our home," Regina says, "and we've come to find a way to defeat her."

"Can't do that," Rose says through a gasp. "It's impossible. Nobody can defeat a Dark One, they're immortal, they are. We lost so many trying."

"What do you mean?"

Carlos takes over. "The Dark One was a terror. She got these desires in her head that us common folk couldn't begin to understand, and then she'd stop at nothing to see it done. This world used to be one of magic used for both good and ill, but then the Dark One came. She was like a hound the way she hunted it down. Ripped through everyone from great sorcerers who worked for kings to humble nature witches who sold luck charms to villagers. If there's magic left in our world at all, people certainly are very quiet about it."

"The nobility did everything they could to stop her," Rose adds, shifting forward in her seat. "They sent out knights and champions and whole legions, but nobody ever returned. All the greatest heroes failed. It got so bad that Papa said even the dark fairy Maleficent tried to stop her. He said there was no other sight like it in all the world. The Dark One battlin' a massive dragon over the skies of the Enchanted Forest." Rose releases a wistful sigh, chin resting on her palm. "Sounds something amazing, it does. Papa said everyone coward below while their war raged overhead for close to three days straight.

"On the third, the dragon fell from the sky in exhaustion, and the Dark One took her head as a trophy. She mounted it on the highest peak of Maleficent's palace as a warning. Folks who pass by in their travels say the skull is still there."

Stomach churning, Regina fights down her nausea at the idea of Maleficent back in Storybrooke, head of the town's obviously outmatched defense.

They need to find Cora's dagger and get home quickly before something happens that can never be reversed.

"The good fairies don't often meddle in the affairs of mortals beyond granting the wishes of noble children, but even the head fairy Blue came in to stop her," Carlos adds. "No wishes getting granted these days."

Rose nods along, head bobbing enthusiastically. "You wanna keep your nose out of that nonsense, Miss. Nothing but trouble there."

"Our home is in danger," Regina presses, "and when she's done there, there's nothing to stop the Dark One from returning here. Nobody in any kingdom or realm will be free unless she's defeated."

"There's no way," Rose insists. "You can't kill what won't die."

"We can." Emma leans back in her chair, arms crossed.
"Every Dark One has a dagger engraved with their name," Regina explains. "Do either of you know anything about that? Whether it's a story or a rumor. Anything."

Rose just stares at them, but Carlos says, "The dagger hasn't been seen for half a century now. Why do you think so many fell to her?"

"Where was it last seen?"

"No idea."

"Was there some place she lived?" Regina fights to keep the frustration out of her voice. "Somewhere she might have hidden something valuable to her?"

Carlos shakes his head. "She wasn't like the one who came before her. He lived like a lord in some dark castle made of magic, they say he was a nasty piece of work. But folks could go to him, talk to him, ask him for magic. He'd give it to you for a price. Usually unfair, but folks desperate enough would go along with it anyways. And maybe it wasn't out of kindness or pity, but I suppose he did help a person or two in his own twisted way. The new one though, she was different. Didn't rest in no one place. Didn't talk to anyone unless she wanted something from them, see? And then sometimes she'd go into these rages. Burn down everything in sight if the wind blew the wrong way. There's nothing to know about her."

"They can't help us." Emma's features are twisted up with displeasure.

"Are you sure there's nothing?" Regina presses Carlos, more than a little desperate. "Anything you can think of might help. Even if it seems insignificant to you."

The blank stares she receives in return is enough to have Regina sinking in her seat. It was all a waste.

This whole trip might very well be a waste.

There's no time for hunting. For gathering information like this.

They need answers now, before there's no home left to save.

- 

It's late afternoon by the time they pay for their meals and head out.

On her orders, Emma is chatting with the stable master, asking increasingly inane questions to keep the heavyset man distracted. Meanwhile, Regina paces the stables, subtly letting magic spark from her fingertips in front of the horses to find which one remains the most calm. It won't do for there to be any rearing and bucking while they're on the road.

The best of the lot are all spoken for, merely being temporarily housed while their owners rest in the inn or relax in the tavern. There are a few for sale though, and Regina studies them carefully. A sturdy looking paso finos catches her eye, deep chestnut color and well muscled. But when she produces a spark as she passes it throws back its head, eyes wide.

Not the worst possible reaction, certainly manageable. But the horse is small, and though he looks to
be strong she worries he may struggle if their journey is too long. The bay fox trotter a few stalls down seems to be the better bet. Despite a wary look, she's considerably more calm in the face of magic, and she'll be useful should their travels take them off the main road and onto more rugged trails.

With her back to Emma and the man, Regina uses her magic to replicate her already full-to-bursting coin purse. Original from Snow still tied securely to her belt, she clutches the copy tight as she heads to Emma's side.

At least she won't have to haggle.

Chapter End Notes

Why is there a Missouri Fox Trotter in a fantasy realm? Who the fuck knows I just like em, back off horse nerd.
"If I knew you were going to be the sole rider, I would have insisted on buying more than one horse."

Regina doesn't give Emma the satisfaction of looking over her shoulder. "If you practiced as much as you complained we wouldn't have to worry about Cora at all."

They've been on the main road for about three hours, Regina on horseback, Emma grumbling as she trails behind her on foot. Despite the fact they're in a new universe, that doesn't mean Emma can start slacking on her training. Dagger or no, she has to be prepared when they come face to face with Cora again. And so Emma walks the long road towards the far away city Rose's father pointed them in the general direction of, putting Regina's old theories to practical use.

It's not the smoothest sight.

Emma waits for the horse to get a decent distance away, and then she jogs to catch up, magic flowing freely as she attempts to use it to push herself along more quickly. There's something to it, Regina can tell, the potential of her vision in sight. But Emma's movements are jerky and her speed erratic. A slow jog at its worst and a decent sprint at its best before she falls out of movement both physical and magical, stuttering to a graceless stop.

Still, for a first effort Regina isn't displeased. Old excitements flicker in her at the thought of what progress Emma might be able to make during their time here.

The villages and traveler's stops grow more populated as they approach the city - Emma forced to stop her transport practice whenever they move through one or a traveler passes them on the road. They keep a fair pace, taking breaks every hour for about ten minutes so the horse can enjoy a restful graze while Emma recharges a bit.

During one Regina sits in the grass, back against a wide oak, snacking on some of the Goldfish Snow packed for them while keeping an eye on their horse.

"Got a name for her yet?"

Regina fights a smile as Emma settles in the grass beside her. "I'll let you know if one comes to mind." She holds out the Ziploc bag of crackers in silent question.

Emma hesitates for a moment before grabbing herself a small handful. Cupping them close to her chest, she eats with a careful slowness she doesn't often exhibit when it comes to food. "So, say we get to this city and nobody can help us, then what? We keep wandering?"

"We need to find somewhere we can purchase a map. I know the dagger won't be there, but I still think we should find our way to my mother's old home. It's a start at least. A point to work from. She's always been very big on history."

"From what you've told me," Emma says as she chews, nose wrinkled, "I thought she always
resented her family."

"She did. They were poor. Low class." Regina snorts. "That life was never enough for her. But when it came to the nobles, those with power, she knew everything there was to know about the bloodlines and the treaties and the grudges that dated back centuries. It was-" she falters, words dying on her lips as it finally hits her.

Regina has been so stupid. Caught up in the past and leaning too heavily on the knowledge of her mother to see the truth. Both Coras had the same humble beginnings, yes, but they also had one glaring difference.

Mother had been obsessed with gaining the throne. Relished in the power and respect that came with it. But this alternate Cora had wanted revenge. She sold her soul for the dark curse so she could rip apart an entire family of royals, but hadn't tried to claim the throne.

She was beyond mortal cares. Or at least she believed herself to be. She was after magic. Boundless, infinite magic. She was making herself more than a would-be queen. This Cora was aiming to be something of a god.

Eternal and untouchable.

"What's wrong?" Emma's brow is furrowed as she studies Regina.

"I think I have an idea," she says the words slowly, carefully, "but I'd need you to answer some questions." Regina swallows, keeps her voice even and without demand. "Questions it might not want you to answer."

Silence.

The horse snorts, head still bowed as it wanders the small field they're resting in. Emma shifts in the grass, Goldfish long forgotten.

This is exactly what Gold warned Regina off of doing, isolating herself with Emma and provoking the curse. It's stupid. Regina knows it's stupid. But she doesn't - her family doesn't - have time for playing it safe.

"I don't want you to be scared of me."

When Regina looks over, Emma's staring down at the ground. Little emotion betrays itself on her face, but her shoulders sag and there's a lost look deep in her eyes.

Regina figures that's as close to approval as she's going to get. She licks her lips. "Travel between realities has never before been documented, so no solid facts are known. But there are all sorts of theories on the nature of parallel universes. And something I believe, something I think we can assume after talking to Carlos and Rose, is that there are an infinite number of universes made up from the infinite number of choices people make every second of every day.

"This world diverged from ours when my mother made the choice to betray Rumpel and steal his power for her own. So, hypothetically, we can say that everything before that moment of her choice matches exactly with our universe's timeline. It would be way too big a coincidence otherwise."

Emma's nod is stiff. "I can go along with that. But how does it help us find her dagger?"

"Like I said, my mother was obsessed with the transference of power between the royal families." So obsessed she had sold her own daughter into the game just to have but one tiny piece. "Lineage and
marriages and ancestry. Divine rights. All the things her station denied, she fixated upon."

Regina steals herself. Knows this is where she might get herself into trouble. "This Cora clearly had the opportunity for a new fixation." A deep breath. "Being the Dark One, becoming part of an exclusive line of hyper powerful beings with magic that is passed down to those that prove themselves worthy, is exactly the sort of thing she would cling onto. It's something she was willing to rip her heart out for."

Realization dawns quickly over Emma. "So if she needed a place to hide her greatest connection with this new lineage of hers, she'd look to her 'ancestors'."

Regina nods. "She'd hide it somewhere important to them. Significant, but little known. A place of magic and history apparent only to those proved worthy by being part of the line."

Emma releases a long, low sigh. Hollow gaze still fixated on the ground, last few Goldfish forgotten in her limp hand.

"I need your help, Emma," Regina says, soft as she can manage. "I need their help."

The speed with which Emma pushes to her feet makes Regina startle a little. Like a shot of alcohol, Emma brings up her hand to throw back the last of her crackers before wiping her palms on her jeans.

"Don't come near me, don't even talk to me, until I tell you to." Emma catches Regina's eye. Not angry, or arrogant, but stern. Serious. Maybe a little scared. "Okay?"

"Okay," Regina murmurs, nodding too much too fast.

"Okay," Emma says again and then heads further into the field. Past the horse and away from the road until she's at least fifty yards from Regina. It's there she sits cross-legged in the tall grass, hands resting on her thighs, eyes closed and shoulders set.

Well then, apparently they're taking longer than a ten minute break.

- 

Power emanates from Emma where she sits in the grass. Dark and foreboding.

Regina does her best to ignore it. She remains against the tree for awhile, running through the history of Dark Ones in her mind. Had she really pieced anything together in her hours of research? Or had that all been wishful thinking?

It doesn't really matter, she supposes. It's up to Emma now to work out the truth.

- 

The day wears on and Emma hasn't moved. Feeling restless, Regina unsaddles the horse and rubs her down to let her relax properly for the night. After brushing her with the supplies she'd bought off
the stable master and checking her hooves, Regina leads her over to the tree and secures her for the night.

"Henry would want to call you Epona," she tells the mare.

The horse shifts on her feet, snorting a bit.

"Not my favorite either." Regina sets about making camp. Bedrolls spread out, pillows and blankets enlarged. A fire would be nice, but they're not far off from a fairly well populated trail. They shouldn't draw too much attention to themselves unless they want a visit from bandits well into the night.

There's some jerky in their pack. The knowledge that it was likely a sneaky addition from Henry is what makes Regina pull it out. She's never thought much of the taste, but the hearty texture is satisfying and it soothes her nerves to chew on it while thinking of her son.

Will they be back before Cora?

The horse nickers, jerking her head towards Regina.

"A bit needy, are you?" Regina smiles as she wanders over to comb her fingers through the mare's coarse mane. "Don't worry, I'll make sure we set you up comfortably before we leave."

Though it can't understand her meaning, the horse leans into Regina's touch. Clearly soothed by the gentle affection and softness of her words.

"If she was back to her rightful self, Emma would probably call you Argo." Even as she rolls her eyes, Regina finds herself laughing. "Actually I'm certain she would." Her mirth quickly fades. Falls from fondness into an aching sense of loss.

For the life of her she can't ever imagine this new Emma sprawled out on her couch with a bowl of microwave popcorn, forcing Regina to suffer through episode after episode of Xena.

God, Regina will put herself through that mind numbing torture a thousand times over again if they can just make it through this intact. She swears she will.

Another soft nicker, and the horse looks back to bump Regina's elbow with her nose.

Regina sniffs and manages a watery laugh. "You're right, Argo," she says, leaning forward to rest her forehead against the mare's powerful neck. "We'll figure it out."

Argo snorts.

- 

When night fully blankets them, Regina settles on her bedroll. Moonlight shines over the field, and with the help of the stars it offers her a shadowed, hazy outline of Emma, head bowed where she sits in the grass.

There's nothing to do but wait, so Regina curls on her side and pulls Snow's blanket high over her shoulder and watches the unmoving figure of her friend until sleep finally overtakes her.
"Regina." Emma keeps a healthy distance when she calls to her. Uses only her voice, hands firm at her sides while Regina stirs into wakefulness.

"Are you all right?" Regina rubs at her eyes while she sits up, blanket pooling at her hips. It's still dark, so when she's a little more with it Regina calls forth a bit of her magic.

A tiny sphere of light forms over her open palm. Soft, like the glow of a firefly, but wide as an orange by the time she's done feeding it energy. The light it radiates won't draw too much attention, but it's enough Emma's expression becomes clear, free from shadows.

Regina gestures for her to sit, and though Emma complies, she keeps a couple of feet between them. Her gaze is determined, but dull, and her shoulders hang low. There's an overwhelming weariness about her, exhaustion all but radiating from her very being.

Guilt flickers deep in Regina. From afar the process had seemed almost peaceful. To an observer Emma had looked as though she'd spent the day meditating under the warmth of the sun. But it's clear seeing the aftereffects that Regina has only the faintest idea what she'd asked her friend to grapple with. "I can't imagine that was easy."

"Everything was fine as soon as we all agreed that nobody involved is looking to be absorbed into Cora's consciousness."

"I'd wondered," Regina admits. "The promise of her power didn't speak to them- or," Regina winces, "uh, it?" She flushes at the amusement that ghosts across Emma's lips and huffs out a petulant, "Whatever."

"My curse would be overtaken. It wouldn't be in control any longer, lost to Cora's whims." Emma's gaze flickers away. "Self preservation seems to be the biggest motivator at all times. At least as far as I can tell." A rough swallow, cheeks pale. "We should get back on topic before anybody gets upset. For now, we're all in agreement that Cora's dagger needs to be found, let's leave it at that."

"All right." Regina may be stubborn, but she knows a thing or two about self preservation herself. "So what did you learn?"

"Before Gold, there were four other souls consumed by the dark curse." Emma's lips twitch. "But you already know all about that."

Regina blinks at her over their magical light. "You knew what I was doing?"

Emma's gaze brightens, but otherwise the question goes ignored. "I've worked out some of the most important memories of the souls involved. Things Cora might have thought to focus in on. The most recent would be Gold's palace."

"He certainly had enough artifacts around for the dagger to blend in with," Regina allows, "but after so many years abandoned the place could very well have been looted by now. And he was well known to the people. Interacted with them, allowed those who were willing to trade access to his magic." She shakes her head. "His palace is too accessible, and despite the fact that it's the reason he taught her, Cora wouldn't respect how freely he handed magic out to those she deemed unworthy. I think she would look to a past life that wasn't quite so known to the people and-"
"Shut up," Emma snaps, fire and fury and venom. "Don't you fucking talk about-"

Regina stiffens even as Emma suddenly cuts herself off, heart hammering in her chest at the sudden outburst.

Emma's face is screwed up tight, eyes snapped shut and features pinched as her breath comes short and shallow. Regina stares.

Watches as her breathing smooths out. Lengthens into long, slow, practiced movements. Chest moving in a steady rhythm.

In and out and in and out and in again.

"I wasn't talking to you," Emma murmurs. "I'm sorry. I wasn't."

"It's okay," Regina says even though her pulse is still jumping in her throat and it really isn't. "I know." It's not as though she hasn't seen Emma outwardly argue with whatever the curse was throwing at her before. Still- "Do you need me to give you some space?"

At last Emma opens her eyes once more. "I'm sorry," she says again. "I'm just tired of them-" She trails off, pinching the bridge of her nose. "It won't happen again." Another steadying breath. "You're right. If we have no luck anywhere else I don't think we should discount the palace completely, but I doubt Cora would choose it as her first hiding place."

Regina stares at the light, unsure if she should offer up her opinion anymore. Perhaps it's better to just listen. Emma won't get physical with her again, she believes that to her bones. She's not scared, but she doesn't want to make things more difficult for her either.

Whether it's due to lingering resentment or not, Emma's fuse is impossibly short when dealing with Regina these days. They're pushing their luck by having this conversation at all.

"Regina?"

Their eyes meet over the light.

"Are you comfortable enough to continue?"

Despite her better judgement, there's enough of the real Emma - earnest, and sweet, and horribly unsure - shining through that Regina finds herself nodding. "Zoso next."

"Zoso," Emma murmurs. "Yes." She licks her lips, quickly averting her gaze once more. "I think what you said about Gold stands. Zoso was powerful, but he gave up the curse to Gold willingly, and while he did have it he was little more than a puppet. The Duke of the Frontlands controlled him. I don't think Cora would have much respect for him either."

Emma snorts a little then, and mumbles something under her breath that Regina is certain is meant for somebody else in this field. Somebody only Emma can see.

She decides it's safest to pretend she didn't notice. "Honrae?"

"As far as we could figure the only real place of significance to him would be his coffers. But I do think Cora would be drawn to a well respected noble with plenty of riches."

Regina hums her agreement and does her best to tamp down the tiny surge of pride fluttering up in her. She had managed to work out at least some of the links in the chain of the Dark One's history.
"Back when he was fully human though," Emma continues, "he had family. It's likely all of his belongings went to them centuries ago. The dagger wouldn't have been safe there. Cora would know this."

Riding high on the success of Honrae, Regina braves another guess. "So that would take us to Boolan next, right? His village?"

"His cave, I think," Emma says instead. "Isolated, hidden away. Somewhere no living people would know to look." She sounds so impossibly lonely as she speaks. As though she herself is Boolan, reliving the painful decades spent in self-imposed seclusion.

"That sounds like our most promising lead so far," Regina says, gently as she can manage. "We should explore every option though. Work out a list in order of likelihood. What about Analath?"

For some reason, that makes Emma roll her eyes. "Analath was a petulant child. The tombs of her undead soldiers have apparently been repurposed in the centuries since her defeat, and I doubt Cora would feel much of any connection to her presence in the curse. She can be pretty-" Emma falters with a sigh, eyes closed and forehead wrinkled as though an irritating sound is washing over her.

"Undignified," she manages after a moment.

"If you're sure," Regina allows. "Then that would just leave-"

Emma's eyes snap open. "Don't." The word is close to a growl. "They don't-" A great, steadying breath. "We don't talk about her."

It's surreal. The tremble of Emma's limbs, the tightness of her jaw, the light of fear flickering deep in her eyes. Someone as powerful as Emma has proven to be scared of-

Of what?

"Who?" Regina dares. "I couldn't find anything about her. She-"

"We have to keep her away. She has to stay sleeping." Emma's hands find the grass beneath her, fingers curling to clench it between tight fists. The way she swallows is audible. "The dagger won't have anything to do with the Source. Not even Cora would embrace that connection."

This is so beyond frustrating. Emma sitting right in front of her with all the answers and yet unable to share them, to get Regina to truly understand just what they're going up against.

"Okay." What else can she say without setting off the curse yet again? "Well then it sounds like we're headed for Boolan's cave. If that comes up empty I think we should track down some of Honrae's ancestors. Maybe they'll know something."

Her displeasure must be evident because there's a quiet, soft, "I'm sorry."

"Emma," Regina sighs out, heart aching, "I'm the one who should be saying that to you and you know it." And because she's never been all that good at sentiment with anyone beyond her son, she forces a clipped laugh. "I feel like I'm racking up a debt with how often you've saved my life."

Emma turns her head away to avoid Regina's gaze. "I've been spending more time protecting you from myself."

"It's not you. It's never been you." The words go ignored, but Regina's never been one for accepting injustice quietly. "We'll fix it," she vows. "We'll stop Cora and then we'll take you home and Henry will save you, just like you saved him."
Emma doesn’t respond, doesn’t move. She stares at the ground, muscles working in her jaw, features hard in a way that calls out to Regina.

She wants to touch Emma.

To sit beside her and smooth the hard lines of worry from her face. Push past the guarded stoicism and find her friend again, well and truly whole. Emma who laughs easily when they’re alone. Emma who teases and pushes and believes in Regina fiercely like nobody else ever dared.

And without really registering her own movement, she’s there, kneeling in front of the Dark One, hands outstretched. Regina is slow to touch. Out of respect more than caution, she telegraphs her every movement with painful clarity to give Emma the chance to pull away or push her back or speak out against the contact.

Emma is rigid though. Perfectly still as Regina’s tentative fingers brush against her cheek.

"Tell me what you’re thinking," Regina breathes.

Emma stares at her, eyes an impossible blend of amusement and pain. "I’m doing my best not to think about anything." It’s like she chokes on the words as she forces them out.

"What can I do for you, Emma?" It’s more of a plea than anything, and Regina hates how desperate she sounds, how wet her voice is, how Emma’s face is blurring as the tears build up, but she won’t stop. Not even in shame. Not now.

She traces an invisible line from the corner of Emma’s lips to the edge of her jaw. "Anything. Please. Just tell me how I can make this easier for you. Let me help in some way."

It takes a moment to realize that Emma’s shaking. Trembling under Regina’s touch.

"I just want to be here with you." It’s barely a whisper.

"You are. I’m right here."

Emma’s eyes squeeze shut and her brow furrows. "It’s too much." She whimpers. "They’re so loud and I’m so tired. They’re so, so loud. They won’t leave me alone. I just want to be alone with you."

Heart in her throat, Regina urges her on. "What are they saying to you? Why are they so focused on me?"

With a hiccuping sort of gasp, Emma leans forward until their foreheads are pressed together, shakes her head against Regina. "You don’t want to know."

"I’ve overseen beheadings in my time." Regina aims for dry humor, but it doesn’t quite land. “I think I can handle it."

"It’s not-" A pained sound rattles low in Emma’s throat. "I just-"

She’s crying. Regina doesn’t realize it until Emma’s tears roll down against the tips of her fingers, but she’s crying. They’re both crying.

"I think," Emma swallows thickly, "if you really wanted to know what they’re saying to me, why they’re saying it," a watery scoff, "you’re smart enough to have already figured it out."

Everything inside Regina constricts. What? But-
What?

She-

"It's okay." Emma pulls away. She takes Regina's hands in her own and gently guides them away from herself. "I understand. I just-"

"Emma?" Regina breathes, watching wide-eyed as Emma abruptly stands. "Where-"

"I'll be back in the morning," she soothes, hands up as she backs away from the meager light of Regina’s magic. "I promise."

"But-"

She's already gone.
The Truth

Morning finds Regina saddling up Argo while Emma packs their few belongings away. A murky fog hangs in the air, and it leaves her feeling damp and sticky. What she wouldn't give to take a long hot shower.

Doing her best to ignore her discomfort, Regina pushes past the way her shirt clings to her back and how her hair is starting to curl at the ends and how there's a deep burn in her thighs with every step she takes. It's true she hasn't ridden in quite some time, but Regina's actually a little ashamed of how out of practice she's let herself become. These are the aches and pains of a novice.

It's something she'll have to change when they get home.

Regina chances a peek over her shoulder at where Emma's zipping up the backpack. There will be times when she feels so untouchable, so inhuman, and then there will be little moments like now where Emma is just a woman packing a bag, relaxed and unassuming.

"When we're buying a map we should look around the city to see if there's some kind of tent for sale. Sleeping under the stars is all very romantic, but I'm tired of morning dew and bug bites." Regina scratches at a particularly offensive one just above her elbow.

"Maybe." Emma doesn't look at her properly, hasn't since last night. She stands, backpack slung over her shoulders, waiting for Regina to mount up. "So are we going?"

They stick to the one hour of travel, ten minutes of rest routine. It's harder than yesterday. Regina's thighs are really burning now, crying out in protest to the rhythm of Argo's pace, and a dull throb has started up at the base of her spine. Sleeping on the ground night after night can't be helping matters.

At least Emma seems to be flourishing. She's more confident in her movement as she trails after Regina, diligently practicing her technique. The process is smoother today, and lasts longer when she uses her magic to put on a burst of speed. Dashes forward with the aid of her power until she's yards ahead of Argo before rounding back in the blink of an eye.

She's still within the limits of humanity, but closer now to the honed abilities of an Olympic athlete than a small town sheriff that regularly snacks on baked potato chips.

Her improvement is significant enough that Regina suspects Emma spent the night practicing after she'd run off. That dampens her pride a bit. Regina had gone and upset Emma yet again and forced her to miss out on some much needed sleep. All because, what? Regina hadn't been able to stop pushing when Emma clearly needed space?

A stupid mistake she can't seem to stop making.

And now she's distracted while she guides Argo along, mind whirring as she attempts to decode Emma's latest mystery.

If she wanted to know why the curse was so intent on harming her, Emma had said, Regina would
have already figured it out.

Resentment.

It's the only answer. The sole one her mind can muster up.

Emma resents Regina for saddling her with the curse, and the voices in her head are making her react to that resentment with violence. But because Emma is good, she's holding back those desires.

It's obvious, isn't it?

Except Emma herself denies it. Emma said-

Gold said-

It's like a movie in her mind's eye. Emma as the Dark One chatting happily on her lawn with Hook. Emma as the Dark One tenderly cradling her little brother. Emma as the Dark One still capable of laughter, of love, of empathy.

Emma as the Dark One staring down Henry with a cold, ravenous hunger as though she'd like nothing more than to tear him to pieces.

Emma as the Dark One staring down Regina like-

Like-

Regina forces the idea from her head before it can even fully take shape, cheeks warm at her own foolishness. That's not-

It couldn't possibly -

Resentment.

Whether she admits it or not, Emma resents Regina for forcing her to take on the curse. For that, and for everything that came before. For cold shoulders and scathing remarks and a turnover offered neatly in Tupperware with a smile. Everything.

Resentment.

-

By lunch they can make out the strong walls of the city down the road, though it's practically dusk before they reach it's impressive gates, even after they pick up the pace.

There's a stable and paddock just outside, travelers resting against the crooked wooden fence while their mounts graze and relax. Regina houses Argo there. She pays upfront for a total of three weeks simply because she can, and whispers her goodbyes to the horse when the stable master's back is turned.

Once they get their hands on a map, Emma and Regina's combined magic will unfortunately make Argo rather redundant.
The stables are well maintained, and the local animals strong and sturdy. Argo will have a good life here until the three weeks are up and some other traveler with enough coin needs a mount. Hopefully they will be kind.

"Thank you," Regina murmurs, patting Argo's neck one last time. "Good luck."

- Regina's surprised to find the wave of nostalgia that washes over her isn't entirely unpleasant. She certainly never finds herself missing anything about her old life in the Enchanted Forest, but there is something charming about the market they wander through. Stalls packed into every available inch of space, merchants calling to them from every angle. It's been a long time since the Evil Queen has been able to travel through any such place with anonymity.

She almost thinks she might enjoy herself until Emma leans close and mutters a quiet, "Make sure the map clearly shows the East coast of Boholan," before taking off into the crowd, zigging and zagging between the locals until Regina loses her completely.

What the hell? Emma's the one with the memories and locations they need seared into her brain. This should be her job. That brat hadn't even told Regina where to meet up with her afterwards. Is she supposed to just wander the streets after dark and hope they bump into one another?

Regina shakes her head with a sigh. The first step is buying the map. She can worry about what comes next when she gets to it.

- "Boholan? Well that's quite a journey." The heavy set man has to dig around his stall for quite some time. The trailing ends of his long, white mustache tickle the counter as he roots around beneath it, pulling out map after map, unfurling them each before shaking his heavy head and moving on to the next. "On the other side of the continent, that is."

Regina shifts between her feet, doing her best to remain patient as the sun sinks lower and the crowds begin to thin out for the day. It's nearly fifteen minutes before he finds the damn thing.

"Ah ha!" The man gleefully rolls out the map to show off his product. "Beautifully drawn, this is. Very fine quality. Very fine."

It's larger than Emma will probably like, showing both Boholan and the bordering lands of Thokin. But it should work well enough for their purposes. No map will hold the exact location they need. And once their magic gets them on the coast, they'll be able to find their way to the cave from Emma's implanted memories.

In theory, at least.

"Now," the man says, lips quirking beneath his bushy beard as he scoops up the parchment and cradles it close to his chest, "this sort of map is quite rare in these parts, you see. Very unique as
"Just tell me your price," Regina spits out, hand outstretched as she rolls her eyes. "I don't have time to haggle."

Beaming, the man takes in Regina's full purse with an impossibly bright gaze. "Very good, miss. Very good indeed."

Map rolled back up into a tight scroll, Regina tucks it under her arm while she counts out an obscene number of coins as payment. "If I didn't know any better," she drawls as she drops them into his open palm, "I'd think you little better than a common thief."

His smile is as wide as it is insincere. "We're all doing our best to make a humble living, miss."

She has half a mind to chew him out, but it won't be worth it. This isn't her world. Not anymore.

All she needs to worry about now is finding Emma.

"All set?" As though summoned by the thought, Emma appears beside her. She flashes a tight, barely polite smile at the merchant before urging Regina towards a quiet corner of the rapidly emptying market.

"Where-?"

"I got a small tent like you asked." Emma lifts her shoulders to jostle the near-bursting backpack as evidence. "Had to shrink everything down though."

Oh.

Emma glances over her shoulder to make sure they're not being overheard. She leans close. "This jump is going to be a huge drain on our magic," she says in a low voice. "We'll need to rest as soon as we land, and despite my borrowed memories, I don't think it will be easy to find a hidden cliffside cave in the dark. We'll need to wait out the night."

"Right." Regina unfurls the map and they huddle around it. "It's bigger than I'd like," she says apologetically, "but it will get us on the coast at least."

"Then let's-"

"Here?" Regina cuts her off as Emma seems ready to start spell casting in the middle of a crowded city. "Maybe we should head back out to the road. We can find somewhere off to the side where nobody will see us."

Emma raises her eyebrows. "It doesn't matter if they do, it's not like they can follow us."

She does have a point. But if the cave doesn't have the dagger or they end up unable to find it altogether, it probably won't help the rest of their search if wild rumors of two witches performing magic in a marketplace are flying about. They want to draw as little attention to themselves as possible.

Still, arguing with the Dark One hasn't been working well for Regina, so she bites her tongue and resigns herself to putting her faith in her friend's judgement. "All right, then."

"I think we'll be better off if you guide us," Emma offers. "With my track record I'll end up overshooting." She jabs her finger at the parchment, pointing a few centimeters over a peninsula on
the East coast of Boholan. "Focus around here, I'll give you as much juice as you need." She swallows thickly, and takes a deep breath before holding out her hand to Regina.

Regina hesitates for only a moment before accepting, magic already humming by the time their fingers entwine. This time around, there's no life or death urgency when they meld their magic through physical touch. But that doesn't make the way they bolster each other, the way they feed off one another, any less intense.

There's that same fogginess in her mind as the magic takes over. That same raging heat as the sheer amount of Emma's power overwhelms her. Their magic meets and connects and binds and it's all Regina can do to remain conscious and staring at that tiny blank space on the map while Emma races through her veins.

They're glowing. They're light. They're buzzing.

In some vague, distant way Regina half registers how people are staring. How a crowd has started to form, one shifting violently from curiosity to fear as the air distorts. But by the time she can really grasp them, it doesn't matter.

They're already gone and it's just Emma and Regina, gripping tight to one another as they travel through space.

"You're all right."

Regina's back on solid ground before she can fully process the magnitude of the transport. Something that would have been completely impossible were she alone. Her knees rattle together and she starts to fall before steady arms come up around her middle, supporting her weight.

"Easy."

She slumps against Emma's chest, the exhaustion that overwhelms her bone deep and beyond debilitating. To jump kingdoms onto unfamiliar land is-

"Did we-" she slurs.

"We're here," Emma says as the world goes dark. "You did it."

- 

Though she certainly hadn't meant to leave all the heavy lifting to Emma, Regina is hardly going to complain when she blinks awake to find herself sprawled comfortably on her bedroll, their new tent erected around her. The backpack and her boots are neatly upright by the tent flap, and her sweater is still on despite both her and Emma's blankets piled on top of her. As soon as she sits up she registers the drastic temperature drop.

That will be thanks to the ocean, she supposes, if she really had managed to get them to the coast.

Though her limbs protest with every movement, Regina tugs one of the blankets over her shoulders like a cloak and crawls towards the exit to poke her head outside. She's instantly met with an icy blast of wind that stings her cheeks.
"Stay inside." It's well past dark now, and Emma is hunched over a pitiful looking fire, nursing a pot of something as the flames below it threaten to flicker out of existence from every slight change of the wind. "Don't let the heat out."

A part of Regina wants to argue just because she resents being ordered about at all, but goosebumps are already bubbling up on her arms so she slinks back inside the tent. It's a bit better, but Regina can't help but be tempted to warm herself up with some magic as a handful of violent shivers race through her. The aching emptiness of her body warns her away from the idea though. In this state, it's likely even the simplest spell for warmth will have her blacking out again.

So Regina resigns herself to hunkering down with a flashlight Snow had packed for them, teeth chattering while she waits for Emma.

When Emma eventually ducks inside, she brings a blast of cold air and a steaming bowl of what looks to be some kind of stew. Even hunched over, her head grazes the top of the tent before she manages to awkwardly settle on her own bedroll and pass the dish to Regina.

There is a crude looking spoon resting against the rim and Regina uses it to poke around in the stew a little. It's surprisingly thick. A couple pieces of carrot rise to the top when the surface is disturbed, along with what looks to be some potato and-

"Meat?" Regina questions aloud, more than a little surprised. Even in her new form Emma doesn't strike her as the hunting type.

"It's not the freshest, being what was left after a full day in the market," Emma shrugs, "but it's better than we've been doing."

Ah. That explains it then.

Emma maneuvers until she can comfortably sit cross-legged and pins Regina with an expectant look. The tent is small, likely meant for a single person, so their blankets overlap at the corners and their knees knock together if somebody moves too much, but even cramped as it is it's certainly preferable to being outside facing the elements.

"Have whatever you can. It's not healthy for you to eat as little as you have been while we're travelling so much."

"I'm fine," Regina assures her, before quickly adding, "but thank you," at Emma's frown. It's not as though the gesture isn't appreciated. To prove that, she scoops up a heaping spoonful and tries it.

Oh.

The moment the warmth of the stew hits her belly, Regina finally processes just how hungry she is. They haven't had anything properly filling since the tavern, and even then they'd only picked at their meals, too interested in gathering information to focus on anything else.

She's through half the bowl before her stomach gurgles in protest, and she supposes she better give it a moment to settle lest she make herself sick. Emma seems pleased at least, even if the hypocrite isn't eating herself.
Regina wipes at her mouth as delicately as she can manage considering she's using the sleeve of her sweater. Desperate measures and all that. "How are you feeling?"

Emma seems to mull the question over for a time. Outside the wind howls on, beating against the sides of their fragile tent. Regina wonders briefly if Emma had cemented it to the ground with magic to keep the whole thing from being ripped off their heads.

"I'm nervous about tomorrow."

Regina raises her eyebrows. "There's a lot at stake," she allows, "but if the dagger isn't in the cave then we'll keep looking. We won't stop. We'll find it eventually. We have to." Emma's features remain stony, so Regina scoots forward a little to nudge Emma's shin with her knee. "You're supposed to be the one with hope woven into your genes. Don't give up on me before we even start."

"It's not that. We're-" Emma falters, shakes her head. "I- I'm pretty sure it's here." She raises a hand to her heart, presses her palm firm against her chest. "I think I know it is. I think maybe I can almost feel it."

Regina does her best to aim for casual as she knocks bits of potato around her bowl with the spoon. "That's a bad thing?"

"Before we left, Gold talked to me."

The solemn, severe tone of Emma's voice is doing wonders for Regina's anxiety. The day they left she remembers the pair of them, locked in a heated argument that only stopped when Regina had interrupted them with her presence. "I noticed," she admits. "You didn't seem particularly happy about whatever he had to say."

"No," Emma snorts, "but he was right." She turns her head towards the tent flaps as though she's looking through them, beyond them. "Even if we get back home in time, even if we return with her dagger, it's going to be near impossible to take her down."

A tightness forms in Regina's chest. Something that claws its way through until it's climbing her throat, hot and acidic. "But it's like you said," she tries, more than a little desperate, "no matter how strong she gets you'll still be immortal. We can fight. We'll wear her down for as long as we have to. I don't care if it takes years, we're putting an end to this."

Emma studies her, the faint smile on her lips strained, but real. "I don't think it's going to come down to perseverance." She gestures to the bowl. "Keep eating, please. I'm going to be the one backing you up on whatever traps Cora has in store for us tomorrow. You need to be at full strength."

Regina forces down another couple mouthfuls to appease her, but she's not ready to just drop the subject. "There's more that Gold said to you. You're not telling me something."

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"I'm not keeping secrets." Emma's slow, defeated shrug is pitiful. "There's just really no point in discussing it. Gold knows what I'm going to have to do, what the final battle is going to come down to. When the time comes, I'll have to accept it too."

"Whatever this is, I can tell I'm not going to like it." Regina shifts on her side to leave the near empty bowl at the end of the tent next to the backpack before settling back into place. "Talk to me, Emma. Please."

"When Gold rejected Belle and embraced the curse he grew more powerful. We think the same goes for Cora."

Emma looks down at her hands, clenching and relaxing them as though testing their
strength. "When I use magic it's boosted by the power of the curse, but it's still me. My magic. My intent. My will. I haven't given in yet. I'm fighting. Every second of every day I'm fighting while they surround me, screaming at me to give in and realize my true ability."

"What are you saying?" A breathless, awed laugh slips out of Regina. "This is you holding back?"

"Holding the curse back," Emma amends. "It keeps me in check. But on top of the added power from those she's overtaken, there's nothing holding Cora back. You saw what she looked like, right?"

Horrific. Cracks and crevices slashed through the pale skin of her face. A pulsating darkness just beneath the surface waiting to be set free.

"In our timeline at least, every iteration of the Dark One has managed to keep a piece of themselves. Something they've been able to cling to that helps keep them centered, something from their human life. Analath had her sense of justice that drove her actions, Boolan wanted to keep his loved ones safe, Honrae had an obsession with treasures, Zoso a loyalty to his nobleman, Gold his love for and desperation to find his son. Lights in them all, human concerns that the curse could never completely snuff out."

"But Cora is only after power," Regina murmurs as realization dawns. "And she's giving up more and more of herself to get it. There's nothing to ground her."

"Her pursuit is becoming mindless. Soon she'll be without direction or real intent, blindly consuming all in her path." Emma heaves a heavy breath. "Gold says if she keeps this up, she'll surrender herself to the curse completely. It will be in a way no other has before."

Regina swallows. "And what happens then?"

"So far our understanding of a Dark One is that they are a mortal soul inflicted with an immortal curse. It's a struggle. A constant internal battle waged for all time as it's passed on from person to person. But what we're talking about now, is the curse winning that battle. Wholly and completely." Emma catches her eye, the weight of her words clear on her face. "If Cora willingly gives in, she won't be the Dark One anymore. She'll be gone, and in her place we'll have something new entirely. Something we've never faced before."

Regina clenches her fists, nails digging into the skin of her palms. "It doesn't matter," she insists. "We won't let her get to that point. We'll stop her before it comes to that."

A light scoff slips out of Emma. "Maybe. Maybe not. Either way, it'll be a fight."

"Wait," Regina's brow furrows as a thought strikes her, "you never explained why this turned into an argument. You said that when the time comes you'll have to accept-" Regina falters, eyes wide and chest tight as it hits her.

"No. Emma," her voice turns harsh, reminiscent of her days as queen, "that's not an option."

"Having the dagger won't matter if I can't land a hit," Emma explains, surprisingly calm under Regina's clear anger. "She's going to get stronger the more she collects, the more she gives in. I'm going to need every ounce of strength the curse can possibly give me."

"No," Regina barks out. "Emma, the whole point of this, of everything, is that we don't lose you. That's what we've all been fighting for. For you."

There's pain behind the smile Emma offers her. "We're fighting for something bigger. We're fighting
to keep our reality from falling apart. To make sure our son has a safe place to live out his life however he chooses."

"Don't you dare use Henry to shut me up," Regina growls, but Emma ignores the threat in her voice.

She stretches to grab the bowl and tries to press it back into Regina's grasp. "Finish your food," she says. "And then you need to get some rest for tomorrow."

"Fuck your food." Regina snatches the damn thing and tosses it out the tent flap. "I don't care if you're some all powerful immortal god now. You don't get to act like you're so high above us you can just make these kinds of decisions on your own." She doesn't remember her tears forming. Doesn't remember the prickle at the backs of her eyes or her throat going tight. But she feels them now, warm and sticky on her cheeks. "We're supposed to be a team," she forces out. "We're supposed to."

"Regina," Emma sighs, eyes averted, "just-

"We're supposed to be a family."

The word itself seems to physically strike Emma, and with the state she's in all Regina can think is good. The asshole fucking deserves it.

"You can't do this to us - to me. I-" it catches in her throat. "I can't be the reason this happens to you. Please. Don't make me the reason. I can't-"

"Regina," Emma's hands tremble as she lifts them, as though it's taking all of her restraint to keep them slow moving and nonthreatening. "None of this is your fault."

Regina shakes her head, eyes stinging now. "It is. I-"

"If it hadn't been you, it would have been somebody else. You know no matter who it was, I wouldn't have walked away." Her shaky fingers find Regina's hands, her hair, her cheeks. "But it was you, and that makes it better. That makes it so easy."

Regina stares at her, throat burning, heart hammering against her chest as she waits for -

"You make it a choice I can never regret," Emma's eyes are wide and earnest and pleading with Regina to understand this simple truth, "and since I've been cursed that thought has saved me a thousand times over."

Regina can't help it. Not with Emma's thumb brushing her cheek and the ache in her heart and that lingering idea that maybe, just maybe- She leans forward. "I just want you to come home." It's an almost petulant whisper. Close to a whine. "I just want this to be over."

Emma pulls back a bit, gaze wary, but not unkind. "You need to rest," she insists again, declaring the argument over.

Either way they'll need the dagger, so Regina decides to let it go for now. They're both too emotional. There's too much risk of their conversation going wrong. Besides, she'll still have time to help Emma see what a complete idiot she's being. She'll find a way to stop this if it kills her.
"You rest too," Regina demands as she lays down and gets situated under her blanket. She shoves the second one in Emma's direction.

"I don't need to rest."

"No," Regina allows with a grumble, "but you're less of an asshole when you do."

Emma watches her with the eyes of a predator. Sharp gaze absorbing every minuscule movement as Regina curls onto her side, huddled in on herself for warmth. It's enough to stand the hair on the back of Regina's neck on end, even as she does her best to ignore it.

"Besides," she says as casually as she can manage, "you're helping keep the temperature in here up." Maybe it's a little sneaky, but against all odds Emma seems intent on looking after her. Regina knows she won't walk away if she feels like she can help.

The ploy works, though Emma dutifully drapes her blanket back over Regina before laying down beside her, stiff and uncertain in a way that would be endearing if it didn't make Regina want to pull her hair out so much.

She rolls her eyes. "This is getting pretty old, you know." Regina scoots forward until they're both under the blankets together, on their sides, breath mingling between them as they stare one another down, each waiting for the other to make the next move.

For a moment, Emma's eyes flutter shut, and Regina wonders if it's over. If she's about to go to sleep and put an end to the unspoken words bubbling just under the surface of their conversation. If they'll wake up in the morning and revert, business as usual.

But then Emma whispers, "I hate this," so quietly that Regina would have missed it if she wasn't just a few measly inches away. Close enough to feel the heat of the words on her skin. "This shouldn't be-" Emma cuts herself off, her eyes snapping open. She lifts a trembling hand. "I just want-

Regina leans into the tentative fingers that trail along her cheek. "What do you want?" she murmurs, buzzing, humming, thrumming. Because if Emma is telling the truth, if she doesn't loathe Regina, then logically there's only one answer left.

Then logically she must-

Emma's gaze dances between Regina's eyes and her lips, pained longing leaking through, so uncharacteristically gentle it calls to Regina. Tugs her forward in a desperate bid for more.

But before their lips can so much as brush, Emma stiffens and jerks away. Not enough to break all contact, but a clear avoidance nonetheless.

Regina swallows down the embarrassment that burns through her, but when she tries to put more distance between them - to roll over and clamp her eyes shut and pretend the idiotic notion of a kiss had never struck her at all - she's not allowed to retreat very far. Emma's hand finds her hip under the blanket and she holds Regina against her, a gentle enough grip to pull out of, but solid enough that Regina thinks maybe this isn't all in her head after all.

Slowly, carefully, Emma curls closer until their foreheads are pressed together, but keeps their mouths pointedly apart.

"What do you want?" Regina breathes against her again, anticipation and frustration bubbling up a confusing cocktail in the pit of her stomach. She's not used to such mixed signals. Not used to passion without clear intent.
"I want you to be safe."

"I'm safe with you."

Emma laughs a little, but it's wet and half-formed and sounds more distraught than anything. She's shaking. Quivering against Regina with raw, restless energy like she can hardly hold herself back from-

God, Regina can't even tell right now if Emma's desperate to fuck her or murder her.

It's so bizarre. Surreal. So intense, yet oddly detached in the way Emma's been since her return. There's a cold distance between them, and even though Emma isn't pushing her away, she's not initiating anything either. She's lying there, gaze sharp and determined as she waits for Regina to- to choose.

Regina realizes then what's happening. The hand on her hip is permission, the mouth hovering near hers, but never touching, is her boundary.

No kissing.

For what reason? The promise of a soulmate? The heart of a pirate? Does the cheating not count if they're in another universe under another sky alone on a rocky coastline?

That doesn't make sense. It's ridiculous. Stupid. But it has to be Emma's thought process or else-

Or else-

Regina swallows as she dares to draw a hesitant line with the very tip of her finger. From the hollow at the base of Emma's throat across the length of her collarbone around the back of her neck until she's tracing her hairline. Emma's eyes clamp shut, throat working overtime as shivers run through her.

Or else

Or else Emma must think that Regina's kiss might be the thing to break her curse.

A sudden rushing urge to kiss her overwhelms Regina. Just to try it. Just to see. Just to be sure. But if it does work-

Emma would be helpless. Defenseless, just like the rest of them. Cora would return and wipe them all out and everything they've worked for would be destroyed.

If it worked...

But it won't.

It can't.

It's impossible.

Even if Emma felt-

It still wouldn't matter because of all Regina's done. Because of everything she's been. As if a kiss from the likes of Regina could ever-

Henry.
She kissed her son once and had ended a curse. She isn't completely broken. There is something kind still inside her, somewhere. Some glimmer of goodness buried deep left weakly flickering.

To break the darkest of curses though?

No, not Regina.

How could she succeed where someone as kind and good as Belle had failed?

No.

Emma's salvation lies in someone pure. Someone innocent.

Henry.

Henry will be her savior.

It's stupid, but that burning is back. Regina squeezes her eyes shut and ducks her head. Drops it against Emma's chest, all but burrowing against her. "I'd save you if I could." A thick, watery promise.

Emma's arms tighten around her, hand moving from her hip to run up Regina's back.

It starts a slow, soothing pattern there, rubbing up and down her spine, back and forth in the silence that follows. They stay like that for a long time. Until Regina's left half asleep against her, drowsy and sluggish.

"I won't," she thinks Emma says, only just barely able to register the words as sleep creeps up on her. "Never."

What does that mean?

Regina wants to ask, means to, but she doesn't think she manages to get the words out beyond an unintelligible grumble. Emma's chest jostles Regina a bit as soft laughter runs through her. Though as soon as the mirth comes, it's abruptly silenced.

"You're the weak one." Emma's voice is tight, harsh, and the last thing Regina realizes as she drifts off is that Emma isn't speaking to her at all. "I didn't let you have her before, you won't take her now."
When Regina stirs in the morning, shifting under the heavy blankets, she's pleasantly surprised to find the weight of Emma's arm still around her as she blinks into alertness. So far Emma has gone with a one step forward, thirty steps back approach when it comes to their interactions. After last night- well, Regina wouldn't have been surprised to wake up with Emma nowhere to be found to be quite honest.

"We should get moving as soon as possible." Emma's features are drawn as she looks down on Regina, her jaw tight, the bags around her eyes deep and dark as though she's been like this all night. Desperate for closeness while the darkness screams around her.

Regina risks lifting a hand to trail gentle fingers along Emma's cheek. Emma swallows thickly, but doesn't flinch or pull away.

"Did you get any sleep at all last night?"

"Some," Emma says. It's a clear lie, but Regina doesn't call her on it.

Emma leans down, presses their foreheads together and breathes deep. "Do you feel up to heading to the cave? I don't want to try unless you have full access to your magic."

Regina does her best to quell the fluttering in her stomach before she reverts into the stammering, flushing mess she'd been last night. "I'll be fine."

The strained smile Emma flashes her is backed by a tender affection that makes Regina want to scream. The urge to grab Emma is overwhelming. To shake her and shout and force her to reveal if this can be real. If the curse could possibly want somebody like Regina dead because she's still, after all this time, a threat.

If the inkling of attraction that started to grow in Neverland - before Hook and Hood and the expectations of the masses - has still been flourishing all these years. If it is possible, somehow, in some way, for someone like Emma to care for someone like the Evil Queen enough that a dark curse might want her out of the picture.

But Regina doesn't do any of that. Instead she sighs and pulls out of Emma's arms and sets about packing up.

"It's so different," Emma murmurs for the third time as they wander the coastline.

They're on a high cliff, carefully navigating the rocky terrain as they head North. There's a sandy beach a couple hundred feet below, but apparently the whole landscape is somewhat changed from Emma's borrowed memories. Centuries of erosion and storms working against them.

There's not much Regina can do to help, so she trails Emma, arms wrapped around her middle to fend off the cold while her hair whips about her face. "Maybe we should transport ourselves down by the water to get a look at the cliff face from a different angle."
"The sand's soft, it will tire us out. Let's stay up here for another mile at least."

It feels a bit silly not to change up their strategy, but Regina really isn't interested in trudging through sand for hours on end so she keeps her mouth shut.

The day wears on. Instead of breaking for lunch as usual, they snack on the go, passing a baggy of almonds Snow packed between themselves. It gets easier as the afternoon sun finally breaks through the clouds, warming Regina considerably whenever the wind eases up.

Another two hours pass before they seem to make progress.

"There." Emma stops short suddenly, jutting a finger out over the water at a collection rocks. "See the tall on in the middle there? That's what Honrae used as a marker when he traveled this way with his company. They camped on the beach across from it, and then the cave was only a couple hundred yards off."

It's an imposing figure. Awkwardly shaped, but smooth from the persistent crashing of the waves. Seabirds circle it, screeching over where it stands tall, a spire. A beacon.

"Come on." Emma grabs for her hand, and then in a swirl of magic they're on the beach below.

"Warning would be nice," Regina grumbles as she shakes off her disorientation at the sudden transport.

"Sorry." Emma's not looking at her though. Back to the ocean, her eyes scan the cliffside. "We should hurry if we want to beat sunset. Let's go."

Emma drops her hand and hurries forward, her gait unsteady in the shifting sand. Regina has to set a brisk pace just to keep up. "Be careful, Emma. Don't forget Cora probably set plenty of traps."

"I know," Emma says, but keeps moving at a speed that suggests she won't be taking the warning to heart. They're too close now for caution. Too close to saving their family for common sense to hold much weight.

Regina understands her urgency, feels it too, worming its way under her skin and dragging her towards certain danger. But she has to be the levelheaded one. Has to keep them both from stupid mistakes.

It's cold down by the water, but the wind doesn't hit them as hard down here. Despite the sand sliding beneath their feet, it makes the trip easier. Regina finds she prefers being exhausted to half-frozen.

"I can feel it," Emma calls over her shoulder from a couple feet ahead. "There." She points out a good sized tide pool down the way. It takes a few minutes more to reach it, and when Regina finally catches up Emma is rocking on her heels, impatient and jittery.

The pool is impressive now that they can fully look upon it. Twenty feet wide at least, though with plenty of dips and shallows and craggy rocks jutting out.

A bright starfish clings to one, just under the surface near Regina's foot, and dozens of bright plants she can't properly name decorate the bottom. What she imagines to be sponges and barnacles and whatever else thrives in seawater. She even thinks she sees a horseshoe crab scuttle by in the distance and for a moment is taken back to more pleasant days tailing an over excited Henry as he toddled through the shallows of the harbor.
"See where the inlet carves into the cliff?" Emma's finger traces the jagged curve. "See how deep it is? And then there, that gap between the cliff and the surface?"

Regina hums, eyes tracing the line of the water where it rests under the rocks. The pool is darker there, and the gap is pronounced enough she can see where this is going.

"The cave had to be hidden." Emma's tone is apologetic as she explains it, as though she can read Regina's mind. "He wanted to keep out his family. He wanted to keep out all temptation."

"Until Honrae showed up."

"Yes." Emma holds out her hand respectfully this time around instead of just grabbing for Regina. "I remember enough of the layout I think I can transport us in side."

"Here's hoping you don't magic us into a rock." Regina takes her hand, squeezes her eyes tight, and prays for the best.

Nothing happens.

A frustrated growl slips out of Emma. Regina turns to look at her and finds her features twisted up in anger. "Cora placed a barrier around it. No transporting by magic in or out."

"Well," Regina shrugs as Emma drops her hand, "it's not surprising."

"No," Emma agrees, "but it's going to make this a hell of a lot colder."

"Wha-" But Regina's question dies in her throat as her worst fear is realized.

Emma drops the backpack in the sand with a muted thud and strips out of her coat.

Fuck.

They're going swimming.

Her displeasure must show on her face because Emma laughs a little while she unzips her jeans. "You can wait outside. I won't force you."

"I'm not going to work on my tan while you face down whatever horrors my mother cooked up," Regina grumbles, resigning herself to her fate. Reluctantly, she starts to disrobe as well.

"You have been looking a bit paler since I got back."

When Regina finally manages to wrestle her way out of her oversized sweater she's met with teasing mischief gleaming in a half-naked Emma's eyes. Her jeans are gone and her boots are kicked off and Regina averts her gaze as she does her best not to think about just how see through those white cotton panties will be after a trip through the water.

"Must be all the unnecessary stress you keep forcing on me." As she tugs down her own pants she thanks whatever higher power exists that her underwear is black.

"You're sure you know the way, right?" Regina eyes the small gap under the rocks suspiciously, voice wavering. "I'm a decent swimmer but I'll admit it's been awhile. I'm not sure how long I can hold my breath."

Another low chuckle sounds and before Regina can blink, Emma's in her space, fingers gently trailing along either side of her neck to leave a pleasant buzz in their wake. Regina shivers under the
unexpected attention, stepping forward on instinct alone to press closer against Emma. Her entire body humming as so much skin connects. More than ever allowed before.

Legs and thighs and arms. Their chests press together, only Emma's tanktop and the thin material of her own undershirt getting in the way.

She feels young locking her eyes with Emma like this, their warm breath mingling in the air in what little space resides between them. Young and giddy, meeting in a secret cove on a secret beach with the secret lover she was never meant to do anything but loathe.

In seconds Emma shatters the fantasy, stepping away and dropping her hands. The buzzing sensation on her neck remains, and Regina at last recognizes it not as attraction, but magic.

Bringing up her own hands to explore, she finds sensitive grooves under her searching fingers. Not full on gills, no, but a temporary mimicry to see her through until she reaches the other side of their journey unscathed.

"It won't be long," Emma assures her with a tight smile, "but just in case you start to get uncomfortable."

"Thank you," Regina murmurs, but Emma is already wading into the pool.

It's a dangerous venture, especially barefoot like they are. Regina hisses as the cold water laps at her thighs and steps carefully to avoid sharp rocks and jagged coral. Scraps and bruises can be healed with magic, but the pain that comes with them is never pleasant.

She keeps sliding on algae, nose wrinkling in disgust as the goopy substance squelches between her toes, and she's beyond done with the whole experience as soon as it starts. Despite the frigid temperature, It's almost a relief when they're close enough to the bottom of the cliff that the water licks over Regina's hips, up her waist, around her stomach, under her breasts.

The deeper they get, the sooner this will be over.

Emma reaches the cliffside first, feeling about the rocks under the water until she's certain she's found the proper entryway. "I'll make sure we have enough light," she says, glancing over her shoulder at Regina where she stands, arms wrapped around herself, shuddering violently. "If you feel like you need to breathe, stay calm. Keep your mouth closed and mimic slow deep breaths like you're breathing out your nose, okay?"

Teeth chattering, Regina nods.

Emma takes a deep breath, and slips below the surface of the water. Regina whines a little before committing herself to following. A greedy gulp of air, and then down she goes.

The shock of the chilly water enveloping her completely nearly steals the air from her lungs, but she manages to focus on the blurry figure of Emma just in front of her and push herself forward.

Her eyes burn. The salt in the water is easier to stomach than the chlorine of a public pool, but it's still uncomfortable. Her features twist up at the pain and she does her best to ignore it as she pushes off the mossy rock that she'd been balancing on.

There's a narrow crevice under the water. Emma's summoned a light with her magic, a small sphere that floats just over her palm, and it highlights the tiny pathway. A discrete crack running through the rocks that Emma uses her free hand to drag herself through.
As soon has her legs disappear inside, Regina follows.

It's worse when she's moving, the dull throbbing of her eyes becoming a sharper sting. Regina grits her teeth and pulls herself through the passageway. The jagged rocks curl tightly enough around them they graze her uncomfortably as she passes by. Tickling her stomach and trailing against her limbs.

She hates it. Hates the claustrophobic darkness. Hates how the rocks seem to close in around her, predators trapping their helpless prey, even though her rational mind knows they're stagnant and lifeless. The air she has left seems insufficient now in this small space.

It's dark.

It's too dark.

She can't see.

She's alone.

The world is a hazy blur and her eyes burn like they're on fire.

The rocks are pressing in around her. She can feel them.

They're not tickling anymore. Not teasing.

They're pressing, digging, pinning. Pinning her in place. She can feel them digging into her wrists and pressing into her thighs and pinning down her thrashing legs.

She tries to swim forward. Jerking and writhing in the water but it's hopeless. Useless. She's trapped.

The rocks are moving.

They're alive.

Wretched, hateful things that want to keep her with them forever. Hug her tight between their stones and never let her go. They press and press and press. Tighter and tighter.

She has to be bleeding by now. She must be.

Her skin is torn, shredded by the jutting angles. Her bones are aching, creaking in protest at the force of the pressure. At the way there's a rock digging into her calf and another pressing into her shin and it's going to snap-

She's going to snap.

Regina reaches out frantically, fingers scrambling for purchase on the slippery stones. She latches on and pulls with all her might.

Free.

She has to get free.

But the rocks won't let her go. They latch on and her body screams as they scrape across what's left of her skin. She's raw and exposed. She's dying. She must be dying because she's torn to shreds and her bones are brittle under this weight and she can't breathe.
God.

She just wants to breathe. Has to breathe. Needs fresh air in her lungs and light on her face and-

Light.

Emma's light.

Through the murk and the haze and the emptiness she can see that light.

Emma.

Mouth closed, just like breathing through her nose.

Her chest rises and falls, her lungs tricked by Emma's magic to think they're being fed healthy doses of oxygen.

Regina stills, snatching what's left of her composure and refusing to let it go. She grips the rocks closing in around her and drags her battered body through the impossibly small crevice.

Except it's not impossible.

It's actually quite easy.

A narrow passage, yes, but certainly wide enough for a woman of her size.

Her body isn't battered. Her flesh isn't torn.

She's safe. She's safe and she's swimming. Strong and sure, moving towards Emma's light between rocky walls that don't so much as graze her skin.

They break the surface of the water at the same time, their greedy gasps echoing off the walls of the cavern they've found their way into.

"Motherfucker," Emma spits out, rough and strained and it's enough to have Regina let out a manic bubble of laughter at the massive understatement. "That was some nasty magic."

An illusion spell by Cora to twist the minds of any unwanted explorers into thinking they were trapped. To trick completely free people into drowning themselves by inaction.

"One for one," Regina offers through her chattering teeth.

Emma frowns. "Let's get you out of the water."

Her light hovers above the water and trails forward to guide their way until there's a solid surface for them to pull themselves onto. The world around the faint glow it offers is surrounded by shadow, the sound of their every move magnified as it bounces off the walls back at them.

The uneven, rough ground they drag themselves onto is slick with slime and god knows what else, but Regina can't bring herself to care much about hygiene. Anything is preferable to spending
another minute in that water, the cold and Cora's magic doing all it can to seep the life out of her.

"Come here." Emma scoots over to Regina and wraps her arms around her shivering frame, collecting her close to her chest.

Regina hums as warmth floods through her. First from Emma's body, then from her magic. Slowly easing into her limbs with a gentle buzzing heat, careful not to overwhelm her lest she's sent into shock.

The most prideful parts of her want to remind Emma she's perfectly capable of using her own magic for this, but she can't deny the joint effort is much more appealing as her shuddering lessens and she's left warm and content in Emma's embrace.

"Hmm." The frown is clear in Emma's hum.

"What?"

"I tried to summon our clothes, just to see. But there's nothing."

"Oh good," Regina drawls against her, "I always wanted to traverse a dark cave barefoot in my underwear."

Emma's laughter is forced and she pulls away as though just remembering the state they're in. She pushes to her feet, and her jaw is set when she reaches down a steadying hand to pull Regina to hers. When Regina's standing, Emma still keeps hold of her.

"I don't know what's next, but we need to make sure we can't be separated. Don't let go."

Regina nods. "I'll lead. Keep your light in front of me but down near hip level. We need to see the ground in case she drew any wards."

The skin around her eyes feels tight and dry, her hair stringy, and the rough rocks below them threaten to slice into the soft pads of her feet at the slightest misstep. "Did I mention this is one of the worst experiences of my life?" She laughs. "And that's saying something."

Emma gives her hand a little squeeze.

- 

The deep pool they popped out of isn't very wide, rimmed by a narrow ledge of algae covered rocks that are difficult to navigate even by the light of Emma's magic. They press their backs to the wall and have to sidle by at some points until they're finally free of the water's edge.

The passageway carved into the wall in front of them is mercifully wide, but their light only pierces the darkness so far and the long, makeshift hall quickly stretches into an abyss of nothing. Regina swallows thickly and dares a step forward.

The light goes out.

It's dark.

Completely dark.
"Emma?"

"I can't-"

Oh.

Regina tries too. Lifts her free hand to summon up a ball of light, but as soon as it flickers into existence, it's snuffed out. Faint traces of Cora's magic hum in the air. Winking anything she tries to conjure out of existence before it can truly take shape.

She tries again. And again. And-

"It's not working."

Oh.

It's dark.

_Really_ dark.

The kind of darkness that ceases to exist in a world of lamps and light switches.


It's the feel of Emma's palm pressed against hers that cuts through Regina's momentary hesitation. The idea of Henry waiting anxiously back home. The thought Blue destroyed and Mal's skull on a pike and a tear in the universe threatening to consume them all.

Whatever Cora has waiting for them in that darkness is nothing compared to all they stand to lose if they don't face it.

A deep breath, and she yet again takes the plunge. Steps into the shadows not knowing what will come next.
The Cave

"You know what I keep thinking about?" It's had to have been at least fifteen minutes since they started stumbling through the cave over every sudden dip and rise, free hands pressed to the wall desperate for any sort of guide. "There's a flashlight in the front pocket of the backpack. It's just sitting there on the beach. Waterproof and ready to go."

Regina snorts. "There were stories in the old world about that, you know. Tales of overconfident witches who relied so heavily on their magic for mundane things they brought about their own downfall."

"Now she tells me."

Despite everything, a smirk tugs at Regina's lips.

"This is a little strange, isn't it?" Emma continues. "It's been so long and we've just been walking in a straight line. Shouldn't there already been an, I don't know, branching path or a booby trap or, like, an ambush?"

"I'm trying not to think about it actually," Regina says. "Just keep on your guard. Whatever comes, comes."

"Right."

- It's at least another half hour of mindless shuffling through the dark, searching fingers tracing the slimy cave walls for guidance, when Emma finally speaks again.

"This is wrong."

"I know," Regina says.

"The cave shouldn't be this big. We should have hit another of Cora's traps by now."

Regina swallows. "I think we might already be in the trap." She slows to a stop, Emma coming up beside her. "It's not any spell I know, but I think we're meant to wander ourselves to death in this darkness."

"An illusion?"

"An enchantment, maybe. That could be why our light went out the moment we stepped into it. She's turned the pathway into some kind of loop. It feels like we could walk on forever and never reach the end."

"How do we break it?"

"Awareness is key. Now that we know we're trapped, hypothetically we can just push our way out with enough force."
"But-?" Emma needles, sensing her uncertainty.

"But I'm not sure if this is an enchantment. If the walls around us are magic or real stone." She chews on her lower lip, weighing the risks. "If I'm wrong, this could bring the whole cave down on our heads."

In the dark like this, Regina can't make out Emma's expression. Her silence betrays her hesitation though.

Silence, and then, "You won't be wrong."

Regina hopes not anyway. In other circumstances Emma's blind faith would be flattering, but now-

A deep breath. Regina puts a tentative, trembling hand flat on the wall, grips Emma tightly with the other. "Give me everything you've got," she echoes their meeting from just days before.

Emma snorts a little and then her magic is flooding Regina. Pouring inside from where they're physically connected. She latches onto it with her own power, forcing the energy into a usable shape. Regina sends it against the wall, beating into the barrier she prays is magic constructed by her mother and not simply stone supporting the ceiling above them.

A hole. She imagines puncturing a tiny hole in the wall with their power. One that grows, cracks crawling through the barrier in a spiny pattern like a spider web until the whole thing shatters like glass.

It does.

The world shimmers around them, the facade fading into reality. Taking a chance, Regina holds her hand palm up and summons some light. This one isn't snuffed out.

They can see now. The true cave is more natural than a single straight path. It's a winding thing, with dips and curves and indents and hollows.

"Hopefully that's the end of it." Emma steps forward and conjures a light of her own, towing Regina along behind her as she sets off. "It won't be long now."

Regina lets herself be led, trying her best not to think about her sore feet or just what sorts of multi-legged insects might be skittering near her toes. She'd always relished the natural world as a child, the freedom it might sometimes afford her, but this is too much.

Emma guides her around a sharp bend, ignoring the path laid out before them. "I know this place," she says.

The cave widens a bit as they walk, growing larger and larger until it spills them out into what looks to be a decent sized, round room. Regina stumbles as she steps on something softer than stone. Something that splinters under her heel.

"Careful," Emma whispers. "Maybe don't look down."

Of course Regina has to. Has to trail her gaze to the ground and lower her light for a better look and take in the horror surrounding them.

Bones.

Hundreds - thousands - of small animal bones caking the floor, scattered about beneath them and
"Cora?"

"Boolan." Emma tugs on her arm a little, urging Regina into motion once more. "Sometimes he'd leave at night when it got-" She falters, swallows. "I think hunting, eating - just a mouse or a squirrel - it made him feel real. Like he was somehow still alive even after being here for all those years."

They move more slowly now. Carefully stepping around the debris, forced to toe their way through to find free ground when there proved to be too much. To keep her mind off of the gruesome task Regina lets her eyes wander and finds her attention instantly pulled to the wall to their right.

"Emma," she murmurs, shifting direction suddenly. Emma hesitates for a moment, but lets herself be dragged to the side of the room without resistance. "Look at this." Regina squats, holding her light aloft to uncover more of the clumsy, chalky lines scraped against stone.

Drawings.

People. Tiny stick figures in groups. A bear. A deer. The grass and the sun and some crude birds in the sky. A village.

His family.

Regina traces her fingers over them. A mother and a father and two younger siblings. "He was just a boy, wasn't he? Just a child."

Emma shifts to squat beside her. "He sang a lot," she says. "And when he got tired of his old songs he created new ones. Ones he thought his mother might like."

A thickness in her throat, Regina tears her eyes away from the clear sorrow etched into the walls and focuses on Emma instead. "Is he telling you that?"

Emma frowns. "It's not him. Not really." She shakes her head. "I think they're more like imprints. Memories of what came before. The curse using an echo to connect with me in a more human way I can understand." A half-shrug. "At least, as far as I can guess."

The weight of being here is real though, Regina can see it in the droop of Emma's shoulders and the pained longing of her features. Boolan is sad, and so Emma is sad, and whether it's a manipulation of the curse or not, the effects are clearly tangible.

"Let's keep moving."

Emma nods and stands and Regina grips her hand to pull herself up. As she follows Emma she tries not to think of how, under the right circumstance, this might have been her. Emma Swan taking on the curse to save her family and then hiding herself away from the world to keep them all safe. Putting herself through years upon years of torture in the name of noble self sacrifice.

It's exactly what she would have done, Regina knows. What she had been trying to do.

Two months of no contact. Hidden away from the world. Isolated. Alone. Until Henry had been in danger and needed a savior.

What songs would Emma have sung in her isolation? What would she have carved into the walls of whatever prison she made for herself?
Regina squeezes Emma's palm and Emma, absent and unknowing, squeezes back.

"Here," Emma says as they carefully pick their way through the bones, "this is where he would-" she trails off as her light falls upon the far wall of the room, illuminating their treasure at last, "-rest."

It's not a jagged, ugly dagger that lays in the withered bed of grass and leaves that had once belonged to Boolan. It's a sword. Dark steel and sharp edges, Cora's name etched just below the hilt.

"Why is it so different?" Regina asks where they stop a few paces away from it, as though the wretched thing might leap up and attack them of its own accord.

"I don't know." Emma dares a half-step closer. "Maybe because of the others? I don't know how many she absorbed. They could have changed the dagger too." She doesn't sound confident in the conclusion, but Regina can't really think of a better explanation.

"I can't feel anything magical but the dagger. Do you?"

Regina shakes her head. "I don't see any wards either. But she wouldn't leave it just sitting out like this. We're missing something."

"Well," Emma sighs, "we won't know until we try and take it." She releases Regina and steps forward on her own.

"Be careful," Regina says, rather lamely as if Emma doesn't already know. But she's feeling anxious and itchy and useless and there's not really much else she can do. She's forced to just watch as Emma tentatively approaches the blade, hand outstretched.

Her breath catches in her throat when Emma leans down to brush her fingers against the hilt. Nothing happens.

Emma peeks back over her shoulder at Regina and shrugs before scooping up the sword. It's long, almost obnoxiously so, but still small enough to be classified as a one handed weapon by Regina's limited knowledge. She watches cautiously as Emma gives it a few lazy test swings.

"Kind of anticlimactic, no?" Emma almost looks amused. "Guess she figured nobody would get through the other stuff."

Regina doesn't tempt fate by acknowledging that. "Let's just get out of here. Come o-"

A sickly squelching cuts her off. They turn together at the wet splat that sounds out, peering into the shadows beyond the rim of their meager lights.

Something moves.

"What is that?" Emma whispers.

"I don't think we should wait around to figure it out," Regina replies.

"Right," Emma says, nudging her arm against Regina's to urge her back the way they'd come, "we should-"

Another splatter, but this time behind them. Something thick and damp and sticky oozing in the darkness.

And then another to the left.
Another to the right.

More and more fall like rain around them, just beyond their sight.

"Go," Emma barks, tight and high. "Just start moving."

Emma's light blinks out of existence when Regina grips the conjuring hand, the other wrapped tightly around Cora's sword. She holds her own light aloft as she races for the exit, tripping over bones that cut into the soft pads of her feet and desperately ignoring the movement around them drawing ever closer. They're so close to the winding cave path, just a few paces away.

Something falls from the ceiling just in front of them, and they skid to a graceless stop. A foot away lays something of a puddle, though it's thick and has volume without borders. A viscous, putrid looking thing that's a deep, midnight blue flecked with spots of silver like far away pictures of the galaxy.

It moves.

Slides forward smoothly over rock and bone, leaving a slick trail in its wake.

"What the fuck is that?" Emma breathes.

"I don't know." All Regina does know is that it's moving towards them, body rippling, more surrounding them from all sides.

Emma pulls away and pushes past her, holds up a hand, palm facing the creature. A burst of magical flames shoots out to consume the thing, and an ungodly shriek echoes off the walls as it burns. Body charring from blue to gray to black.

Emma doesn't stop her assault until a shriveled husk is all that remains.

"Good," Regina gives her back a little push, "keep mo-"

Emma lets out a cry of alarm as another creature springs from the side, latching onto her outstretched arm and wrapping its near liquid form around her.

"What the fuck?" Cora's sword clatters to the ground as Emma frantically tries to bat the ooze away. But the moment her free hand touches it, it's pulled in as well as the monster spreads. Sliding down to encase her fingers and climbing upwards to swallow her biceps.

"Emma-" Regina takes a cautious step forward, reaching out a hand.

"Don't," Emma shouts even as she struggles to break free. "Don't touch it. We have to- magic. Use magic."

Regina can see a faint light flickering beneath the gel-like body of the creature, but Emma's magic seems to be swallowed up as soon as it's produced. Maybe it has to come from the outside?

Regina raises her hands and tries to magically lift the creature off Emma. She tries to throw it. To slam it into the far wall. To transport it away. But the damned thing sticks fast and they're running out of time.

It's climbing up to Emma's shoulders now, somehow expanding while its brothers and sisters squelch about the cave around them.

Nothing works. Nothing but-
"Emma," Regina says as she knows what she has to do, "I'm sorry."

The panic in Emma's eyes gives way to understanding the instant fire springs to life in Regina's palm. "Do it," she grits out.

A deep breath and Regina lights Emma's arms on fire.

The creature screeches just like the first. Its pained wails near deafening. Regina doesn't stop though. She keeps on the pressure until it's shriveled and dead and it falls to the floor, charred and lifeless.

"That's enough," Emma whimpers as the flames lick her bare skin. "It's done."

Regina drops the spell and despite her pain, Emma quickly scoops up Cora's sword once more as sickening gurgles close in around them.

"Get out of here," Emma shouts, shoving Regina roughly for the hall. "Go!"

They're running, feet pounding on the harsh ground as the horrid little blob monsters spring after them. Regina can hear the gulp of their coil, the squich, squelch, squish of their boneless bodies smacking against the stone.

Emma shoots fire behind them at random as they sprint through the winding cave while Regina takes care of the ones that pop up in front. Shrieks and screams surround them, but as many as they take out, more only seem to pop up in their place. Dripping down from the ceiling and oozing up out of the ground and flowing freely from the walls.

There's too much. Too many. As soon as one falls dead five more take its place.

One leaps for Regina and she hits it in mid flight, but another uses her distraction to wrap around her leg. It's cool and slimy and she instantly knows its aim as it begins a slow ascent. To climb up her thighs and her chest, to crawl into her mouth and fill her lungs until she's suffocated from the inside out.

"Dammit." She stops to aim at her leg, palm open and ready to summon her fire. But another lunges and wraps itself around her hand before she can conjure so much as a spark. "Fuck."

She instinctively twists to look back at Emma for aid but finds the other woman worse off than she is. A hip encased and a leg near completely consumed.

"Move," Emma shouts and Regina ducks out of the way as one leaps for her head. Seemingly on instinct, Emma slices through it with Cora's sword and cuts it clean in two. There's no scream this time around, and no blood as it falls to the floor.

Instead, the halves twitch, and then start moving towards them again, duplicated instead of destroyed.

"Shit." Emma switches back to fire to free Regina's hand, not stopping until Regina can feel her skin start to dry up and crack in protest under the onslaught.

It doesn't matter when the creature falls off though, because another has already latched onto her shoulder. Behind her, Emma yelps as yet another clings to her back.

"There are too many," Regina yells as cold, slime seeps around her throat. "We won't make it."

"Give me your hand," Emma says, already grasping blindly.

Regina reaches for her, frantic fingers clawing at one another before they manage to get a firm grip.
As soon as they touch, Regina feels her magic sapped, Emma leeching off of her to build up something big. Something powerful. Something Regina's only felt once before.

Something Cora's cave would have no protection against because it shouldn't be possible.

Just like before, the portal barely flickers into existence. Weak at first, the barest imprint of a gateway before growing into something solid. The air splits and the magic expands until a swirling vortex of raw energy shimmers in front of them.

As if they know escape is near, the creatures seem to grow more aggressive. Most lunge for Emma as she produces such powerful magic. They bounce about, gripping onto Regina's thigh, to Emma's calf, to Regina's back, to Emma's neck.

It's there. Freedom is right there in front of them but they can't reach it. Can't fucking move.

Regina tries. Tries so hard. But her legs are locked and her ribs tight where the monsters constrict around them. It's getting harder to breathe and she doesn't dare look at Emma. Doesn't dare witness the life being squeezed out of her-

Oh god, Henry's going to be looking for them, always. Waiting for his mothers to return home for the rest of his life.

Emma drops her hand and for one, heartstopping moment - even knowing it's impossible while the curse still resides within her - Regina thinks she must be dead.

Then there's light. So much light.

And heat. Uncomfortable, suffocating heat.

Emma is on fire.

She's enveloped in flame, the creatures shrieking and crying as they drop off one by one with sickening thuds onto the ground.

Emma drops the spell as soon as she's free, but the damage is done. Her skin raw and red, her limbs shaky. The portal flickers a bit, growing unstable in her weakness, and though Emma's free, the monsters are not done.

They're endless and hungry, desperate to feed.

New ones, freshly spawned from the walls of the cave, leap for Emma, but she ignores them as they latch onto her legs and grip at her thighs. She reaches for Regina, frees her hands with hot fire and presses Cora's sword into her trembling grip.

"Go," she screams, voice hoarse and pained as she shoves Regina towards the portal where it wavers in the air, threatening to blink out of existence altogether before they can even use it.

A monster leeches onto Emma's back, another grips her throat, crawling slowly up and up and up until it tickles the bottom of her jaw.

"Emma," Regina screeches, "don't."

But it's already too late. Emma gives her a hard push and then Regina's falling through time and space.

"Oof."

The landing stings, Regina's back throbbing as she finds herself sprawled out in the middle of quiet, pristine Main Street, just where they had left. Cora's sword clatters unceremoniously to the pavement. Above Regina, the swirling portal lets out a hiss and promptly snaps shut.

Emma is gone.
"No. No. No."

Regina pushes up onto her palms, ignoring the ache in her back as she watches the creatures that still cling to her skin disintegrate. Their bodies dissolving into nothing as soon as they're fully cut off from the life source of Cora's magic.

As much of a relief as it is to freely wiggle her toes again, muscles in her calves able to flex and relax without restraint, Regina doesn't dwell for long. Her attention shifts to the place where the portal had just vanished.

"Emma," she growls, heart still hammering in her chest, "you idiot. Come on. Don't be so dramatic. Just get over here."

Nothing happens. The sky doesn't open up. Emma doesn't drop down onto the road beside her with a dull thud.

"Fuck." Regina makes to stand, but her feet sting where they shift against the pavement. She takes a moment to run her fingers over the soles of her bare feet, healing the scrapes and cuts she acquired while sprinting through that damn cave.

The burns come next. They're all superficial for the most part. Bright pink skin on her exposed legs and patchy redness on her arms. Nothing greater than second degree by her notice, and it all heals up nicely under the attention of her magic.

God, what a sight the mayor must be, half-naked in the middle of Main Street tending to self inflicted burns.

She pauses, confused. If Regina knows anything, she knows her town and just how insufferably nosy all its residents are. She should have drawn a crowd by now. At the very least a car should have tried to pass her where she's blocking the way.

But it's quiet. Sun shining brightly. Birds in the sky and leaves rattling across the pavement from the biting October breeze.

Scrambling to her feet, Regina spins about. No people on the sidewalk. No cars on the road. Not a single soul behind any of the shop windows surrounding her.

The town is completely deserted.

"What the hell?" Regina seeks out the face of the clock tower. Nearly a quarter past one, it reads. Everything should be open. People should be everywhere. What happened to them all?

Henry.

Without stopping to think, Regina stoops to snatch up Cora's sword and transports herself home in a flurry of magic.

"Henry," she shouts as soon as her feet hit the polished hardwood of her foyer. She stumbles gracelessly for the stairs, the tip of Cora's sword clanking against the banister repeatedly as she dashes to the top. "Henry? Are you here?" Her voice is high and shrill and all she can see in her mind is her little boy making a stand, the false savior Rumpelstiltskin ready to cut him down to keep
Robin's fake marriage in motion.

He's not here. She knows it before she even bursts through his door to find his room empty. Bed sheets messy and spare clothes scattered on the floor.

But where is he? School? What day of the week is it?

Even if he was in class, that wouldn't explain the state of the rest of the town.

Regina races for her room next. She'd left her purse on the dresser before she and Emma had left, her phone too. Things that would be of no use to them in another universe. The few seconds it takes to power the device on are agonizing, Regina gripping it so tight that for a brief moment she's afraid she might crack the screen.

She has to find Henry. Has to make sure their son is safe. Has to get Blue or Gold or Maleficent or anyone who can help her bring Emma home. There's no time to waste. No time for this stupid *fucking* phone to flash all of its asinine logos before letting her make one *fucking* phone call and-

At last her lock screen shows and she quickly drags her thumb through Henry's birthday. As soon as her contacts pop up she clicks on his smiling face. "Come on," she mutters, needing desperately to hear his voice.

Her stomach plummets as two tones sound out. One in her ear, the other somewhere in the house. "No," she whines, heart constricting. "No. Come on, dammit."

Regina follows the upbeat ringtone back to Henry's room and finds his cellphone on his desk, plugged into a wall charger at one hundred percent battery.

Don't panic. It doesn't mean anything. It's not proof that he's hurt. Only that he's gone.

Breathing deep to ward off the panic that threatens to overwhelm her, Regina snatches one of Henry's oversized hoodies from the floor and rushes back to her room.


She can do this. They've faced so much worse together. Overcame so much more.

They can survive this, all of them.

Thanks to the curse, Emma can't die. They can bring her home. Henry is fine, so many had been looking after him.

It's all going to be okay.

She has Henry's sweatshirt if she has to locate him by magic, but first she needs to get herself to Snow's. That's the most likely place her son would be. She tosses the sword onto her bed and then throws the hoodie over her head, pushing up the sleeves a little so her hands don't get lost inside.

Pants. She needs pants too.

The first pair of slacks she finds, she jams herself into them, all but hoping back to the bed as she fiddles with the buttons and zipper.

It's probably not smart to be running around town while swinging about the only way to defeat their current enemy, so she wraps the decorative throw from the bottom of her bed around the sword in
hopes of disguising it a little.

Snatching up the bundle in her arms, she dials Snow's number. Phone trapped between her shoulder and ear, she makes for the door. As soon as she steps off the plush carpet of her room onto the hardwood of the hall, she rolls her eyes at herself.

She needs to calm down if she doesn't want to start making stupid mistakes.

The phone rings and rings and rings while Regina sticks her feet into the first shoes in her closet that don't have heels, before going to voicemail.

Okay. Deep breath. It's getting to be a struggle, but she musters up the power to transport herself to the loft. Before she even opens her eyes after the unsteady landing, she instinctively knows it's just as empty as her own home.

"Shit." She redials Snow's number as she hunts through the apartment for any clues on their whereabouts. There's no sign of a fight, which is a relief, but there's an eerie feeling of interruption that has her on edge.

A pot of cold water on the stove intended for boiling the opened box of Ziti beside it. The washer light on, signaling the end of it's cycle, a heap of damp clothes still inside. A book on the floor by the couch, splayed open, pages bent.

Something happened that interrupted Snow and David one night. Something unexpected.

Had Cora already come for them all? Did she wipe out everyone in town and then move on to conquer the next universe?

But why leave the buildings completely intact? There are no signs of struggle.

No, they're fine. Everyone is fine.

Regina heads to the tiny kitchen to steal a glass from the cupboard. She greedily gulps down a cup and a half of tap water before grabbing one of Snow's many cardigans from the back of a chair. They'll be together, she knows. As long as the very worst hasn't happened, Henry, Snow, David and Neal will be together. No question.

"Okay," Regina breathes, screwing up her features as she pumps her magic into the clothing, "take me to them."

The magic it takes to transport home to grab her car almost pushes Regina past her limits, but it's a much more preferable alternative to chasing the locator spell all across town on foot. She does her best to remain calm in the stifling quiet of the car. Her nails dig into the plush material of the steering wheel, her gaze darting about hunting for any sign of life as she follows her magic to Snow.

There are no cars on the street, no people in their yards or wandering the sidewalks.

But it's okay. It's going to be fine. She's going to find her family, and then they're going to get Emma back and then-
She glances at the bundled up sword resting against the passenger seat.

And then this is going to be over, once and for all.

- 

There's no harm in speeding with the roads so clear, so Regina finds herself at her destination in a little over fifteen minutes. It's here, at last, that she finds life.

The hospital is all but overflowing with it. The parking lot is full to bursting, cars parked haphazardly outside the designated lines and up on the grass, some doors left open as though their passengers dashed out in a rush. The traffic spills out into the street, and Regina winds up having to throw her car into park in the middle of the road a good hundred feet from lot.

She gets out and jogs the rest of the way, sword clutched tightly to her chest. Just as she makes to step into the lot, she runs smack into an invisible barrier. It doesn't hurt anything but her pride when she stumbles back with a little yelp of surprise, but her skin tingles where the foreign magic washed over it.

Maleficent. Regina can feel her energy in the protective barrier quiet clearly. Blue's, too. There's a third unfamiliar magic mixed in as well. That must be Lily.

Across the lot, one of the many doors at the front of the hospital inches open. David's head peeks out, and it's almost comical how he squints at her in suspicion for a moment before his features light up.

"It's Regina," he cries with delight to someone inside, and then he's running, sprinting towards her at full speed while others pour out the door behind him.

The crowd and their breathless, expectant faces would be overwhelming if not for the circumstance. But Regina doesn't really have the energy to delve through her emotions at seeing unadulterated joy on the faces of those who once cursed her very existence. Not when she still doesn't know where her son is and Emma is trapped in another world, immortal and endlessly suffering.

David and Snow stand in front of her, looking rather ragged yet giddy like young children at her arrival. Blue stands behind them, gaze mistrustful as ever, but the handful of dwarves Regina never bothered to learn the names of look pleased to see her. Ruby is there too, and Granny stands back at the door of the hospital, holding it open with her foot as she watches them, ridiculous crossbow in hand.

"Hurry," Snow says instead of any sort of greeting, "we have to get her inside, Blue. There's no time."

The fairy makes no move to take down the barrier though, her eyes narrowed. "It could be a trick. How do we know this is really Regina?"

Oh for fuck's sake. Regina scowls at the posturing of the uppity bitch who dares to stand between her and where she's sure her son waits. "Because I'm two seconds away from setting you on fire, you insufferable bug." Regina slaps her palm against the protective shield and it shimmers in protest. "Now let me in before I'm forced to tear the barrier down myself just to have a clear shot at you."
Snow's sigh is as fond as it is exasperated. "That's Regina. Let her in."

Blue reluctantly lifts her hands, clearly still suspicious, but Regina doesn't care. She ducks into the small opening the fairy creates in the barrier as soon as it's wide enough and rushes Snow and David.

"You need to gather up every single person we know who has magic." She thrusts the bundled up sword into David's arms and he squeaks a little under the shock of the weight of it.

"Wha-" The question trails off as he drops the blanket to reveal the impressive weapon. "Wow," he breathes, staring up at the tip in wonder. "Cora never does anything halfway does she?"

Snow ignores the blade altogether. "Where is Emma?" Her eyes are hard on Regina. "Why isn't she with you?"

Fists tight at her sides, Regina breathes deep. "Cora was ready for anyone who might try and take her dagger."

Snow's features are already twisted up in horror at those few words alone.

"Emma is the only reason I made it back home alive." Regina pointedly avoids her pleading gaze.

"But she's-" Snow breaks before she can even finish the question.

"Emma." Devastation coats the single word David manages to produce. His eyes are wide with disbelief.

"She immortal," Regina reminds them all as the rest of the group - finished with watching the shield be resealed - closes in to listen, heartbroken, eager faces focused on her. "She won't be dead. She can't be dead. She's just waiting. And now we're going to track down every single magic user in this town to pool our power together and get her back."

She looks to Blue. "I want you, Maleficent, Lily, and anyone else the three of you can think of. We might not be able to sustain a full gateway for long, but all we need is to be able to break through long enough to grab Emma and pull her back. I think we can do it."

Regina's not sure. Not even close to sure, really. But Snow nods frantically in support, cheeks glistening.

"Of course you can." Her assurances sound more like prayer. "Of course."

"Where is Henry?" Regina presses. Unable to wait a moment longer, she sets off for the hospital before her companions even have the chance to reply.

Snow and David hurriedly scramble after her, the rest staying behind with Blue to likely discuss just who might be able to help them with their makeshift portal.

"Most of the kids are up on the third floor," Snow says, a little breathless as she struggles to keep pace on shorter legs.

"We've been doing our best to keep them occupied," David adds.

Regina offers an absent hum as they squeeze past Granny to get inside and immediately head for the stairwell, weaving through the dozens of citizens milling about the lobby. "What's going on exactly? I assume everyone is hiding out because she already returned?"

For the umpteenth time in her life, Regina finds herself cursing her mother and just how single
minded she is. For her to leave and return so quickly, hellbent on bringing down the universe that had dared to resist her.

"She's been back for a little over a week now," Snow says as they round the second floor landing and continue their climb to the third, "and-

"A week?" Regina stops short. "We were gone for a few days. We-" She sighs, running a hand through her tangled hair, fingers snagging in the knots she hasn't found the time to comb out. "Time must move more quickly here. We only camped out for three nights in the other universe."

"Is that even possible?" Davids asks, face scrunched up in confusion.

"After all we've been through lately I'd say anything is possible," Snow says.

It's an idea, but it will take someone far better versed in mathematics than Regina to work out the precise calculations.

Regina shakes away the thought for the time being and continues up the stairs. The logistics don't matter right now. All that matters is getting Emma home. But first-

"Mom!"

Word must have reached the third floor of her arrival because the children of Storybrooke are gathered around and Henry is waiting to rush her as soon as she opens the stairwell door. He wraps around her and squeezes so tight her breath hitches a little.

"It's been so long I thought-" He doesn't finish the thought, voice lost as he buries himself against the sweater she'd swiped from him.

"Never." Rocking a bit, she holds him against her chest, fingers running through his hair as she whispers soothing assurances. "I'm fine, sweetheart. Everyone is going to be fine."


According to Henry, Regina and Emma left town nearly three weeks ago. Just over one week ago, a portal opened up by the harbor and Cora emerged, powered up and spoiling for a fight. Jason and Emilio, two unlucky dockworkers, were in her line of vision and hadn't lived to tell the tale.

Chaos and panic erupted. More lives were taken, but until the crisis is over and they are able to get a proper census, officially there is no body count as of yet. In the hours that followed Snow and her closest friends had been able to get word out for everyone to gather at the hospital, Storybrooke's largest public building.

Under the protection of Blue and Maleficent, the majority of the town was able to safely hunker down together to wait out this newest attack. Not everyone had made it inside before the barrier was erected, and the first few days of hiding saw plenty of stragglers pounding against the magical wall with desperation.

After careful screening they were allowed through, but it wasn't long before Cora found out what they were up to and began skulking about the perimeter of their protection, lunging at the wall here and there, testing the shield for weakness.
"It was so scary, Mom," Henry says. "I'd be up all night watching the shield light up every time she threw her magic into it. I kept waiting for the time it would just break." A grimace pulls at his lips. "But then she disappeared again, and that was even worse."

"She can't hurt you here," Regina assures him, gripping his hand tight. "I'll never let her hurt you."

Though she wants nothing more than to sit and rest and hold Henry close, Emma is still trapped, suffering, and Maleficent finds them, beckoning Regina to a secluded corner so they can chat. Regina leaves Henry with his grandparents and follows her rather ragged looking friend.

Exhaustion oozes off Maleficent. The strain of keeping such a powerful barrier in place for an extended period of time is clear, and Regina's sure Blue would look just as haggard should she care to really study the fairy. It would seem even here, in this protective bubble, they have a time limit.

"We need Emma," Maleficent says as soon as they're as isolated as they can expect to be in an overcrowded hospital. "She's all Cora cares about. We've been using glamour spells on my daughter to give her brief sightings so she wouldn't realize where you'd gone and try to hunt you down, but I don't think that will keep her satisfied for much longer." She clutches Regina's arm, eyes hard and solemn. "Our power is waning and the hospital isn't equipped to sustain this many people for this length of time. The second Cora realizes Emma isn't here she'll raze Storybrooke to the ground and we won't have the strength left to stop her."

Regina swallows. "If we can just manage to get a portal open-"

"Darling," Maleficent's words are a soft, almost pitying sigh, "it's all we can do to keep this place protected. You asking us for an impossible portal is as good as a death sentence for everyone inside."

 Fuck .

She hates it, but Regina knows Maleficent is right. According to Henry, Cora is waiting for them to waver. They'll just be giving her an opening to attack. She'll rush them as soon as she has the chance and there won't be any way to stop her.

"Wait-" Regina murmurs, "I was outside the shield for awhile. I've been running all over town to find you. I was using magic without trying to mask my presence at all. Why didn't Cora come after me? That doesn't make sense."

Maleficent frowns. "We can't be certain, we no longer have any eyes outside the hospital, but we think she may have left again. She hasn't been here to test the shield in days."

"Impossible," Regina scoffs. "No way she would just give up over a weakening protection spell."

"We think maybe she's collecting more power to be able to break in here, or maybe biding her time until we lose our strength or are lulled into a false sense of security."

"Then we have time," Regina urges. "If she's not even here we can pull together, drop the shield, and open a portal to Emma. As soon as we get her home we'll put all the protection back in place. Emma and I can help make it even stronger."

"There's no guarantee Cora isn't merely laying low in the forest waiting for us to drop our guard just like that. We can't take that risk."

"We have to."

"What we have to do is stay smart."
"I can't just leave her there," Regina snaps. "She's dying."

It's too loud. The words burst out of Regina in a great rush as she tries to get Maleficent to understand. As she tries to get her to see just what horror Emma must be suffering. She's not just trapped in another universe. Emma is trapped in that cave, Cora's magic doing all it can to snuff the life out of her, but unable to finish the deed while the curse keeps her breathing.

They have no idea what that must feel like. On the cusp of death, but still going because of the unnatural influence of magic. Agony. The way those magical beasts tried to crush them, to smother the life from their lungs. God. Emma must be in such agony.

"Regina?"

Too loud. Regina was too loud, and she turns to find them all looking at her. Children and their parents alike. Strangers. Her family. Her son.

"Mom?" Henry takes a shaky step forward, licking his lips. "What's happening to her? Why did she have to stay behind?"

Behind him, David places a hand on Henry's shoulder. He gives a gentle squeeze. Snow is there too, watching Regina with wet, wide eyes that betray how much she hates wanting to know the details. How desperate she is to know everything about her daughter yet still enjoy the bliss of ignorance.

Regina swallows. "She-" Her voice cracks and she clears her throat to try again. "Emma-"

The very air in front of her splits, everyone in the room leaping back, pressing themselves as close to the walls as they can manage as a buzzing portal flickers weakly to life. For one horrible, heart-stopping moment Regina thinks of Cora, finally strong enough to bust her way inside the protection of the hospital. Their shield protects them from those with malicious intent however, and in the end it isn't an alternate version of her mother stepping out of the magic, ready to bend the world to her will.

No. Instead it's a charred, misshapen lump of flesh that tumbles from the gateway, landing on the hard tile floor with a sickening slap. Regina watches in horror the familiar sight of Cora's creatures dissolving as the portal snaps shut, and knows then what the unrecognizable, twitching mass on the floor must be.

Who it must be.
Hello!

I didn't want to be too gratuitous and/or graphic with the descriptions here so I tried to keep it relatively vague. The intent is to get the point across without making anybody too grossed out haha. If I played it too safe and in turn made it unclear as to what is actually happening please let me know so I can come back and fix it up thanks!

"Emma!"

Snow White's anguished scream is the thing to break the hush that cloaks the room. As soon as it pierces the air, the explosion of sound and movement is overwhelming.

Children shout in a youthful blend of excitement and fear while the adults try to corral them away from the gruesome sight. Snow rushes for her daughter blindly, but David thankfully has the sense to wrap an arm around Henry's waist and drag his squirming, struggling form into the stairwell before the boy can see too much.

The stench is the worst part. Acrid. Sulfur and charcoal overtaking her every sense. Even worse than the sight of the body's weak, shuddering crawl. Even worse than the sound of crisp, raw skin scraping along hard tile.

It doesn't feel real. None of it feels real.

Snow sobbing as she hovers over what should so obviously be a corpse, afraid to touch, to help, but unable to leave. Maleficent frozen and stiff and murmuring over and over about, "the barrier," how, "she can't have gotten inside the barrier."

There are doctors in coats. Nurses too. A stretcher. They're yelling at each other. Cursing the civilians that stand close and crane their necks instead of clearing the way.

Regina's drowning in it all. The sounds and the sights and the doctor who shoves roughly past her unmovning form. Why are they all so loud?

"Careful!"

"Support her head!"

"Get back there!"

There's screaming. Sharp, echoing screaming. It takes Regina a moment to really register the sound. To realize it's Emma, twisting and writhing in complete agony as what's left of her is lifted to the stretcher.

Someone to her left doubles over and throws up in the middle of the hall.

"Everyone, clear out!" David is back, his eyes hard and his voice cutting as Regina has never heard
"Calm down." Since when has Gold been here? He's hovering around the hospital staff now, following them as they attempt to wheel Emma away. "Just get her something for the pain. The curse will do the rest, none of this can do her any real harm, you'll only be wasting supplies. Just do whatever you have to to get rid of the pain."

Emma's screaming. Her body thrashing as though she's still on fire. The doctors dodging the flailing limbs of a woman who is meant to be dead, but finds herself unable to die.

"-na?"

It's faint, but through the ringing in her ears Regina manages to register Maleficent's voice. She blinks at the woman beside her, dazed and unsteady.

"Regina?"

Her name sounds clearer now, more real. And the syllables actually match the movements of Maleficent's lips.

"Come on, darling." A hand on her back and soft, soft eyes. "Let's get you somewhere quiet. Let's sit you down."

Based on the little pop up travel crib they pass on the way in, Regina thinks it's safe to assume Maleficent lead her into the room Snow and David have been using throughout their stay. judging by the cots and sleeping bags Regina's found strewn about for most everyone else since her arrival, it would seem it really does pay to be royalty, even as removed as they are from the concept of monarchy while in Storybrooke.

Maleficent helps her out of her clothes and gets her into a shower that never manages to get past lukewarm even when Regina twists the knob as far as it will go towards 'H'. It doesn't matter. She can barely feel the weak stream raining down on her one way or the other. She merely sits on the built in bench meant for the safety of patients and stares at the far wall until enough time passes that Maleficent returns for her, concern etched into her features.

"I just left her," Regina says, eyes still fixed on the wall in front of her. It's a sort of beige color, paler in the places where the water beats against it. "She pushed me through, and I knew what was happening, but I couldn't do anything to stop her. I just left."

Twisting off the water, Maleficent reaches for one of the hospital's towels to drape around Regina's shoulders. It's thin and scratchy, but Regina grips it and wraps herself up tight anyhow. She doesn't resist when she's pulled to her feet and brought back out into the small room.

"You need sleep."

Regina stands wrapped in her flimsy towel as Maleficent takes a cheap comb to her hair. She winces every time it catches on a tangled knot, teeth harshly working through the snarls.

"I know it seems selfish, but there's nothing to do but wait for the curse to work its magic. It may
take time, but she'll heal. You need to be getting your strength back as well." Maleficent sets down the comb and takes back the towel, bunching it around Regina's hair a few times to soak up the excess moisture until she's satisfied enough to back away.

Numbly, Regina reaches for her discarded clothes. Her undershirt is stiff with seawater. Her underwear too. The texture is incredibly unappealing after finally getting clean, and her energy is too sapped for magical washing. So she ignores them and pulls on her pants from home instead, tugging Henry's sweater over her bare chest just to make herself decent and warm up some.

"Rest," Maleficent orders as she guides her towards the bed with a gentle hand on her back. "I'll find something for you to eat."

Maybe it should feel a bit weird to crawl into the tiny bed Snow and David must be snuggling up together on every night, but Regina finds herself too drained to care. She closes her eyes and sees a shriveled corpse, blackened with magical flame and writhing in the center of an overcrowded room.

"I'm sorry," she whispers as Maleficent flicks the switch by the door to turn out the light.

"I know," Maleficent says. "She knows."

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Regina sits cross-legged on the floor against the wall beside Henry, a tray balancing on her knees. The mashed potatoes are easily identifiable, but whatever hunk of meat rests beside them is a complete mystery. It's too brown on the outside and too pink in the middle and absolutely drowning in the colored water they're trying to pass off as gravy.

The only thing in front of her she trusts to put in her mouth is her dinner roll, but Henry snatches it when he leans against her, pinching off bits of crust to nibble on likely just to have something to do with his hands while the adults argue around him. She can't fault him for that, and lets the theft go without complaint.

David is standing against the far wall, a teary Snow leaning against his chest, wrapped in a comforting embrace while Neal naps in his travel crib. Belle and Gold sit on the edge of the tiny hospital bed, looking pensive, and Hook prowls the room like a trapped animal. Restless and angry.

There's a limp to his walk. His shoulders are stiff as he moves, as though he's in pain, and his face looks as though he's undergone a thorough beating Regina hasn't found the opportunity to ask anyone about just yet. Emma and everyone's safety are the priority now, Regina can find out who bruised the captain's pouty face and congratulate them later.

At least it's easier to focus now. The shower wasn't as revitalizing as it should have been. Not in the cold, clinical hospital where Henry is so scared and confused and Emma is in so much pain and the entire town is waiting on Regina for what comes next. As though she possibly has any sort of answer that will save them.

Still, at the very least she - or Maleficent, really - was able to run a comb through her hair and she doesn't smell like stale ocean anymore. That's about as much of a win as Regina can expect under current circumstances.

"We don't know how long Emma's recovery will take," Maleficent says. She's leaning against the
wall beside where Regina sits, and her eyes track Hook's pacing, ever wary. "We need to be ready in case she's not conscious when Cora returns."

"It won't be long," Gold assures them, his frustration with their lack of comprehension clear. Despite his protests, the doctors taking care of Emma had put her in urgent care, doing their absolute best to stitch Emma's burned, battered flesh back together. "The curse's entire purpose is preservation. All of its power will be put towards getting her back on her feet as soon as possible."

"Still," Maleficent says dryly, "we don't have the luxury of resting on our laurels. In a matter of life and death, I don't think it's unfair of me to say putting all our hopes in waiting for a savior to leap in and win the day is more than a little idiotic."

"Not when that savior is the only one who can possibly handle the threat," Gold snipes back through a sneer.

Belle calms him with a gentle hand on his arm.

"You both have valid points," Snow cuts in, ever the peacemaker even in her grief. "Dagger or no, we can't challenge Cora without Emma. But we can't just wait around for her to wake up either. I think the most important thing to do is focus on bolstering our defenses. Now that we have Regina back we can add her magic to strengthen the shield. Or switch out her power for someone else's so people can have a chance to rest. Work on a sort of rotation so nobody's magic gets too drained." Her eyes flick from Maleficent to Regina and back again. "That could work, right?"

"We'll make it work," Regina promises, if only to lessen the despair in her eyes.

"You're all delusional." Hook stands in the center of the room, an ugly sneer on his split lips, blackened eye seeming to shine under the harsh lights of the hospital room. He jabs a finger at Cora's sword where it rests on the bed, all powerful and yet so completely unassuming.

"You think anyone can get close enough to stick her? You've never faced anything like this before." Beneath the sharp laughter and bravado, genuine fear haunts Hook's every word. "Nobody stands a chance. Not me. Not any of you. Not the savior." He snorts without humor. "Not even a Dark One."

Something like amusement flickers across Gold's features. "All due respect," he drawls, "you were hardly equipped to be challenging Cora in the first place. Sending in someone like Emma, who actually has the ability to match her power, is a different story."

It's too much. Regina can't take the smug way he says it. Like it's some kind of victory. Her mind knows Gold's attitude is only meant as a slight towards Hook, but her heart aches with the knowledge of what this man who has already stolen so much from her, intends to take from Emma.

"She told me what you said." Regina glares at Gold, clenching the loose fabric of Henry's sweater in tight fists to keep from doing anything she'll regret. "You told her to let go."

His eyes widen a little. Clearly the bastard hadn't expected Emma to be so forthcoming.

"You told her that's the only way she can win." Everyone watches as she and Rumpel stare one another down. "You'd sacrifice her to save yourself."

He's quiet for a time. Remorseful. It's clear in the slow droop of his shoulders and the set of his jaw. Not malicious or triumphant. It's not some scheme. It's how he truly believes this must play out, and he regrets it, in his own quiet way.

Regina's hands relax as she accepts that remorse.

Nobody is allowed in to see Emma, not yet. So Regina, seeing that Henry is just about as restless as she feels, asks him to take a walk with her. They wander the bottom three floors in an aimless, directionless way.

The fourth floor is where the few patients already in the hospital before all this started have been moved, while all the healthy folks have stuffed themselves into the rest of the available space. Luckily Storybrooke is small enough that there weren't too many patients that were disrupted, and their immediate families were welcomed up to stay with them as well.

Henry takes her arm as they walk together, and points out everything he's helped build in his time here. How he got together with some of the other kids to make a makeshift sort of playroom for the little ones. They pooled together toys and books and had even used some extra blankets they'd found to hang off the backs of waiting room chairs and make a fort.

"We try to keep the younger ones out of everyone's way. Some of them don't really get why we're all stuck here and there were a lot of toddler temper tantrums for awhile."

Regina can't help but chuckle at his exasperated tone. A child playing at being a world-weary adult. "I'm sure the parents really appreciate that, sweetheart."

He shrugs like it's not as big of a deal as it is. Like it should be a given that he sacrifice what's left of his childhood like this because she's never managed to give him the average, mundane life he deserves.

Heart clenching in her chest, Regina tugs him along. "I'm just so glad to see you safe. When I got here to find the house deserted and nobody was answering their phones, I thought the worst had happened."

Henry winces a bit. "Everything happened so fast I didn't even think to grab my phone when Grandma and Grandpa took me away. They woke me up in the middle of the night and it was just like go, go, go, you know?"

She nods through the tightness of her throat and presses closer against his side.

"I'm pretty sure they both had their phones, but most stuff has died by now," he carries on. "There are chargers floating around, but it can be hard to pin them down. It's kind of nice though," he adds with a smile, "everyone's really generous when you ask for stuff. Everyone's really been doing their best to help each other out."

"I'm glad." Regina returns his gentle smile. "That's nice to hear." She hesitates as they round the corner and head down a dead end, walking down to the windows at the far wall before looping around again. "So, it just happened in the middle of the night? You didn't know Cora was back before you took you here?"

"Well, we were all waiting," Henry says with a shrug. "We knew it was just a matter of time. I was more worried about you guys though. I knew it would take awhile to find her dagger, but every day felt so long. I hated not knowing what was happening." He snorts a little.
"And Grandma isn't exactly relaxing to live with when she's worried. She had me even more stressed out about everything than I already was." He mimics the fretful little whines Snow tends to make when something she doesn't like is happening beyond her control. "All day all night it's all I heard," Henry says through a laugh.

Regina hums her amusement. "That certainly sounds like Snow."

"Anyways," Henry continues, sobering some, "I guess the portal opened in the night when I was already asleep. Grandma had people watching all the time. We set up shifts around town to keep an eye out for any portals that might open, and Blue and Maleficent were always feeling for magic. Like I said before, she showed up by the docks." He frowns, voice quiet. "I guess a bunch of people didn't make it."

Regina slips her arm out from his to wrap it around his shoulders and give him a comforting squeeze. "We won't let her hurt anyone else."

"I know." He lightens up a little, the hint of a smile on his lips. "Hook tried to take her on all by himself."

Regina raises her eyebrows. Well that explains the state of him. "I see that didn't go well."

Henry leans close and whispers like he's imparting a great secret. "Grandpa Gold said his ego was hurt more than anything else."

She bites back her laughter in the hopes that it will make her a better parent. "He lived and he's safe now, that's what's important."

"I think he probably couldn't stand not being the big hero." Henry rolls his eyes. "Even though we all tried to tell him what would happen."

Regina sighs. "Henry, we're all upset and on edge right now. People like Hook, people like me, we're not very good at handling those kinds of emotions. We both don't like feeling powerless or under someone else's control. Sometimes it makes us do ridiculous things we later regret. Dangerous things, even when deep down we know better."

Henry frowns down at the floor as they amble on. "I wish you'd stop lumping the two of you together all of the time. He only cares about himself and Ma. It's like you're defending him, and he doesn't deserve it."

"A lot of people probably say that about me too, you know. That I don't deserve the way you defend me."

"Well I don't think so."

"A few years ago you did." She offers the reminder gently, not wanting to be cruel, just to encourage the perspective that often comes with more difficulty in youth. "Now you don't. And I think if you asked Emma, she'd probably feel the same about Hook as you now feel about me."

The pout Henry flashes her is petulant and more than a little endearing. "You don't have to be right all the time you know."

She gives him a playful squeeze. "I most certainly do."
The third floor seems to be the least crowded, so they stay there for the majority of their walk, doing tight laps around the claustrophobic halls. They pass Robin on one of their rounds. He looks worn as he chases an energetic Roland about, but flashes a strained smile when Regina catches his eye.

Seeing she's with Henry, he respectfully keeps his distance and does little more than return her wave as their paths cross. The lack of expectation or pressure is mercifully refreshing and just what she needs right now.

Henry bombards her with questions about their trip to the alternate universe. He's clearly a little bummed out by the lack of extreme differences, but takes a sort of delight in hearing the tale of Cora's fight with a dragon and how the people spoke of her memory.

It betrays his age. So mature in some ways, but still childish enough he sees that universe as little more than a story. Awesome, fictional events to be enjoyed for their narrative, and not the suffering of real life innocents who never deserved a thing that happened to them.

Regina doesn't look down on him for it. In fact it warms her in a way, how despite all he's seen and done her boy can still manage to be a child. Though of course, Henry being Henry, his boundless empathy still shines through.

"That's kind of sad," he says through a frown as she describes the drawings etched into the walls of Boolan's cave.

"It was very sad," Regina agrees. "After that was when we found Cora's dagger. Well," she hesitates, "sword, I suppose."

"Why's it so long?" Henry tilts his head, features screwed up as he works it out in his mind. "Cause of all the daggers she takes from the other Dark Ones? Are they just, like, sticking together?"

"We figured it must be something like that." A tired sigh slips out of Regina. "As far as we know nothing like this has ever happened before, so we don't have all the answers." She snorts a little. "We barely have any answers."

"At least we know we have what we need to stop her," Henry says, resolute. Totally certain. The Truest Believer, always. "So then what happened?"

"There was one last trap waiting for us." Regina tries her best to strike the balance between honesty and not scaring Henry any more than their previous adventures already have.

She really needs to properly thank David for getting Henry out of the room before he'd really registered the state of Emma. God knows how that would have damaged the boy. "We were attacked, and Emma made sure that even if we both couldn't make it out, the dagger made it back. That's why I was here alone at first."

Henry bobs his head as he soaks in their story. "I can't believe you guys were all fighting over how to save her and Ma just busted her way home anyways." He laughs, eyes bright. "I know she's cursed and we gotta free her and stuff, but is it weird if I think it's also kind of cool? Right now she's so strong she could kick anybody's-" he cuts himself off abruptly, wary eyes darting to Regina before he swallows and mumbles a quiet, "butt."

Regina tickles her fingers against his neck in playful warning at the almost-slip. Squealing, he jerks
"She's strong," Regina concedes, quickly sobering, "but she's exhausted and isolated and pretty miserable." She fixes Henry with a pointed look. "I don't think all the power in the world is worth that trade off. I'm sure Emma agrees with me."

That pout is back. "I know." Henry shoves his hands into his jeans, shoulders slumped. "I was just saying. After we were safe, thinking back on their fight at the well, it was kinda cool. I still want to break the curse as soon as possible though. It's dumb that she can't, like, hang out with me anymore." He kicks at the floor with the toe of his sneaker. "And I hate the way she talks now. Sometimes she sounds like a robot."

Regina hums. "It does take some getting used to."

"She's gonna be okay, right?" Henry's voice is impossibly small.

"Of course she is." Regina makes sure there isn't time for any sort of hesitation to slip through her words. "Just like Gold said, the curse will patch her up and she'll be back on her feet in no time. The doctors just want to keep her somewhere quiet and clean until she's all healed up. We'll be able to visit her soon, you'll see."

Hopefully she really has managed to get through this conversation without lying.
David and Snow do their best to convince her to take the bed that night, but Regina insists on spreading out a sleeping bag on the floor beside Henry. Using her magic to duplicate his a couple times, they end up with a fairly comfortable nest of bedding between them. It's not ideal, but it will work considering Regina has no intention of sleeping.

She's supposed to be resting for the morning when she'll step in to add her power to the barrier so the other women can start getting some rest. But with most of the hospital staff resting, tonight will be the ideal time for Regina to sneak upstairs and see Emma. Judging by how many times Hook got tossed back down to the third floor on his ass today, it will be best if she avoids any confrontation with overworked nurses.

Normally she wouldn't bother them, but-

The curse should be healing Emma, yes, but Regina needs to see it with her own eyes. Needs to be sure. Needs to know if there's anything her own limited magic can do to help.

Neal is fussy after his supper, squirming and shrieking on and off for a good hour. An exhausted Snow curls up on the bed and is out like a light the minute he quiets. David is outside with a group of gung-ho volunteers who take shifts at night to walk the perimeter and keep an eye out for any signs of danger beyond the border. So, once Henry's eyes close and his breathing evens out, Regina risks creeping carefully out of the darkened room into the hall.

The journey upstairs is painfully long considering how many sleeping bodies she has to carefully maneuver around. It takes tripping over the strap of a messenger bag and stubbing her toe on a door jam, but eventually Regina makes it onto the fourth floor.

A doctor passes by, and there are a couple of nurses milling about that have Regina ducking back into the stairwell. She curses under her breath as she hides behind the door. It's important for her to be resting, she really does need to let her magic reserves build back up, but Regina can't possibly slink back downstairs and go to sleep.

Maybe it's selfish, but she has to see Emma.

Snapping her eyes shut, she draws up her power and reaches out for Emma's magic. It's quiet, still, but she can feel it. A deep, pulsating strength that melds with hers and clings tight. It tugs her close, as though Emma is awake and reaching back for her, so Regina doesn't resist. She lets herself be swept up in the magic.

When Regina opens her eyes, she finds herself on the roof of the hospital. It's almost midnight, but the moon is nearly full and easily lights up the sky with the help of the stars. It should be cold this late into October, windy too by the looks of the swaying trees across the street and beyond, but beneath their protective shield of magic the air is warm and still.
"You're up late."

Emma stands in front of her looking like anything but a woman who should be very much dead. She's wearing loose, thin pants that must have been supplied by the hospital, and a plain, cotton t-shirt that shows off the remnants of the wounds on her arms. There are marks everywhere. Up her hands, reaching towards her shoulders, splotched along her neck, and splattered on her cheeks.

Gone is the charred, smoking, unrecognizable flesh. Now the marks are ones of healing. Soft red blushes and raised white lines that would have been impossible without the magic of the curse putting its all towards restoration.

"You're supposed to be downstairs," is all Regina can think to say through her awe.

There's a pull at the corner of Emma's lips. "Don't tell on me, huh?"

It's stupid, but the light of amusement in her gaze churns Regina's stomach. Her eyes sting as she curls her fingers into tight fists at her sides. "I thought you were gone," she whispers past the thickness in her throat. "I thought-" she breaks off, shaking her head.

"Everything is all right." Emma's voice is softer than it has any right to be. "I'm back now."

"They killed you," Regina insists, taking a half-step forward.

"They tried," Emma agrees, mimicking her movement, "but you know that's impossible. As soon as you were gone I pulled together every bit of my power and I burned down everything in that cave that would catch. Even me." She looks close to laughing and Regina hates her for it.

"I waited but you didn't come."

"It was just seconds," Emma assures her. "I was seconds behind you. Minutes at most."

"But time moves more quickly here. Right." Regina breathes deep, trying to steady herself. She hates how emotional this whole ordeal has made her. She feels drained in ways she hasn't since Henry looked at her with contempt in his eyes. "You clean up well."

That earns a smile. Emma lifts a hand and flexes her fingers a bit, testing the strength of her newly formed skin. "I'll probably be back to normal in a few hours. By morning for sure." Her gaze returns to Regina. "I don't think I'll have much longer than that before Cora loses what's left of her patience."

"Are you-" Regina swallows. "Are you scared?"

"Not of Cora." Emma turns her eyes skyward, tracing the light of the stars. "Tomorrow I'll take the sword and I'll meet her. I'm not sure what will happen, but I promise I'll do everything I can to keep you all safe."

"I know you will."

Emma studies her for a moment. "Will you do something for me?"

"Anything."

"As soon as it starts, I want you to take the barrier down and start evacuating everyone. I'm not sure what will happen to Cora if she crosses the town line, if she'll lose her power or not, but if I go down that might be your only hope to stay safe."
Regina risks another step closer. "Can't we use that somehow? Trick her over the line and fight her when she's powerless? It would be hundreds against one."

Emma shakes her head. "I don't know for sure if her magic will be taken. She's been traveling realms and universes without issue for years, and she's different than us. There's no guarantee what will happen to her. But I know for certain that if I cross over I'll lose everything. I only have one shot to use her sword. The second she gets that away from me, she'll be invincible. We can't take the risk. I have to go at her full strength or not at all."

Heart pounding away in her chest, Regina sags in defeat. "You're going to do it, aren't you? What Gold wants."

"What I have to," Emma amends. "Look." She raises a hand to point over Regina's shoulder.

Regina turns, following the line of Emma's finger until she's looking at the massive scar in the sky over Storybrooke's forest. Running around as she had been, Regina hadn't even registered the damn thing. How it's bigger now, more prominent. Menacing.

"I can't turn away from that. Not when I might have the strength to stop it."

"We won't let you go completely." Regina refocuses on Emma as she makes the solemn vow. "Whatever you have to do to survive tomorrow, Henry and I will be there after you beat her to set it all right." She stares up at Emma, eyes hard and voice tight. "This curse won't take you."

Emma's tentative smile is soft and a little pitying. "Thank you," she says, like she's already resigned herself to the worst of what comes next, "for everything."

Swallowing, Regina drops her gaze. "Please don't thank me." Her laugh is watery. "I already feel like shit as it is. You don't have to keep piling on the guilt."

The hum that slips out of Emma is amused as she crowds Regina's space. "Whatever comes next," she says, so close but never touching, "remember what I told you before." Her gaze is cutting. "No regrets." Even as she loathes herself for it, Regina can feel her tears begin to spill over. "Please don't," she rasps. "I've ruined everything. Ruined- ruined you."

Shaking her head, Emma rests her tentative, trembling hands at Regina's hips. Slow and cautious, as though waiting for Regina to snap and jerk away.

_Doesn't it hurt?_ Regina wants to say. _Aren't you still in pain?_ But she can't find the words. Can't force them into the night air when Emma's looking down at her like that. Fighting past the agony and the curse, somehow so content to just be here with Regina, listening to her whine on this shitty roof.

"The person I was with you-" Emma trails off, her smile so close to what it might have been before the darkness threatened to consume Regina whole. "When we worked together, moving the moon and bickering over paperwork and loving our son, that was the first version of myself I was truly proud of being."

Regina makes to clutch at her arms but stops herself, not wanting to agitate the remnants of Emma's still healing wounds. She grips at Emma's thin shirt instead in a desperate search for something that might ground her.

"I like being the person who picked up that dagger and took on this curse. And I won't pretend that's not true so you can feel like you're getting whatever punishment you think you deserve." Emma
gives her hips a playful squeeze that makes Regina's breath hitch. "We couldn't make it click for awhile there," she says, "but once we got it right, you were always the best parts of me."

"Fuck," Regina sputters through a laugh. She glares up at Emma through the tears she's now completely lost her fight against. "You're really going to tell me that and still not let me-" Regina doesn't finish the sentence. It feels wrong to mention the word kiss. To presume that role in Emma's life. It feels arrogant. Ugly, to ask for what she knows in her shriveled heart she doesn't deserve.

Cautiously, she lifts a hand to Emma's still red cheek, and is relieved when Emma leans into her tentative touch instead of hissing in pain.

"Will you stay with me tonight?"

Emma's question catches her off guard, but Regina's hardly going to argue. Still- "It won't be too hard? You need to rest for tomorrow. I don't want to be a distraction that has it keeping you up all night like last time."

"They don't matter." Emma holds her close. "I don't want to waste the time. Not if-"

"We'll save you," Regina cuts off the words before they can be fully voiced. She traces the curve of Emma's cheek with the pad of her thumb in short, soothing strokes. "You'll beat her and we'll save you."

Emma's smile is strained. "Still," she says, "I want to be with you."

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Right under her doctors' noses, Emma transports them into her darkened room. Regina is still a little apprehensive to have much physical contact with Emma's damaged skin, but Emma tugs her into the tiny hospital bed with an easy confidence that proves she's not feeling much pain anymore.

"Are you comfortable?" Emma asks as Regina gets settled against the lumpy pillows. The lilt of her voice betrays she's less worried about the scratchy sheets and more concerned with Regina having to sleep next to someone who will likely dream about tearing her limbs off.

"I trust you." Rolling onto her side, Regina inches forward until they're pressed against one another under the blankets. "I wish you'd let me go with you."

Light fingers brush against her arm in a soothing rhythm. Up and down and up and down and up again, goosebumps trailing in their wake. "Everyone here needs you."

Regina snorts. "They don't. You just know I'll get in your way." She can't keep up, plain and simple. And if Cora knows Emma cares in any way for her, she'll be little more than a liability. Something to protect. "I'm just not used to sitting on the sidelines."

"We really are the center of most conflict in this town." Emma chuckles. "It's a wonder the people haven't revolted."

Regina laughs too, though it's a barely there, breathy sound as Emma pushes lightly at Regina's shoulders, nudging her onto her back. Even in her confusion, Regina complies without resistance.
"Imagine how peaceful their lives would be if not for us. Without magic and villains and portals to other realms." Emma's hand slips under her shirt, fingers tracing teasing, absent patterns against Regina's abdomen as she speaks. "You know, sometimes I miss those first few months. Back when I just got to town."

A shiver races through Regina as a finger slowly circles her bellybutton. "I don't," she breathes, hoping her companion doesn't catch the waver in her voice.

Emma laughs, hopefully at her words more than the way Regina's breath catches when her fingers dip lower. "I know that wasn't the best time in your life, but it was simpler, wasn't it?" Emma's tracing the waistband of her pants now, back and forth absently, as though she's not even aware of what she's doing.

Skin burning at every point of contact, Regina finds herself painfully aware of every minuscule movement. Hips pressing forward lightly, she tries her best to spur Emma into some sort of action. Whether it's commitment or refusal. Just anything to get past this maddening almost they're trapped in.

"Sometimes," Emma whispers, leaning close, "I like to think about if everything was what it had seemed." Regina shudders as Emma curls around her, face buried against her, breath hot on her neck but lips never touching. Never. Never. Never. "Henry just confused. You just defensive. It would take a long time, but we'd relax after awhile. Learn to get along. Maybe even get to how we are now."

Tracing back and forth and back and forth. Regina shifts her hips again, pressing into the sensation, fighting a growl when Emma doesn't react to the silent request. Who knew the savior would be such a fucking tease?

"Henry would just be a kid who goes to school and watches cartoons and writes book reports. You'd be my overbearing boss who invades my office at least once a day just to drive me crazy." Her hum is fond. "Do you ever think about that? What it would have been like?"

Honestly, no. It's different for Regina. She never lived like Emma. Never existed in a reality where she wasn't the Evil Queen. Where the Enchanted Forest didn't exist and magic didn't dictate her life. Still-

"Sounds like a fairy tale. I think I can understand the sentiment," she murmurs and then breaks off into a gasp as Emma finally takes the leap. Pushes past the barrier of her waistband and presses against Regina at last. "Jesus," she hisses.

Emma is stiffer now, more serious. Absolutely focused. And Regina finds herself wondering how much concentration it's taking to keep her touch so gentle when the voices of the past are screaming for blood.

"Okay?" Emma asks, nudging their foreheads together.

Regina nods frantically against her, eyes snapping shut, hips moving in time to the steady rhythm Emma sets. "Okay," she whimpers clutching tight to Emma's arm. "Okay."

Emma breathes against her skin and Regina can feel it, her frustration. Past the sharp pulses of pleasure zipping up from her core and the warmth of the body wrapped around her, Regina can feel the want and the longing and the bitterness at being held back.

She twists into Emma, foreheads pressed together and breathing, breathing, breathing. The air mixing
where their lips rest dangerously close, mere inches of space between them.

"I want to kiss you." Her voice is close to a whine, but Regina can't bring herself to care. Not when she feels this good and her heart aches so much.

She opens her eyes and Emma is watching her with so much open warmth she almost has to close them again in fear of being overwhelmed. *Say it,* she wants to plead. *Say what can't be true or kiss me and shatter the idea forever.*

"You must really want to see me get my ass kicked."

Regina's laugh is more of a choked sob as the words wash over her. As good as a declaration of love. More so, even.

It's true. Regina rocks into Emma, gripping tight as the feeling builds. It's true and Emma believes it. Emma says so. Her words building up in Regina, churning and bubbling just under her skin. It's true. I love you. That's all she can possibly mean. It's true.

*It's true. It's true. It's true.*

Emma holds her steady when she falls, gasping. Wraps her up safe until her breathing evens out and Regina manages a whispered, "How?" She's slick and exhausted and still shaking a little. "How do you know?"

"I feel it," Emma murmurs into her skin. "I know it every second we're together."

It's too much, isn't it? Too fast. Too deep. Too real. And Regina is still-

"Belle couldn't," she says, grateful for the darkness that blankets them save for the tiny square of light from the window carved into the door. "I don't think I could-" The sentence hangs there, unfinished.

An amused hum slips out of Emma. "You don't think it would work?"

Regina clings tight to her at the idea of failure. When she envisions kissing Emma to no avail, when she really, truly pictures it, she nearly laughs out loud. Because it isn’t voices in the dark proving anything by shouting and cursing and kicking up a fuss.

It - they - are before and now and always.

Of course. Magic and understanding and impossible, boundless empathy. Connection. Real, true, earned connection building up for years. *Of course.*

"It would work. I know it would." She presses herself as close to Emma as possible. "If we're all it takes, than it has to."

Emma's fingers find her hair, combing absently.

"Tomorrow, I'm going to save you."

And then, maybe, Regina will be able to return the favor.

Chapter End Notes
This got so much gayer than I ever intended. How embarrassing.
The Storm

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait!

**PLEASE NOTE THE TAG CHANGES FOR THIS STORY**

I've put a violence warning for this story. If you're squeamish maybe be careful moving forward and don't be afraid to hop on outta here if it's too much or not enjoyable for you. Your comfort is the most important thing :)

Regina blinks to full alertness, features scrunched up under the harsh, too-bright overhead light. She groans as she forces herself up onto her elbows and finds Emma already awake and moving about the room.

"Sorry I couldn't let you sleep in." She doesn't sound all that sorry. Emma is back to the stiff, almost businesslike persona she's seemed to have taken on with the curse. It's a bit jarring after the raw emotion she'd let loose last night, but Regina isn't about to call her on it. It isn't like Emma is closing herself off because she wants to. That's been well established by now. "Cora was testing the strength of the barrier around dawn. She's goading me."

Tilting her head, Regina watches as Emma gathers her regrown hair back into a tight ponytail. Her skin is pale and smooth everywhere it shows, as though she'd never been injured at all, and she's wearing jeans again, her favorite jacket hastily thrown over a plain shirt. She must have gone back and found where Henry had dropped it by the well before they'd even headed to Cora's universe. "I meant to ask, how did you get through the barrier anyhow? You shouldn't have been able to transport yourself inside."

"Honestly at the time I didn't have a destination in mind. The first portal I opened was just a shot in the dark. I focused on home and threw it up." Emma moves to sit on the edge of the stiff mattress. "Where did you end up?"

"On Main Street. Exactly where we left."

"I guess that makes sense." Emma purses her lips. "The second portal I tossed up thinking of catching up to you, so maybe that's why it spat me out at your feet."

Regina frowns. "Still doesn't explain how you got past the barrier."

"Well, it's designed to keep out those with ill intent towards the people inside right?" Emma shrugs. "Maybe the magic decided I was harmless."

"It kept me out." Regina crosses her arms and does her best not to pout.

Emma raises her eyebrows like Regina's not doing a very good job. "Based on the energy coming off it, Blue seems to be the one who cast the spell. She used Mal and Lily to boost the power, but she was at the helm. We know she's not your biggest fan."

"Insufferable bug," Regina mutters through a scowl. She would inadvertently edge Regina out of her
"Nobody's perfect." Emma gives her leg a pat and pushes to her feet, quickly sobering. Likely refocused on the task ahead.

"You should eat something while we still have time." The words tumble out of Regina. There's a light, fluttery feeling high in her chest. It's so quiet here with Emma in the safety of this tiny room, but in a matter of hours, maybe minutes, everything will change. They might never see each other again. So much is unknown. There are still so many questions.

Will Cora's dagger still have the same effects in its new form? Will she be too strong for Emma? Too fast? Will they get the townspeople to safety before anything happens to them? Would crossing the town line render Cora powerless? Do they even have a chance of beating her? Or are they just fooling themselves? Is there a way, after everything, for Emma to survive this with her soul intact?

God, so many things can go wrong, Regina wants to just grab on to the quiet security of this moment and never let it go.

"I'm not hungry," Emma says.

Heart high in her throat, Regina slips out from under the blankets. "Emma, please." She's not above begging, not now with so much at stake. "You told me yourself it makes you feel better to eat."

"I told you it makes me feel more human," Emma amends. A heavy sigh. "Today that's only going to slow me down."

Emma meets her halfway when she approaches and wraps Regina in a hug that takes her by surprise. There's the usual hesitation to it, Emma keeping careful control, but there's also a finality to the contact. A resignation in the way Emma buries her face in Regina's neck and breathes deep like it's the last time they'll ever be this close again.

"Are you sure there's nothing I can do?" Regina wraps her arms around Emma's shoulders to keep her close. "Even if I'm just playing decoy. I can keep her distracted and it might be easier for you to land the hit."

"Maybe," Emma breathes against her, "but I won't risk it. This isn't like last time." She pulls back a little and straightens, presses their foreheads together so she can hold Regina's gaze. "Knowing you're safe will be more help than you can imagine. All of you. That's all I need." A soft smile, and then she pulls away. "My parents are on their way up. They know about the evacuation and they'll help you how they can."

Biting her lip, Regina nods. "We'll get it done."

"I know." Emma's head jerks towards the door, and then a few moments later her rather frazzled looking parents burst in. Snow is cradling a fussy, squirming Neal while David has his own hands full juggling a pair of swords. Henry tails them a second later, leaning against the door frame without a word, hands stuffed in his pockets and eyes only for Emma. There's no fear, but a certain wariness lingers about him.

"I brought both like you asked," David says, a little breathless.

"Thank you." Emma takes Cora's sword first, lays it on the hospital bed before returning for the other. It's David's personal blade. The one Emma first wielded in battle against Maleficent, and David never has it far from reach. She unsheathes the blade and hands it back to her father.
Moving to the bed. Emma holds her father's scabbard against Cora's sword. Her magic pulls together, working over the worn leather in a shimmering haze to elongate it until the pair are a perfect match.

"Cool." Henry can't seem to help himself as he watches Emma slip Cora's sword into the scabbard and tie it to her belt.

Emma flashes him a strained smile. "It might buy me a few seconds. She can't sense magic inside the barrier, so hopefully she doesn't know it's here yet. I'll cover up its energy and maybe I'll catch her by surprise."

She stands in front of them, hair magically regrown and skin flawlessly stitched back together and looking so close to the hardened woman who had pulled into town a few short years ago.

"I should head outside. I need to meet with Maleficent and Blue."

"Do you have to go just now?" Snow is the one to voice what they all are feeling. "The barrier is still holding," she rushes to explain. "Maybe we could spend just a little time together while it's still safe."

There's little emotion on Emma's face, but her feelings manage to shine through in the way she steps forward. The gentle hand she uses to give Snow's shoulder a squeeze. "It isn't safe," she says before heading for the door.

Henry waits there, cautious but determined as he stares up at his mother. Emma studies him for a moment, and Regina's heart picks up pace as Emma's fingers twitch where they hang by her thighs. As if the urge to grab Henry is so overwhelming Emma's muscles are jumping in anticipation of the attack.

But then Emma takes a deep breath, in and out, shoulders rising and falling. She lifts her hand, painfully slow, and plops it on top of his head. Henry grins as she ruffles his messy mop of hair, eyes shining, the look of a boy who just had his faith completely validated.

"Kick her butt, Ma."

Emma hums and then steps out the door, solemn and stiff.

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They split up to cover more ground, each person taking a floor to spread word to the townspeople that they need to gather up whatever belongings they have and get their families together. Henry stays with Regina on the third floor, as he's clearly developed relationships with most of the families there, while Snow and David handle the lower floors.

"We'll need to move quickly and smoothly. Leave behind anything that can be spared. We have every intention of returning once the threat has passed, but please be prepared for every eventuality." Regina keeps her gaze focused on a plain, gray brick on the far wall so she can avoid any eye contact while she addresses the masses. It's all she can do to get the words out.

"We're not sure if we'll be able to use vehicles yet so head outside to the lawn and await further instruction downstairs. We'll likely need to get moving as soon as the barrier is taken down so don't dawdle and please leave the elevators free for those with medical conditions, the elderly, and small
children. Thank you."

The usual murmuring of a crowd dismissed breaks out when she finishes. The people are confused but mercifully amiable. No one rushes her to start trouble, likely because of Henry’s presence at her side, and she's grateful when he follows her to climb the stairs back up to the fourth floor.

"It's weird," he says as he trudges up behind her, "but I don't actually think I've seen you make a Mayor Speech since before the first curse broke."

"Town meetings have been a bit difficult to organize with a new super villain popping into town every week." Under her breath she adds a muttered, "Not to mention all the amnesia."


"My mistake."

-The hospital staff on the fourth floor are less receptive to the news.

"You can't just be pulling these people out of their rooms," a nurse says. He crosses his arms with a scowl. "They're not here on vacation."

"Some can be moved," a doctor argues, "but there are others that really shouldn't be carted around. I imagine everyone is going to be on top of one another during the evac, and we've got people here with weakened immune systems."

Regina does her best to keep her patience. "Surely you have procedures in place for emergencies? What if this were a fire?"

"Of course we do," another doctor snaps. Her dark eyes are narrowed as she tosses her long hair over her shoulder. "But this isn't exactly your typical emergency. Some of the patients who need supplies and equipment would be housed in an ambulance. Except as you very well know, Mayor, our town being as small as it is means we only have a few vehicles available. And the ones we do have are all completely blocked in. It's a gridlock out there. So unless you-"

"All right." Regina holds her hands up in defeat. "Just let me think. We'll figure something out that works for everyone. How about you focus on getting those who are mobile downstairs as long as it's not a danger to their health. I'll come up with some way to take care of those who can't."

-When they get back down to the third floor, there's already a long line forming at the elevator doors. A couple feet away the stairwell is jam-packed, the townsfolk crowded around the too-narrow doorway. Regina scans the commotion with a grimace.

"What do you say we skip the dramatics and take the express route?"
Henry grins up at her before taking her hand. In a rush of magic, they're outside of the hospital.

"Oh my." Belle startles a bit when they suddenly appear beside her.

"Sorry," Henry offers, a little sheepish.

It's growing crowded out on the grass around the building. People pouring out of the hospital in a steady stream. Good. That means everyone is taking the threat seriously.

"How did everything go upstairs?" Belle's gaze darts questioningly between them.

"All the doctors are pretty mad at Mom." Henry gives her hand a squeeze. "We have to think of a way to get all the patients who aren't able to walk over the town line."

"I know everyone's magic has been rather strained lately," Belle offers, "but can't you transport them to safety?"

"Mobility isn't the issue," Regina explains. "They need equipment and care and we don't have anywhere to go once we cross over. We're going to be huddled up on a road in the middle of nowhere. I could transport them to the edge of town, push them over the line, and then what?"

"I see." Hands on her hips, Belle chews on her lower lip, mind clearly working on a solution.

"Ah, there you are, Belle." Gold heads over, the way he leans heavily on his cane betraying his exhaustion. He nods stiffly at Regina, then Henry, deep bags under his tired eyes.

Regina's never really considered it before, hasn't found the time, but she wonders if it weighs on him at all. The power he lost. How he might have been able to combat this force if the curse still held him prisoner. How he's helpless now, under this new threat. Just another mortal scrambling about trying to survive like the rest of them.

"I need to speak to Emma before she leaves. Have any of you seen her?"

"She's at the edge of the barrier with Blue and-" Belle trails off with a quiet, "Oh dear."

They follow the line of her finger to see Emma and Blue and Maleficent huddled together, speaking quietly amongst themselves. And then, of course, there's the infamous Captain Hook approaching. Determination in his hard gaze despite the limp in his step, and an apparent obsession with distracting Emma from what she needs to do because of his bruised ego.

"This should be good," Gold drawls, doing little to hide his amusement.

"Not if he gets himself killed," Regina snaps before hurrying over. Emma is already on edge, the last thing she needs is to have it weighing on her conscious that she murdered that filthy pirate because he was too arrogant to accept the word 'no'.

Emma turns at Hook's approach, eyebrows raised in question. It's stupid, more than a little embarrassing, but Regina's insides twist up at the sight of her so open with him, so free. Even after all that happened last night, she can't shake off her nature. The possessiveness that's been ingrained in her after so many years of nothing but loss.

She hates it. Is desperate to move past it. But deep down that bitterness has a tight hold. A tiny, screaming child clutching onto her toys as tight as possible lest some bully tries to take them away. Lest Mother decides to crush them to dust.
Loss, it seems, has made Regina Mills very bad at sharing.

Foolish, foolish, foolish. She knows it is. Still, it's nothing she can force herself to change. And so when Hook steps well into Emma's personal space, Regina can only move faster. Fingers twitching at her sides, she joins the group in time to hear Emma's response to whatever plea the pirate has made.

"Enough," she says. A hand on his chest, Emma pushes him away with a gentleness Regina's insides scream he's never deserved.

Maybe Regina doesn't deserve it either, but dammit at least she knows it. At least she's constantly in awe that it's afforded to her.

"Why won't you just let me try?" It's a petulant whine. He's something of a child himself in this moment, denied his favorite toy. "It would work. Just let me prove it to you, you'll see. If you would just drop down your walls and let someone in I know it would work."

For the briefest moment, Regina feels something of a kinship with him. Pities the man as he echoes such similar sentiments as she had the night before.

"That's the problem, Killian." Emma tilts her head. She's soft, but detached. Reserved even as she offers comfort. "That's always been the problem. Pushing for proof shouldn't be necessary. My words should be enough. My desire. And it never was." She drops her hand, takes a step back. "Not for you."

The lack of triumph is odd. Regina just stands quietly and watches the scene play out. Blue shifts in discomfort on one side of her and Mal bites her lip on the other. The air is suffocating, their awkwardness enveloping them all like a thick blanket.

No, there's no triumph in Regina as she watches Hook deflate, everything in his usual swagger going limp and sagging. They're too alike in the ways that matter when it comes to loving Emma Swan - embarrassingly desperate and unfathomably unworthy - for this to feel like any kind of victory. Because this could be - should be - her. But it's not. Somehow. Someway.

She shouldn't be crowing over Hook's loss, she should be celebrating all she's manage to gain. Not at his cost, but in spite of her faults. Henry and Emma and even Snow and David. Protecting them now, cherishing whatever comes next, that's all she needs to focus on moving forward.

After all, when has that petty streak of hers ever resulted in anything good?

It's what a hero would do, isn't it? Be the bigger person? She's never done that before, has she? This seems like as good a time as any to start. To duck her head and avert her eyes instead of looking upon Hook with ridicule. To hope that maybe he is one day able to find whatever it is he's looking for. Perhaps a woman who fits against him naturally, instead of poor Emma, forcing herself to smile and nod and fold into the prison of his arms. Someone who won't have to mold herself into his desires until she starts to lose the very framework of her being.

"I just want you to be happy, Killian," Emma tells him. "I always did." It's not a lie. Even cursed and in shadow, Emma shines brighter than the best of them.

Hook scoffs, takes a step back as he stiffens. Obnoxiously bitter to cover up the heartache. "You said it yourself. That was the problem."

As she watches Hook leave, a man who had never tried to create roots in this town that weren't entangled with Emma's, Regina knows they won't be crossing paths again.
"Is everything okay?" Emma is focused on her now, concern clear. After all, they'd already said their goodbyes upstairs.

Flushing, Regina realizes her hurry over probably made it seem like something nefarious other than her own idiotic emotions was at play. "No, I-" She clears her throat. "It's nothing. Everything is fine."

Maleficent's knowing grin is obvious enough Regina's tempted to wipe it away with magic, but Emma just stares down at her in confusion. Mercifully, Gold chooses then to interrupt.

"I'd like to have a word with Emma, if that's all right." He nods politely to Blue and Maleficent in greeting.

"We're done here anyhow," Emma says. She pins the women with a hard stare. "Just remember, don't drop the barrier until I have her completely occupied. But don't wait too long either. I don't know how much time I'll be able to buy you."

They agree, and after some stilted goodbyes they're off to continue helping get everyone organized for the evacuation. Gold looks to Regina next, waiting for her to take off as well, but Emma moves beside her.

"She's fine," Emma says. "She understands."

Gold's expression is wary. "So you say," he drawls, no doubt considering all the times she's snapped at him over Emma's fate since this whole mess started. Regina refuses to apologize for it and his attention returns to Emma. "How are you feeling?"

"Oddly numb," Emma admits. And then, softly, "They're quiet today. I almost feel like myself again, just, I don't know, muted."

"It would seem you're not the only one with nerves." Gold tilts his head, considering. "Maybe they don't want to distract you."

Emma brings her hands up, flexing her fingers. Curling her hands into tight fists only to unravel them once more. "Maybe," she murmurs.

"Do what you can on your own," Gold tells her. Based on Emma's stony silence, this isn't the first time they've had this conversation. "Remember, calling upon the true power of the curse is a last resort. The more you lean into it, the deeper you'll be pulled in." His lips pull into a grim line. "Fall far enough, we might have no way to drag you back."

Heart high in her throat, Regina turns to Emma. She's quiet, still seemingly calm. He shoulders relaxed and a hand resting casually on the hilt of Cora's blade.

We'll save you, Regina wants to remind her. No matter how far you go we'll always bring you home. But Gold is right there on top of them, and Emma is distracted, and everything is so uncertain Regina can't bring herself to open her mouth and utter a promise she's not sure she'll be able to keep.

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Despite how many people are gathered up outside the hospital, the world inside their protective
bubble is silent when Emma leaves. Blue raises the barrier, cuts out a hole for the savior to slip out of while her family looks on, the townspeople she's sworn to protect crowding behind them.

Emma doesn't look back before stepping out into the world. Not at her parents, not at her son, not at Regina. She just steps into that final battle without hesitation while everyone else is left helplessly observing. Regina holds her breath, waiting for Cora to swoop down from the sky and tackle Emma to the ground.

Nothing happens.

Emma merely stands there for a moment. She looks left, then right, then left again. A beat, and then she disappears in a cloud of gray smoke. She's gone. Henry leans against Regina and Snow grips her hand and David hovers close.

Whatever happens next, they won't know until it's over.
They take the barrier down at the first sign of battle, as soon as magic fills the air. Two distant, mighty powers clashing. Again and again. Blows meeting, their combined force sending shockwaves of energy over the town.

Well, it would seem Emma hadn't been able to get in a surprise attack with the sword. So it would come down to power then. A simple question of who could outlast the other.

Until the results come in, there's nothing to do but keep themselves busy by preparing for the worst.

The evacuation is tricky. Gridlocked as they are, it's not really feasible to get people into their cars. Figuring out which family belongs to what vehicle will take much too long, and even if it wouldn't they can't exactly have a motorcade headed for the town line. They have to do this in small groups if they want to stay out of Cora's notice.

It's Belle who proves most valuable to them in the end. She organizes the people. Makes sure families stay together and that those with young children and the elderly are taken care of first. The hospital is far enough from the town line that it's unreasonable to expect anyone to walk, so in the end they figure magical transport is the most realistic solution.

The trick of the matter is to make sure they're not exerting so much power that Cora takes notice of them even in the heat of battle.

Belle gets the townsfolk into small groups, no more than thirty at a time. Blue, Maleficent, Lily and Regina stand ready to escort them. They work in a steady rotation.

Snow is sent out with the first group to watch over those at the town line. David stays behind to keep those waiting for transport calm and amiable. Blue is a trusted figure in the community, but the three witches present still don't instill that much confidence. Accepting them and their magic is a lot different than trusting them to use it on you. Regina can understand the hesitation, even if it is making her job more difficult.

"It will be disorienting, yes," she assures Mrs. Ruiz as the elderly woman clings tight to her arm, face pale, "but there's no danger of you losing any limbs. I promise."

"But what about splinching?" Her grip on Regina tightens to the point of near pain. "My grandson told me all about splinching. You poof yourself to the market and wind up without a nose if you're not careful! I know all about it! He told me!"

Regina swallows down a tired sigh. "Splinching is a fictional concept created for a children's book series and has absolutely no basis in reality-"

But it's too late. The others in the group caught some of the conversation and a man shout, "What did you say about our noses? You have to take our noses for the spell to work!?"

The young woman beside him gasps, hands shooting up to clutch at her nose, eyes wide in horror.

"I'll take my chances at the hospital," someone else shouts.

"Yeah," comes another voice, "the Savior will fix everything. I'm not losing my nose for a maybe!"

"Nobody is losing their nose," Regina tries, a little desperate as the crowd starts murmuring, shooting
suspicious glares her way. "As I said before, splinching has never and will never occur in any realm known to us. I can promise you in all my years practicing magic I've never once seen or heard of any incidents occurring."

"Just because you've never seen it doesn't mean it doesn't exist!" a man cries.

That gets the crowd going again, some grumbling their agreement and others shouting terrified questions over each other's heads. Good god. Regina pinches the bridge of her nose, desperately clinging to the last remnants of her patience. This is why she'd always made a point of addressing the peasantry directly as seldom as possible.

"Trouble, Madame Mayor?" Blue's tone is dripping with innocence, but she makes no move to tamp down her smug smile as she passes smoothly by the scene, her own cluster of evacuees calmly following behind her like a line of ducklings.

Though a few choice words rest on the tip of her tongue, Regina manages to swallow them down. She's clearly already in some hot water here. Something tells her cursing out a nun in front of them won't endear her to the people.

Regina refocuses instead, clearing her throat and lowering herself to play along with their idiocy. "All right," her no nonsense tone quickly quiets the rabble, "the truth is, splinching is indeed real and I merely didn't want anyone to panic."

"I knew it!" a woman shouts.

"However," Regina continues, "I would also like to say that in over thirty years of practicing magic, I've never once had an incident."

Silence for a time, and then, tentatively, "Never?"

"Never." Regina's smile is tight and plastic. "I'm just that good."

Mrs. Ruiz's grip loosens at last. "Well, I suppose if it's to get away from all this Dark One world domination nonsense..."

The rest of the day gets smoother as it goes along. David keeps those waiting for transport calm as the women keep their rotation moving. One group sent out at a time. The next being sent out as soon as the first spellcaster returns. There's time to rest between trips this way, but still, it's a taxing job. Everyone's tired and pale by the time the last group is safely over the line and noon is long gone.

Regina does her best not to think about the battle raging on in the distance. It's taking too long. She can still feel Cora's power a few short miles off, Emma's rising to meet it blow to blow.

Had Emma not tried to use the sword yet? Had she, failed, and then Cora stole it away?

Is she unbeatable now? Is Emma left simply trying to buy them time to escape?

Does any of this really matter if Cora's going to wind up bringing reality down around them anyhow?
Taking a deep breath, Regina shakes away the 'what-if's threatening to consume her. She promised Emma she would do everything in her power to keep these people safe. Until that's done, she has no time to wallow.

After everyone outside has been moved, Blue and Maleficent head back to the line. Until they know for sure whether or not Storybrooke has been lost, nobody is being relocated in the real world. As such, they've got a rather large number of people milling about in the empty fields outside of Storybrooke with nowhere to go.

So Blue and Mal dedicate themselves to working tirelessly just inside the town's border. Belle has been taking inventory all morning and has them replicating whatever food and bedding they'll need to get them through the next twenty-four hours at the very least. Lily is set to join them in a bit, but first she helps Regina free up the town's four ambulances by way of magic. They get them clear of the cars overflowing from the lot and load up what doctors and patients they can. With the supplies inside, they'll be able to offer basic care to the infirmed until the danger passes or more permanent solutions need to be found.

Lily takes them to the town line while Regina stays behind with a Dr. Rivera and a Nurse Roberts. Up on the fourth floor, a handful of townsfolk remain. Theodore Howard, a man in a medically induced coma recovering from surgery after a bad car accident, his husband and their young daughter refusing to leave his bedside, and teenaged Felicity Barnes, her mother protectively keeping watch at her side ever since she'd first been diagnosed with Cystic Fibrosis.

On doctor's orders, Regina is not allowed any magic unless they're in immediate danger. She can erect a small, easy to sustain barrier just around the couple rooms they're occupying if need be, and if the worst happens and Cora comes after them, Regina's last resort will be to transport them out of town.

The moment she feels Emma's power fade from existence, they'll been transported to safety. Until then, she's on guard duty.

Waiting and waiting and waiting. Only link to Emma the faint pulses of power ripping in from the distance.

- 

Dr. Rivera is a stern, focused woman. If she wasn't so distracted, Regina might take the time to admire her work ethic. Her passion for her job and her dedication to her patients. Nurse Roberts is much softer. A heavy, kind-faced man whose pale cheeks darken when Regina thanks him for the water he brings her from the cooler in the staff room.

The staff sticks mostly to the two patients' rooms, keeping the families as relaxed as one can be in such circumstances. They keep the lights down low as the sun sets, doing their best to be as inconspicuous as possible should Cora come looking for any stragglers.

Regina drags a waiting room chair over to one of the wide windows at the end of the hall. She sits and sips at her drink and obsessively tracks the flashes of magic that pierce the rapidly darkening sky.

It's been so long now. Hours.

How can Emma possibly survive-?
A soft scraping startles Regina out of her thoughts. She shifts about in her chair to find Gold of all people approaching. He's dragging a chair behind him with one hand, leaning heavily on his cane with the other.

Regina blinks at him, perplexed for a moment, before deciding that after all the years she's known him, she really shouldn't be surprised by Gold slinking out of sight to defy her orders however he likes. "And here I thought I'd said evacuation was mandatory for all civilians."

Gold chuckles as he settles down beside her. "We both know I've never been good at following rules."

Regina snorts. "Only making and breaking them."

Night has fallen fully now and the sky flashes, streaks of red splitting the sky before fading back into darkness.

"Would you take a look at that." He watches the flow of magic, obviously impressed, his sharp eyes shrewd as ever without the curse looming over him.

Regina tucks her feet up under her on the stiff chair, taking a sip from the flimsy paper cone in her hand. The water is lukewarm and unsatisfying, but it's something to do. "Belle didn't mind you staying?"

The sky glows a bright, blinding green.

"She understands." Gold leans back, cane balanced against his thigh. He looks old. Older than he ever has before. Maybe, free of his curse, age is finally catching up to him. Or maybe he's just as exhausted as Regina is. "I've never felt like this before. There's nothing I can do to help, but I still feel involved. Locked in with this thing that's been my whole world for so long."

Regina can certainly sympathize. She stares out the window, watches her town glow blue.

"It's gone, I'm free, but-" Gold sighs, long and deep, "everything going on out there-" He shakes his head. "It still feels like a part of me."

"It will be over soon," Regina says, voicing the mantra that's been running through her head all day aloud. "It's almost done."

"Maybe."

They sit quietly for a time. The world flares up purple and white and a beautiful golden yellow, the sheer power behind each blast making the very foundations of the building tremble.

There's no telling who struck what blow, which ones landed, if Emma's still standing. Regina squeezes the cone in her hand until the paper collapses, what little is left of the water sloshes over her fingers.

Please.

*Please. Please. Please.*

"I always manage to underestimate her." Gold doesn't tear his eyes away from the window as he speaks. "Before you two left, I asked Emma to reconsider bringing you along to the other universe."

An amused hum, low in his throat. "I certainly didn't doubt the benefit of your influence, but I doubted her ability to be isolated with you for so long. I remember that feeling. That drive to destroy."
How it consumes you. Overrides everything else. How much it makes you want to-" He cuts himself off, breathing deep through his nose.

"You knew." Regina shifts in her chair to get a better look at him. Striking scarlet magic lights up the sky and highlights the grim pull of his lips. "From the beginning you knew how she wanted to hurt me. Why she wanted to."

"I had my suspicions," he admits. His voice is stilted. Awkward. "Emma confirmed them."

"You didn't tell me." It sounds a bit more like an accusation than she originally intended.

"I gave you enough of a warning to keep yourself safe." He sniffs, offended. "The rest was hardly my business."

"I suppose not." Regina fiddles with the soggy paper in her hands. "About that," she clears her throat, "Snow and David-" she falters. "Well, they-" Gold seems to be enjoying her discomfort, the bastard. "They don't know, do they?"

"Not that I'm aware of."


"Don't tell me you're frightened of the inlaws?" Gold can barely contain the glee in his voice.

She stiffens. "Hardly. I just think on top of everything else, Emma doesn't need to deal with the drama that will come with that reveal."

"That's a family dinner I'd love to be present for, by the way." The burst of orange outside lights up his grin. "Consider this my RSVP."

"Ass." Regina does her best to force away the heat in her cheeks as he chuckles.

"Illuminating as the conversation has been, I didn't broach the topic to discuss anyone's love life." The amusement in Gold's voice fades quickly as he speaks. "All I meant to say was that from the very beginning, before your curse was even cast, I had expectations for Emma as the fabled Savior. Barriers. Limitations. And somehow, she consistently overcomes them all." His laughter is soft. "I know the situation is truly hopeless and yet I sit here, hope filling what's left of my heart."

Regina squints as the world outside glows a blinding green once again. When it fades the hall feels even darker than it had before. "I want to feel that way. I want to be like David, like Snow, but-" Her voice breaks. "I asked Emma if she was afraid, and she said not of Cora."

"I would think she's more afraid of what Cora might let herself become." Gold absently taps the end of his cane against the hard tile floor a couple of times.

"Does it-" Regina hesitates. Considering they might lose everything at any second now, there's really no harm in prying. Right? She takes a breath. "Does that have something to do with the Source?"

Gold's head snaps up. Even in shadow, the fear in his eyes is clear.

"Emma mentioned something about it in the other universe."

"She's very brave," Gold allows. "Or very stupid."

"She told me not to talk about 'her'," Regina hurries on, a little defensive. "We were talking about the line of Dark Ones. I asked who came before Analath." Regina winces at the memory of Emma's
harsh words, her high, tight voice. "It didn't go over well."

"It wouldn't." Gold refuses to look at her.

Regina's never been one for giving up easily though. "Who was she?"

"She never spoke to me, but she was there. I could feel her." He raises a hand to his chest, palm splayed wide over his heart. "Always."

"Who was she?" Regina tries again. "I looked into it. Followed the line back as far as I could. But after Analath everything was a dead end."

Gold shakes his head. "You wouldn't find her in any book. Her name has been lost. One could find her now only in oral histories, I would think. A legend. Little more than a fairy tale."

The remains of the paper cup are a shredded soggy mess in her lap by now, so Regina grips the arm rests of her chair instead. Her nails digging in tight as she shifts closer to Gold. "Tell it to me."

He balks. "It would be a fraction of the truth. You more than anyone should know how easy it is for stories to be twisted to fit the teller's narrative."

"I don't care." Regina shakes her head. "Please, just tell me whatever you know. Even if it's all make believe."

"They're old stories. Old even when I first heard them as a boy, oh," his gaze drifts upwards, the flash of blue magic outside highlighting his wistful expression, "so many centuries ago now. There are different versions. Characters that pop in and out. But in every telling there are constants."

He breathes deep. "For instance, it always starts with a young, arrogant king..."
Chapter Notes

**WARNING FOR VIOLENT ACTS INVOLVING YOUNG CHILDREN**

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Man Who Made Evil's Home

Long ago, back in the ancient times when gods still walked the realms, there lived a king. He was so rich, so powerful, he could have anything in the world his heart desired.

When he was hungry, food was brought to his table. When he was cold, beautiful cloaks of the finest silks were draped over his shoulders. And when he became infatuated with a visiting nobleman's daughter during the festival at the end of the fall harvest, he snapped his fingers and instantly she was his.

They were married within days and before winter was half gone, the new queen was with child.

Every demand the King made was met. A nursery was crafted to his liking. The Queen was waited on day and night. The entire kingdom was anxiously awaiting an heir to the throne.

But when nine months passed and the queen went into labor, all was not well. The Queen was dying. The baby was dying. No mortal power could save their lives.

And so, the King went on a hunt for immortal power.

He went first to the ocean to kneel by the sea. "I am the richest man in the world," he told the Lady of the Waves. "I am the most powerful king in all the realms. I am as close to a god as a mortal can be. You must save my wife and child."

"I will not," the Lady of the Waves replied as she crashed on the sand. "Just as the tides must flow and ebb with the pull of the moon, all that is mortal must one day die. That is how it must be."

In all of his life, nobody had ever refused the King's request before. He would not take no for an answer. So he left the water and returned to the grass to lay his palms flat upon the ground.

"I am the richest man in the world," he told the Man of the Earth. "I am the most powerful king in all the realms. I am as close to a god as a mortal can be. You must save my wife and child."

"I will not," the Man of the Earth replied as he rumbled and quaked beneath the grass. "Just as my land shifts and reforms with the passing of time, all that is mortal must one day die. That is how it must be."

Still, the King refused to give up. He threw his hands high above his head and cried out to his final hope.

"I am the richest man in the world," he told the Being in the Sky. "I am the most powerful king in all the realms. I am as close to a god as a mortal can be. You must save my wife and child."
"I will not," the Being of the Sky replied as they blew through the air to reform the clouds. "Just as the light of the sun must at times be swallowed by storms, all that is mortal must one day die. That is how it must be."

The King returned home, for the first time in his life without his heart's desire granted. For all his gold and all his power, he still was mortal. He could not rise above the cold grip of Death. At the Queen's bedside, he sat and cried and waited for his wife and child to be taken. Before Death arrived however, the King had another visitor.

The One in Shadow appeared in the Queen's chambers and spoke to the King. "I shall grant your deepest desire."

"Why?" The king asked. "We are mortal, and all that is mortal must one day die. I thought that was how it must be. Why would you do this for us?"

"You are the richest man in the world," the One in Shadow replied. "You are the most powerful king in all the realms. You are as close to a god as a mortal can be. For that, I must save your wife or child." The One in Shadow held up a long, crooked finger. "But only one."

"The baby," the Queen weakly begged. "You must save our child."

"Then the child shall live," the One in Shadow promised. "In return for a gift."

"Anything," said the King. "Just name your price."

"I want a home," the One in Shadow replied. "A place where I may live in safety, with the promise I will never be expelled."

"If that is all you wish," said the king, who had lavish palaces in the country and atop the mountains and along the coast, "then it shall be done."

The One in Shadow stepped forward to shake the hand of the King and the deal was sealed for the rest of time.

A child was born that night. The Queen was able to hold the baby Princess before Death came to embrace her. The kingdom mourned, even as they celebrated their heir, and as he held his daughter, the King knew love like he never had before.

"For what you have done," the King told the One in Shadow, "I will not give you one of my palaces. I will order my servants to craft you the finest home that ever existed. A palace that surpasses all of my own."

"I need not a home for mortals," the One in Shadow replied, "for I am a god."

And the One in Shadow entered the Princess' young heart.

The Girl Who Loved With All Her Heart

Long ago, back in the ancient times when gods still walked the realms, there was a girl. She was a blessed, beautiful child born into royalty. All the kingdom loved her. Her father the King, her servants, her subjects, and even her very own heart.

Her heart loved her most of all.

"You are my home," the Voice in her Heart would whisper at night, "and I love you more than
anything in all the world."

"I love you too," the Princess would reply, "more than anything in all the realms."

The Princess loved many people and things. She loved her father the King, her servants, and her subjects. But most of all, she loved the Voice in her Heart.

On her eighth birthday, the King bought his daughter a pony. "You will learn to be the most graceful rider in all the kingdom," he said.

The Princess loved her pony too, but not as much as the Voice in her Heart.

"Our pony is very beautiful," the Voice in her Heart said.

"Yes," the Princess agreed.

"I wonder if he is just as beautiful on the inside as he is on the outside," the Voice in her Heart said.

"Probably," said the Princess.

"We should cut him open and see," said the Voice in her Heart.

And so the Princess did.

The stable hand found the remains in the back of the barn the next day.

When she was nine, the Princess spent her days playing with the daughter of the royal chef. They were very good friends, and often played spectacular games of imagination in the woods by the river. One day, they decided to make a dam just like the beavers the Princess had once read about in her studies.

They collected as many rocks as they could possibly carry, and started to build.

"These are very big rocks," the Voice in her Heart said.

"Yes," the Princess agreed.

"I wonder how strong they would make you," the Voice in her Heart said.

"Probably very strong," said the Princess.

"We should try to use one and see," said the Voice in her Heart.

And so the Princess did.

A hunter found the remains of the royal chef's daughter a week later.

When she was ten, the Princess' fairy godmother visited her on wings full of sparkling magic in the middle of the night to grant her a wish.

"I come to the children of all good rulers on their tenth year," the Fairy said. "If you have a wish that is within my power, I shall see it done."

"I have so much already," the Princess replied. "Love and family and all my father's wealth. I don't know what else I could possibly wish for. May I think about my wish and make it tomorrow night?"
In all of her years, the Fairy had never heard such a request, but she agreed to return again.

When the Princess lay down in bed that night, she thought about what she might wish for.

"The Fairy must be very powerful to be able to grant wishes," the Voice in her Heart said.

"Yes," the Princess agreed.

"I wonder if her wings full of sparkling magic are the source of her power," the Voice in her Heart said.

"Probably," said the Princess.

"We should take them for ourselves and see," said the Voice in her Heart.

And so the Princess did.

When the Fairy returned, the Princess leapt from the shadows and cut the sparkling, magic wings from her back with a carving knife. The fairy fell to the ground, mortal until the end of her days, while the Princess rolled up the wings into a ball and bit into them as one would an apple. They tasted very bitter, but the Voice in her Heart told her the best way to grow sparkling, magic wings of her own was to eat them up whole.

And so the Princess did.

At last, even in his love, the King could take no more. One night he called the Princess into his chambers.

"This must stop," the King told the Princess. "You are the greatest love I have ever known, but I fear the Shadow I let into your heart all those years ago has tainted your soul."

"The King is very upset with us," the Voice in her Heart said.

"Yes," the Princess agreed.

"I wonder if we are going to get in very much trouble if we let him keep yelling," the Voice in her Heart said.

"Probably," said the Princess.

"We should stop his yelling so we won't," said the Voice in her Heart.

And so the Princess did.

In the morning the King was found by his servants in his chambers. He was lying in bed as though sleeping, the breath stolen from his lungs by something none of the healers could identify no matter how long they tried.

When she left her own chambers an hour later, the young Princess found she was queen.

"You are my home," the Voice in her Heart whispered to her that night, "and I love you more than anything in all the world."

"I love you too," the Queen replied, "more than anything in all the realms."

Justice And Her Lady
Long ago, back in the ancient times when gods still walked the realms, there was a serving girl who lived in a beautiful palace. Though from the outside the castle seemed grand and impressive, inside its walls the world was very cold and very dark. The Queen who ruled there was cruel, and her vile, wicked heart made her treat her servants horribly.

"It is not fair," the Serving Girl said as she brought more trays of food than one woman could ever possibly eat to the Queen's table. "She has more than she needs and yet gives nothing to those of us who are starving."

"We are low born," the royal chef replied as she ran herself ragged over the hot stoves in the kitchens to keep up with the demand. "It is not our place to question the will of the Queen."

But the Serving Girl was not satisfied just silently accepting this injustice. So she went to the Good Fairies, looking for help to free her people from the wicked rule of the Queen.

"We are starving," she told the Good Fairies. "Please use your magic to free us."

"We will not challenge the Wing Thief," the Good Fairies replied.

And so she had no choice but to return home without help for her people.

"It is not fair," the Serving Girl said as the Queen ordered tax after tax upon her people merely to watch them squirm as she hoarded their gold for herself. "She has more than she needs and yet gives nothing to those of us who are destitute."

"We are low born," the Queen's hand replied as he was forced to collect much more than the people could afford to give. "It is not our place to question the will of the Queen."

But the Serving Girl was not satisfied just silently accepting this injustice. So she went to the gods, looking for help to free her people from the wicked rule of the Queen.

"We are starving and poor," she told the gods. "Please use your power to free us."

"We will not challenge the Daughter of Shadows," the Lady of the Waves and the Man of the Earth and the Being in the Sky replied.

And so she had no choice but to return home without help for her people.

"It is not fair," the Serving Girl said as the Queen cut off the hands of a starving, orphan boy who had dared to steal a single apple from her overflowing storehouse. "She has reign to do whatever she pleases and yet shows no mercy to those of us who are most in need."

"I agree," said the Handmaiden who watched beside her. "We are starving and poor and shepunishes us violently for the most petty of crimes. I am not satisfied just silently accepting this injustice. We must free our people from the wicked rule of the Queen."

"But no one will help us," the Serving Girl replied. "Not even the gods."

"Then we must help ourselves."

It was the Handmaiden's job to care for the Queen. Every day she stood by her side. She was there in the morning to help the Queen into her elaborate dresses, and she was there in the evening to dress the Queen in her silky nightgowns.

One night, after the Queen was undressed and sleeping peacefully, instead of standing guard, the
Handmaiden unlocked the door to her chambers. The Serving Girl entered and held up a long, crooked dagger she had bought from a hunter.

"I will do it," she told the Handmaiden. "She abuses her power. She hurts her subjects. She tortures my friends and family. I will strike the killing blow."

But the Handmaiden took the dagger for herself. "I will do it," she said. "She abuses me. She hurts me. She tortures me day and night. I will strike the killing blow."

They stepped up to the sleeping Queen and the Handmaiden raised the long, crooked dagger high above her head.

The Queen startled awake the first time the blade sunk into her chest, and she died on the second. Still, the Handmaiden did not slow. Again and again she stabbed the Queen, and to the Serving Girl, it seemed she would never stop.

Sixty-eight times the Handmaiden struck. With each swing she imagined another cruelty the Queen had dealt her. Only when exhaustion consumed her did she falter.

"It is done," the Handmaiden said. But the Serving Girl, horrified but what she'd seen, had already left. So she stood alone over the body of the Queen, bloodied dagger in hand.

"What have you done?" The voice was quiet in her head, but backed by great strength.

On instinct alone, she knew it came from the dagger. "Who are you?"

"I was the shadow in the Queen's heart," the Voice in the Dagger replied. "I was her greatest love. Long ago I was promised a home with her forever, never to be expelled."

"I am sorry," the Handmaiden replied. "My only enemy was the Queen. I did not mean to break such a promise."

"Promises such as this are not so easily broken."

And so the voice found a new home bound to a dagger and to a girl. One from which it was determined never to be expelled.

"And so the shadow in the Queen's heart lived on, infecting all who came into contact with it." Gold speaks slow and clear, each word weighted. "A dark curse born of evil passed on through the act of murder."

"That's where the immortality comes from." Regina shifts forward in her seat. "The Shadow."

"Perhaps," Gold says. "Perhaps not. Maybe the Shadow never existed at all." He shrugs. "As I said, the truth has been lost to time."

"But you would know better than anyone," Regina argues. "The truth was part of your own memories."

Gold shakes his head. "Whoever the Source really was, by the time I came around she was but an
echo inside the curse. Buried and overwhelmed and a fraction of what she was born to be."

"I don't understand."

"Look at what the legacy of the Dark One has become, Regina. Emma Swan is no great evil. Thanks to her careful control she's barely a threat at all, and only just to those closest to her. Slowly but surely, the curse is changing over the centuries. Emma didn't take on it's power for personal gain or in violence. She made a deliberate sacrifice, just as Boolan did. And that's been the way of it for a long time now. Zoso wanted only to serve his lord. I wanted desperately to save my son."

Regina knows what he's getting at, though after all the trouble he caused during his reign she finds it hard to believe. "You think you influenced the curse as much as it influenced you?"

"In a way," Gold allows. "Analath became cruel, ruled by her own sense of vengeance. She was the raw anger. Honrae brought in the greed. I carried with me manipulations. Twisted games and tricky words. But then there was Zoso who held nothing but loyalty in his heart when he let his name be written into the dagger. And Boolan, a boy filled with love. Driven by it. Why, his purity corrupted the curse just as much as it corrupted him."

Regina swallows, licks her lips. "And Emma?"

"You haven't noticed?" Gold smiles, just a little. The barest hint of amusement at the corner of his lips. "Beyond the sheer power, look at how physical she is. The way she uses her magic. It's so different than I ever did. Fists on fire and short bursts of energy. I was a thinker. But Emma, she's a brawler, and so the curse adjusts." He hums. "Think of the stories, all of them. The curse isn't the soulless evil it once was. It's a whisper in your mind, driving you towards darkness, but the strongest wills can resist."

"Despite everything, Emma has managed to spend days in your company, tuning out the curse and focusing on her humanity. It works because she's strong, and the lives of the past have given her the advantage she needs. Follow the line. Boolan was a gentle soul who spared his family by tucking himself away. Honrae became a greedy recluse. Zoso served his master before willingly giving his life to make the voices stop. I granted magical favors in return for petty, mischievous payments. And now Emma Swan, royal princess of all that is good and just, is using its power to save the world."

Hopefully.

Regina slumps back in her chair as three sharp blasts of color explode in the sky. Blue, black, orange in rapid succession. There and gone before she can so much as blink. "Why aren't you saying that like it's a good thing?"

"Because that's our version of the curse," Gold replies. "Cora's is a different story."

"No, it's the same. We made sure back in her universe. Boolan softened it and then it followed the same path. Everyone else up until you. The only difference is Emma."

He tilts his head. "That single difference means everything. Look what Cora has done to the curse. How she's amplified it. Ambition and hatred and untapped potential all boiling over until it's just about ready to swallow us all." Gold sighs. "I told Emma already, Cora's only motivation is power. She gives of herself freely, holding nothing back. No ties to humanity. No limits. No boundaries. No reason to fight to keep herself whole."

"Emma said if she gives herself over completely, Cora won't be a Dark One anymore." Funny, how just the words seem to have power. A frightening enough imagining that merely speaking them aloud
is enough to send a line of goosebumps trailing along her neck. "She'll be something new entirely."

Gold is quiet for a time. A teal glow falls over them before flickering back out of existence. A few sharp coughs ring out down the hall. Rivera's heels clack along the floor as she moves between her patient's rooms.

"Something old, I think," He says at last. "There's always some truth to legend. The curse didn't want to leave its first host." A scoff. "I don't even think that's what you could call her. They were as one. Incomplete without the other. It was love." The smile he flashes her is strained, barely there. "We both know that little in this or any realm is more powerful than that. I think, more than anything, it wants to find its love. It wants to reunite with her, no matter the cost."

Heat floods Regina's body. "Cora will bring her back?" Her words tremble more than she'd like. "You think that's possible?"

Gold's laugh is sharp and bitter. "What isn't anymore? Over two hundred years and every time I think I pin down a rule on magic, one of you kids swoops in to break it. I'm tired of crying out that things are impossible."

Regina swallows, fingers curled into tight fists on her lap. "When Emma brought up the Source, she seemed scared of her. She said all the voices of the curse were."

The effect is instantaneous. Gold soars, any hint of amusement gone. "Yes."

"Did she-" Regina shifts. "You said she never spoke to you?"

"She'd try sometimes. Late in the night." Gold grows distant. He's clearly somewhere else now. Somewhere far away and long ago. "When you dare to sleep, she reaches into your dreams. Whispers to you there. Asks you to let her out." He stares out the window, eyes reflecting the scarlet magic that flares up in the distance. "Begs to be set free."

"And in the day?" Regina's words are barely a whisper.

"It's the one thing everyone could always agree on." Gold's gaze slides back onto her. "Don't talk about the Source. Don't think about her. Make sure she stays sleeping."

"Emma said that too." The memory of Emma's clear fear. Last night's admission of being afraid, but not of Cora. Not of her power alone. The knowledge courses through Regina. Pushes her to her feet, paper scraps fluttering to the floor. A rosy pink hue. A striking, electric blue. A deep, royal purple.

Too long.

It's taking too long.

If it had been possible, Emma would have done it by now.

Cora would be little more than a bad dream.

"She can't do this on her own."

"Maybe not," Gold agrees, still comfortably seated. Already accepting everything Regina can't bring
herself to even imagine. "But for the sake of everything, she has to try."


Regina watches it all through the hazy fog her breath leaves behind on the glass.

"Not alone."

Gold does stand at that. Clatters too quickly to his feet, just barely catching his weight on his cane before he topples over. "Think of Henry."

"I am," Regina murmurs. "He'd never forgive me if I let her go without fighting."

"Regina," it's the closest she's ever heard him come to begging, "you do this, there's a very good chance it will be the last decision you ever make."

It's true, she knows it to her bones, and yet she's calm suddenly. Tranquil now that there's clear direction. A commitment. It's almost relaxing to be so totally resolute. To stop floundering and obsessing and worrying and take action at long last.

Too long has she been standing around, ducking into Emma's shadow at every hint of danger. But it's time to remember now that before Cora's sudden intrusion on their universe, the once terrible Evil Queen had never turned away from a challenge.

There's no choice to make here. There's never been one.

"This is my curse." Regina faces Gold, stands tall under the weight of his disapproving gaze. "It was meant for me. But Emma picked up that dagger and promised to see it through by my side. I won't abandon her now."

He works his jaw under taut cheeks. "I no longer have the power to physically stop you," he grits out. His knuckles are white where he grips his cane. "But you know where I stand."

Regina nods. "I'm going to bring her home."

Even as his eyes remain hard, Gold's voice softens. "I genuinely hope so."

Head tilt, Regina teases him a little. "And then we'll do lunch?"

The corner of his lips twitch. "If you're lucky."

She smiles and then, eyes closed, she reaches out for Emma’s magic with her own. Leaps out of the safety of the hospital and into the unknown of battle.

Chapter End Notes

Let's all just casually ignore how the curse's logic of being changed by those who it absorbed is totally the backstory for Majin Buu. WHOOPS. I was writing it and was like hmmm this sounds familiar...
Despite her newfound determination, Regina isn't going to throw away all common sense. She's careful with her magic. Expels just enough to get her where she's going, but not so much she draws attention to herself. The corner of Main Street is where she winds up, close to the harbor, and she quickly presses herself against the wall of Tillman's garage before she's spotted.

It's unlike anything she's ever experienced. A clear, calm night all around them, but air buzzing with energy. Magic whipped up into a violent storm, throwing the natural world around it out of balance at every turn.

The lights are brighter down here in the middle of it all. The air more stifling. The sheer power more intimidating.

Still, Regina plucks up the courage to move along the hard bricks at her back until she's able to peek around the bend. Down by the docks, Cora and Emma are locked in battle.

They circle one another like lions spoiling for a fight. Emma is battered and bloody and obviously exhausted. Chest heaving, legs shaking. Her clothes are torn and her skin grubby. Loose strands of hair have come free from where it was once tied back to stick to her neck, clinging to the sweat there. She's standing though, and pride surges through Regina at the sight of the blade in her hand. Against all odds, Emma is still in this thing.

As long as they have that sword, there's still hope.

Regina's gaze trails to Cora where she stands under the streetlights, and Regina gasps, stomach churning at the sight that greets her. When they'd last seen her, Cora had been well on her way to corruption. Looking like a walking corpse, deep lines of darkness splitting her once beautiful features.

This though-

God-

The cracks and crevices that had once decorated her skin are now ripped open and raw. Pieces of flesh dangling grotesquely to expose the pulsing shadows below. There's something in her. Something waiting to be set loose.

Something drawing closer to the surface with every passing second.

Cora lunges for Emma, hands splayed and magic bursting forth with abandon. No rhyme or reason or control. Emma skirts out of the way, and Regina grips the edge of the wall tight as she watches the technique she'd passed on in proper practice at last.

The effort is far from perfect. Still clumsy and a bit unsure, but it's keeping Emma one step ahead of Cora just as intended. Keeping her bobbing and weaving and ducking out of the way of oncoming
magic.

Cora is fast too though. Faster than should be possible. She moves like water, ebbing and flowing to mirror Emma's evasion, murky darkness at her feet, urging her along. As soon as Emma falters, that will be the end of it.

They have to finish this before Emma is too tired to keep up. It's clear she's already struggling to even attempt a strike. Cora is darting about, reaching for her, and the anxiety must be mounting. One wrong move, Cora gets her hands on the dagger, and it's done. Everything they worked for will be over in an instant.

Emma stays light on her feet, leaping about the darkened street just out of Cora's frantic, clawing grasp. But she's slowing rapidly. How the hell she's lasted as long as she has, Regina has no idea. How either of them are even standing- well, it's beyond her comprehension.

The how doesn't matter though. All she knows is that there's no way she can stand up to what Cora has become. All Regina can feasibly do is try and give Emma the opening she needs to land that one fatal blow.

A rose colored burst of lightning shoots out of Cora's splayed palm. It cuts through the air and Emma ducks away a second too slow, the magic clipping her shoulder. A grunt of pain escapes her and she falls to her knees, free hand coming up to grip the deep wound. Cora stands over her, triumphant, and Regina knows it's now or never.

Summoning all her power to her hand, she steps out of cover and sends everything she's got hurtling straight for Cora's back.

The magic does little against Cora's superior strength beyond eating away at what's left of her tattered cloak, but that doesn't matter. All that matters is that she feels it. Feels it and turns to face Regina and leaves her back completely exposed.

"You-?" is all Cora manages to get out before Regina sends another blast of biting violet magic. Her power is batted away, swatted like a bothersome fly with a flick of Cora's wrist.

Emma is moving though. Recovered from the shock of seeing Regina and pushing shakily to her feet. Regina keeps firing. Again and again. Moving as quickly as she can when Cora summons up her own strength to retaliate.

Just keep moving and keep the pressure on. That's all she has to do. Just don't let Cora see Emma. Don't let her remember-

"Enough," Cora bellows. A shield bursts to life in front of her and Regina's attacks dissolve harmlessly against it, absorbed into the smoky white screen. Her eyes are murky and distant even in her focused rage. The flaps of skin that hang loose around her cheeks, the shadows below pulsing and throbbing and aching for freedom. Hungry for air. "I'll crush you," she screeches, teeth gnashing as she drops the shield to approach. "I'll crush you both like the bugs you-"

The threat dies on her tongue when the point of a blade bursts through her abdomen.

"I-" Cora staggers forward, her eyes wide as she takes in the blade impaling her, the blood seeping through her clothes. "No- I-" She crumples to her knees.

Emma stands behind her, breathing heavy. Her gaze flickers up to reach Regina's and she offers a curt nod.
It's done.

It's over.

They've really done it.

"No." Disbelief long gone, Cora's voice is venom now. Poison. "I-" She falls forward, palms splayed on the road, sword sticking out of her, point scraping the pavement and hilt proud in the sky. "I can't." She struggles to push to her feet. Stumbles once, twice, then manages to rise completely. Staggering, but upright as blood stains the ground beneath her feet. "I won't." Her voice is different now. Deeper. Darker. And there's something growing inside her.

It's not right.

This isn't-

Cora stands, bleeding and impaled and radiating more magic than she ever has before.

This isn't right.

They need to get away. They need to get out of here now. But Emma is so far away and Cora stands between them and god, Regina can't move. All she can do is stand and stare at the nightmare playing out before her.

"It's over, Cora," Emma says, fists clenched at her sides. "You're finished."

A pulse of energy runs through Cora. Starts at her toes and shoots up her spine until it's radiating outwards. An immense, suffocating power that threatens to consume all in its path.

"I'll tell you when this is over, Savior."

Emma's eyes widen as Cora brings her hands up to her face. Nails poised like claws, there's no hesitation before she digs into the already torn flesh. Shredding her own skin apart, yanking and tugging through the muscles and blood to get to the shadows underneath.

It's enough to churn her stomach, but Regina swallows down her sickness as Emma screams, "Stop! Cora, don't do this. Fight her."

But it's too late. The flesh is peeled away. Cora's being shed like a chrysalis, discarded on the side of the road. Nothing but a shadow left in her place. The vague approximation of a woman. Tall and narrow and utterly featureless.

The remnants of the Source.

"Cora is dead." The Source has no features, no mouth, but the words permeate the air around them. Tickle up their spines and fill their senses completely. She grips the blade speared through her with both hands and pushes. Drives it back out of her body without so much as flinching until it clatters uselessly to the ground. No visible wound is left in its place.

And even if Regina hadn't just heard everything she had from Gold, she thinks she would understand the trouble they'd gotten themselves into just by the way Emma appears in front of her in a sudden puff of magic. "You need to get out of here. Now. I'll keep her busy. Just go."

Eyeless, the Source still manages to track her movement effortlessly. Head tilt she considers them. "It's good to see you face to face at last, Emma Swan." Voice smooth like silk, only the faintest
undertones giving any indication of malicious intent. "Usually there are so many lives between us."

Summoning the weapon to her hand with magic, Emma holds the now useless sword aloft. "You're not my curse," she spits back, the quaver in her voice betraying her fear.

The shadow's shoulders sag. Her head shakes lightly. "Oh, dearheart," she coos, "I think you'll find I very much am."

It happens in an instant. The Source tenses, coils up like a cat ready to pounce, and Emma throws her free hand back against Regina's chest. Sends her stumbling to relative safety before lunging to meet the Source blow to blow. They leap about the road, disappearing here to reappear there, clashing again and again.

There's laughter in the air. Cool and joyful and utterly relaxed. Emma is straining. Slowing down more and more with each failed assault. The Source bats away her magic easily, completely unbothered while Emma struggles to keep out of her reach. To breathe and to run and to feebly lash out with the sword that had been supposed to save them.

Regina watches, helpless. And seeing the might of the curse in its true form, feeling it, she's never felt so insignificant in the whole of her life.

This is true power. Something Cora could never hope to achieve. No mortal could. There's no standing against this.

No chance.

The Source could be done with them in seconds if that's what she wanted.

So why wait?

Emma cries out as a blow to the side sends her to the ground. She rolls over the harsh pavement, skin scraped and bleeding. The Source stands over her, gives her a sharp kick in the ribs. Physical in a way Cora never lowered herself to be. She tilts her head as Emma groans and clutches her stomach. Watching like a toddler with no concept of true pain.

She's drawing this out. Playing with her. Teasing her. Trying to what, provoke Emma?

Why? What could that possibly accomplish? Is this all just some twisted game?

It would be so easy for her to finish it then and there, but the Source walks away from Emma, pacing the dark street without direction. "Despite your best efforts, it seems the curse really did change you. If you'd just let us take you, your precious town would have been saved. But you only cared about saving yourself, didn't you?" A tisk sounds, as though she'd clucked her nonexistent tongue.

Arms shaking, Emma pushes unsteadily to her palms. "You- You would have destroyed the universe. Every universe."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not." The Source's shadowed hands find the place where her hips should be. "But now, it seems we'll never know. For all you have left is one certainty, to watch as I wipe everything you've ever dared to love from the very fabric of this reality."

Teeth grit, Emma forces herself up on her trembling legs. She clenches her fists, shoulders tense.

"Oh," a chuckle, "unless you're going to stop me, of course."
"I won't let you just mindlessly destroy everything."

"Mindless destruction?" If she had a face, Regina is sure the Source would be pouting. "You think I could be so shallow?"

"Fine." Emma's laugh is bitter. "I'll bite. What do you want then?"

"I think, right now, I want you to acknowledge the truth."

"That you're stronger than me?" Emma spits and then works her jaw, tenderly running her fingers along the bruised skin. "Yeah, I got that. Thanks."

The Source doesn't acknowledge her cheek. "This life you've built yourself, it's mortifying, isn't it? Look at you, Emma Swan. Living your little life in your little town, pretending. Aren't you humiliated?"

Regina watches the bravado fade. Emma's self-deprecating smile falters and her gaze drops to the ground.

The Source feeds off of the obvious wound. Starts prowling. Circles Emma like a predator so very close to the kill. "Savior to a town that has already been saved. Grown daughter of a couple who already have a baby. Parent to a son who already has a mother. In love with a woman who already has a soulmate."

It's enough to make her sick, the words washing over Regina. She stands, heart in her throat, watching Emma where she shakes in the faint spotlight of the streetlight above, head bowed.

"I know you, dearheart. I am you. And I ask myself just the same question you have for oh, so long now. The curse is broken, the people are saved and ready to move forward. So then, what is the point of you?"

Regina can't breathe. Emma really-? "I didn't want her to think we could possibly be whole without her," Snow had said. Sometimes she felt as though Emma thought they might be.

Regina had dismissed Snow's words at the time but-

"You're right."

Regina's head snaps to Emma, eyes wide at the admission.

"Maybe I'm nothing. Maybe all I have left is to die here today." Jaw tight, eyes burning, Emma stands tall. "So I guess the last thing I can do is take you out with me."

Emma speeds forward, sword aloft. The blade glows with her own magic now, not so useless anymore as she pumps her energy into the weapon. She swings with purpose, every jab meant to put an end to the battle, but the Source easily outmaneuvers her.

Even if Emma does manage to land another blow, it wouldn't matter, would it?

Their enemy is on another level now. Completely and totally immortal. No magical swords or wands or spells to save them anymore.

"That's it," the Source barks out in obvious excitement as Emma's magic pulls together, every last ounce of her power merging for one final desperate act. "That's what I want." She sidesteps a swipe of the sword. "Embrace what we've been trying to give you, Emma." She dodges a silver blast of
magic from Emma's open palm. "Let go and see what you can really become."

A growl of frustration and Emma brings down the blade from above, finally making contact. But the Source doesn't so much as flinch as it sinks into her shoulder, nearly cleaving her arm clear off.

There's no blood this time around. No exclamation of pain. Just a darkened shadow of a woman, totally unharmed.

"You're still holding back." The Source lifts a hand, palm splayed. No visible magic emerges, but Emma is sent reeling all the same. Pushed back by an invisible force that has her tumbling head over heels onto the pavement. "Let go. It's your only chance, and you know it. Show me the power they're all so proud of."

A crumpled heap on the ground, Emma twitches, struggling to find her way back to her feet.

"Make one last stand for your world, Savior." The Source grips the blade of Cora's sword and tugs it out of her body. She tosses it carelessly to the side. "Prove your worth of the title. Give me one last challenge before my new reign."

Emma manages to push up to her hands but her shaky arms give out. A grunt escapes her when she crashes back down to the pavement. The Source tuts as she tries and falls and tries again.

In an eerily slow motion, the Source turns her head to take in Regina. A blank, featureless stare that sends chills skittering down her spine. "Perhaps we just need the proper motivation?"

"Stop," Emma shouts.

The Source's hand is already raised. The magic already building.

The last thing Regina sees is Emma disappear before the bright light of magic blinds her. A rush. A hard slap against her back. The breath stolen from her lungs.

When she opens her eyes again, Regina is flat on her back on the sidewalk, Emma on top of her. It aches, the way Emma is trembling. How her limbs are weak and her breath is heavy and she's on the very brink of collapse.

"You need to go," Emma rasps, every word a clear effort. "Get over the line. Get as far as possible. I'll buy you as much time as I can."

Regina clutches at Emma's shirt, refuses to let go. "I'm not going to abandon you to be tortured by that monster."

A sigh, and Emma drops her forehead heavily against Regina's. Eyes closed, she says, "She won't be the only one you have to worry about."

Insides frozen, Regina only holds tighter. "Emma, don't. That's what she wants you to do. She wants you to lose."

But Emma's already changing. Her body growing still and strong once more. Her magic building. Her aura more sinister. And when she opens her eyes again, all that's left is an emotionless, milky white sheen.

There's nothing when she looks at Regina. No recognition. None of that hunger that had been so threatening in her darkest moments. None of that will to destroy.
"Em-" Regina lifts a shaky hand, dares to reach for-

A sharp bark of laughter rings out around them. Emma twists around to face down the Source as she approaches. "Oh, now she's finally here." The Source raises her hands, prepared at last to let loose for real. "Show me what we are together, dearheart."

There's something inhuman about the way Emma dives for the Source. Throws her whole body at her without any sense of self preservation. Long gone are her shaky limbs, her clear exhaustion. She's smooth and sturdy and moves like- like the Source.

Like Cora before she'd been taken.

"Emma-" Regina's voice breaks as she watches the transformation take hold.

"That's it," the Source cries, delighted as the shield she throws up to keep some distance between them crumbles easily under Emma's enhanced power. "Show me more."

It's a dance. Wild and unpracticed and nearly faster than Regina can witness. Emma's pursuit is relentless. The Source throws magic at her. Hurls energy like Regina's fireballs. But Emma bats them away with her own magic, moving with the enhanced speed of Regina's spell at last perfected and something more sinister. Something murky and dark that pulses beneath her skin.

"Do what you can on your own," Gold had warned her. "The more you lean into it, the deeper you'll be pulled in."

"We might have no way to drag you back."

"Give me more." The Source's magic lifts the discarded sword into the air. "I want to see everything." She sends the blade hurtling towards Emma faster than Regina can blink.

Emma vanishes and reappears on the docks a ways down the street. She lifts her hands into the air and water rises behind her. A flick of her wrist and a powerful jet of it hurtles towards the Source. Again and again, Emma keeps up the pressure. Stream after stream shooting out, her supply endless with the harbor nearby.

The Source raises a shield, strong and shimmering and the water beats harmlessly against it. But it's only a distraction. Emma is on the move again, transports herself around the back of the Source's protection and swings a fist encased in shimmering magic straight for the Source's chest.

The heart.

She's going for the heart.

But the Source is a shadow. No flesh or bones or blood or organs to keep her alive. Emma's hand sinks into the darkness and comes out the other side, fingers grasping at nothing.

The Source uses the opportunity to grip onto Emma tightly, wrapping her up in a twisted embrace. Emma squirms in her arms, wriggling like a panicked animal caught in a trap. The Source doesn't let go though. If anything, her hold seems to tighten. The shadow of her arms spread, melting like liquid to envelop Emma completely. Regina watches helplessly as the Source's shadowy essence clings to Emma's skin, smoothing over her like spilled ink.

"That's it." The Source's silky voice fills the air. "All that's left is to embrace us. This gift is yours to take."
Emma is still now. Rigid as the shadow threatens to consume her whole. One arm pinned to her side, the other still trapped, stuck violently through the Source's empty chest.

"We're the only option you have left, aren't we?" The voice asks in a whisper, its murky form creeping down Emma's thighs and over her shoulders. The scene is horrific. A deadly snake wrapped around a petrified rodent, ready to squeeze the life out of its prey.

And then Emma moves.

Jerks forward, mouth open, and sinks her teeth into the space where the Source's neck should be. And there's no physical pain dealt by the clumsy attack, but the rejection is clear. The shadow recoils back into a more defined shape, the image of a woman once more. But Emma doesn't release her as she tries to slink away. She is the one to cling to the Source now, turning the tables with the recklessness her curse has provided her with.

The air of humor the Source's arrogance had imbibed in the air fades as Emma attacks. Magic a mere afterthought as she lunges and bites and claws her way through the fight. Emma isn't moving like herself anymore. Gold had commented on her unusual physicality upon taking on the curse and watching her now there's an animalistic quality to her. She's blindly ripping her way through her enemy with inhuman prowess.

The air is heavy with darkness now, the Source's triumph giving way to quickly morph into hot anger. She's near defenseless under the assault as Emma doesn't relent. No more spells or ploys or strategies. Just anger and power and even something as great and terrible as the Source seems meek under the strain of it all.

Emma leaps and tackles and they're on the ground now. Wrestling with one another in a frantic, wild way that would be comical if not for the fact that Regina is struck with the sudden realization that saving the town no longer matters. Because Emma has her enemy pinned to the ground, teeth sunk into what should be her flesh.

Murky gaze betraying the loss of reason, the emptiness that's building, Emma latches onto the Source's arm and wrenches it away from the shadowy body. Again and again. Yanking and pulling and the Source has no mouth, but her scream rattles the buildings around them all the same when her limb is torn from her body.

The lack of blood softens the image, but the influence of the curse overwhelms any hint of Emma. She's there only in body now, her true self fading into the darkness as she carelessly tosses the severed arm over her shoulder. There's no sound when it hits the ground and it disappears as soon as it makes contact with the pavement. The energy reforms instantly, reshapes back at the Source's side to leave her whole and complete once more, but the psychological damage is done.

The Source drags herself backwards along the ground, trying to put any distance she can between herself and Emma. The humor that had once been in the air is long gone now, and if Regina didn't know any better, she'd say the Source is afraid.

Emma looms over the wretched thing, eyes hollow and teeth bared and magic surging around her wildly, untamed and out of control.

This fight is irrelevant. If this keeps up, they're going to lose Emma forever no matter who wins.

On that thought alone, Regina finds herself moving.
Saving the universe is irrelevant now. It's little more than an afterthought. All that matters is getting through this tp find Emma on the other side.

"Emma!" she calls, even though she already knows her friend is beyond hearing her. Emma only has one focus now. One thing in her sights.

The Source rolls on the ground, does her best to scamper away, but Emma is the one that's too fast for her now. Her arm snaps out like the strike of a snake, hand gripping tight to the Source's throat as she helplessly squirms. Fingers like claws digging into the shadow's neck, Emma holds her aloft.

"Emma," Regina screams, "stop!"

But she's too far gone. Emma's eyes are black now, her skin pale in the faint moonlight, the light of life rapidly fading as she slips into her role as an immortal creature. She raises her free hand, ready to strike once more, and all Regina can think to do is dash forward and throw herself onto Emma before she can land another blow.

Everything is still.

The Source remains aloft, fruitlessly struggling in the tight grip. Emma stands rigid, trembling slightly as Regina wraps her arms over her shoulders, likely doing her best from tearing everything around her to shreds.

"Let her go," Regina breathes into Emma's neck, pressing up against her fully despite the danger. "Put her down. Walk away. Not for her, just to prove you can." Emma is full on shaking now, violent energy buzzing just beneath her skin, but Regina refuses to back away. "Just let go. That's all you have to do. Show me you still can."

The Source goes still. Emma remains stiff. The street is dark and the wind is still and feet away water laps against the supports of the dock.

When Emma finally speaks her voice is low and pained, a harsh whisper, "Please don't touch me."

Regina nods, backs away slowly so as not to agitate her any further. "All right." She stands back, heart ready to burst as she watches Emma, stronger than all who came before her, break through the haze of the curse's influence.

Arm trembling, Emma slowly lowers the Source and stares down the woman where her eyes should be.

"You're-" the Source's voice weakly slithers through the air, but Emma's fingers twitch around her throat and stunt them before any more words can fully take shape.

Emma lifts her free hand and in a puff of gray smoke, a familiar leather cuff appears. She snaps it around the shadow's wrist, binding her magic. But that's apparently not good enough. Emma keeps her hand on the cuff and pumps her own magic into it until it melds into the Source. Brands the shadow, becomes a part of her very being. Becomes a lock that can never be broken.

"Stay where you belong," Emma murmurs. The power of the curse still bolstering her, she quickly summons up more than enough magic to splay her palm wide and reopen the remnants of their portal. The Source shrieks and scratches but she's powerless now as Emma drags her over to the swirling vortex. "Stay in the past."

In one great push, she throws the Source inside. Not a second later, the portal snaps shut. Emma stands in the street, victorious.
All is quiet.

Heart in her throat, Regina takes a half step forward. Emma looks over her shoulder, her eyes clear once more, something like a smile teasing at her lips.

It's done.

Done at last.

“It’s all right,” Emma says, every word a clear, labored effort. “She won’t be able to hurt anyone anymore.”

Regina swallows. “Where-?”

“I sent her home. Where the darkness first came from before it slipped into a realm of mortals. A deserted, desolate place.” Emma takes a shaky, staggering step towards her. “One where there won’t be anyone to harm, and she can never escape from.” Another. “Not without her magic.” And another. “We’re free now.”

Regina senses the impending collapse before it happens, and she’s already halfway to Emma before she hits the ground.
There's nothing but darkness at first. The voices take awhile to really register. At the start they're soft, muffled sorts of sounds. Comforting, but distant and unclear. Like trying to make out what someone is saying underwater.

But in time they clear out. Slowly going from a background hum into discernible voices into actual sentences her mind can slap meaning onto.

"Gently, Henry."

Those are the first words she's able to fully make out. It's then that she registers the steady rocking.

Someone's...pushing her?

"You know Ma's always impossible to wake up."

Hey, she's got a tough job. She's entitled to sleeping in occasionally. Isn't she? Henry will understand when he's forced to grow up and face the real world. He'll be missing gluing together history dioramas soon enough.

"It's true, Regina. Weekday mornings were impossible until after everything with Neverland."

Wow. Her own mother, a traitor.

"I suppose she learned in New York how to function like an actual adult."

Fuck off, Regina.

"Emma?" David's voice is loud enough to make her wince.

Oh shit, did she say that out loud?

"Perhaps we could use more child friendly language in front of our son, hmm?"

"I don't think I still count as a child," Henry offers.

"Hush."

"Sorry," Emma grunts. Her throat is tight and she feels like she's spent the last few hours gargling rocks. It's an effort, but she forces her eyes open. Seeing nothing but blurry, too-bright shapes for a few moments before she starts to slowly blink detail into the world.

David is the first one she sees. His anxious face way too close as he frantically snaps his fingers in front of her. "How you making out, kiddo?" Snap. Snap. "How many fingers am I holding up?"
"Goodness, David," Snow scolds. "Give her some space."

She can make them all out now. They're in Emma's room at the loft. Henry sitting on the edge of her mattress, Regina at his back. Snow and David hovering anxiously, pale cheeked and desperation in their eyes. Gold and Belle linger at the far end of the room. Showing their support, but clearly uncomfortable being too present in the little family reunion.

"What's, uh-" Emma shifts up onto her elbows, grunting a bit at the sharp stab of pain that shoots through her abdomen.

"Easy, honey," Snow soothes, a hand on her arm.

"Ya, Ma, go slow." Henry shifts so he can bunch up the pillows behind her back and help her remain at least somewhat upright. "Everything's fine now. You got rid of Cora for good."

Emma squints a bit at the throbbing that's started up in the base of her skull. "Even-?" Her gaze flickers to Regina who nods, lips pursed.

"The tear in the sky is even starting to mend itself now that nobody is messing with the universes anymore," Henry chirps. "It's getting smaller every day."

Huh. Well then. Maybe it's really over for good.

"Yes, certainly a cause for celebration for us all."

Emma's insides tighten and she squeezes her eyes shut, breathing deep as Honrae's silky, condescending voice washes over her.

Right. Of course they'd still be-

"Emma?" The concern is written all over David's face.

Emma looks up at her father, offers a strained smile to reassure him. "Everything is fine. Just a little sore."

"Always so noble," Honrae coos.

Emma bites back a swear and ignores him as she tries to right herself again, this time pushing past the pain to fully sit up. "How long was I out?"

Everyone around her shifts nervously, sharing fleeting looks.

"Guys?"

"We'd never seen anything like it before." Gold is the one to speak. "To your very core your magic was drained. As though it had left your body completely. We weren't even sure if it would be able to come back at all."

Flexing her fingers, Emma stares down at her hands in her lap. She can feel a flicker of magic deep down, but the power is muted. Disconnected and out of reach.

"We had to make sure you would be able to rest completely. No distractions or setbacks." Regina takes a cautious step forward, gaze apologetic. "I used my magic to make sure you'd have the time you needed until your body was ready."

"So," Emma's features twist up as she works it out in her still sluggish mind, "I've been in a magical
"In a way," Regina allows, frowning.

"Mom said you'd wake up on your own when you were ready," Henry cuts in, "but it's been so long we took a vote and decided to wake you up now. Just for today, at least. If you want." His face falls a little. "If you don't want to stay up Mom can let you sleep again."

"Today-?"

Snow's voice trembles as she speaks. "It's Christmas, Emma."

David's smile is watery. "We're having dinner in a few hours."

"Oh." Emma blinks, trying to process.

Two months. She's been out for nearly two months. Away from them all because of this damned curse.

Again.

"Do you feel up to sitting with us?" It's David who poses the question but when Emma looks up they're all clearly waiting for an answer.

There's a tension in the room Emma doesn't quite understand and looking at them all - Gold's somber grimace and Belle's furrowed brow and Henry's stiff shoulders and her parent's hopeful eyes and Regina's clear exhaustion - she gets the feeling she wasn't simply resting these past two months. That maybe things were a little more touch and go than her family is letting on.

Even now, after all she's put them through, they're still protecting her.

Henry clears his throat in the stilted silence. "I convinced Mom to make a couple pies." He raises his eyebrows teasingly, but his apprehension shines through. His fear that she might choose to leave him all over again.

And so Emma forces a smile. She ignores the faint shadows around her, flickering weakly. The way Honræ is grinning over Belle's shoulder. How Rumpelstiltskin and Zoso are taking her in with shrewd eyes, reveling in her weakness. The way Boolan is sitting on the top of her dresser, legs swinging beneath him. How Analath is spread out along the mattress beside her, utterly bored and horribly unimpressed.

Emma ignores them all and smiles for her son and says, "I could probably handle some pie."

All of the onlookers stuffed into her tiny room - the ones that aren't figments of her imagination at least - seem to sigh as one body, their collective tension at last giving way to relief.

"Well then," the high pitch of Snow's voice betrays her wayward emotions, but she manages to hold back the tears as she claps her hands together with a too-wide smile, "boys if you'd please head back downstairs and keep an eye on everything in the kitchen, we'll help Emma get cleaned up a bit."

Gold can't seem to leave fast enough, and David and Henry trail after him. Belle lingers by the door. "As long as the two of you think you can handle this, I'll probably head down as well."

Emma shoots Belle a reassuring grimace as the other woman backs towards the doorway. She's always been nothing but kind to Emma, and they have a good relationship all things considered. But
there's certainly more than enough distance between them that both aren't keen for Belle to see
Emma in her underwear.

"No worries," Emma assures her and revels at the fact that when Belle smiles and leaves, she doesn't
feel any resentment. No lurking bitterness or biting comments fill her mind. The curse is still present,
she can feel it rippling weakly deep within herself. A trickle of water spurting through a crack in a
mighty dam. But just like her magic it's distant and muted.

The past lives of the darkness linger in her room, watching, sneering, but they're quiet in a way
they've never been before. Subdued along with her strength. Emma's under no illusions that as soon
as the gogginess fades and her energy grows they won't be back to throwing their weight around
and doing their best to drive her closer and closer to madness, but for now, she decides to enjoy this
unexpected gift of peace. To let her family have a proper Christmas and not burden them any further
with her drama.

Soon, she'll be forced to leave them once more. For their safety - for Henry's, for Regina's - but now,
in this quiet, they can manage this one last meal.

When the door closes, Snow moves to throw Emma's arm over her shoulder. "Regina, would you
mind grabbing some clothes from the dresser? Something warm, I think." Letting her body be used
as a crutch, she helps Emma slide to the edge of the mattress, feet inching out slowly until they at last
hit the floor.

"Ugh," Regina's disgruntled groan as she digs through the messy drawers nearly brings a smile to
Emma's lips, "do you have anything in here that wasn't intended for a teenage girl?" Her mouth is a
thin line of blatant disapproval when she holds up a pair of jeans that are admittedly more
challenging to get into than they were a handful of years ago.

Emma's laugh makes her ribs feel like they're ready to bust apart. "Probably not, no."

"Go easy," Snow murmurs as Emma tries and fails to push to her feet. With a gentle hand she keeps
Emma firmly rooted to the mattress. "Shirt first. Then we'll worry about standing."

Emma sighs and waits for Regina to find something she deems suitable Christmas dinner wear. Her
gaze wanders away from her mother and her messy bed, over to the armchair in the corner that
definitely hadn't been there last time she left. It's the one from the living room downstairs. Old and
well used. A permanent dip in the middle of the cushion and the flower pattern a faded, washed out
image.

It's next to her tiny bedside table. A dark coat thrown over the back. An open bag on the floor stuffed
with clothes. A pillow on the armrest. A book abandoned on the cushion, a tissue stuffed inside to
serve as a hasty marker. Manila folders beside it, papers overflowing and piled precariously high.
The bedside table has a couple of bowls stacked on top of one another. An old glass still half full of
water collects dust just a few inches away.

Regina.

"I think more casual wear would be best."

Emma pulls out of her realization to find Regina holding a pair of old flannel pajama pants and an
oversized sweater.

"It will be easier to get her into something a little more spacious."

At Snow's determined nod, Emma can't help herself. "I'd like to try on my own, if that's all right."
"Honey," Snow sighs out, something dangerously close to pity on her face as her gaze flickers to where her arm still bears her daughter's weight, "you can barely sit up."

"I just need to get used to it." Emma manages a stiff smile and shifts a bit, leaning away from her mother's support. Her entire body screams in protest, every muscle on fire, but she refuses to let it beat her. She's the Dark One after all, she's immortal still, right? Pain can't kill her, it's not as though she has limits to worry about.

"My," Analath croons, flopping over on the bed, hands to her cheeks, "how very brave."

Emma ignores her while she still can. "I'm sure Dad is freaking out about having to handle dinner without you." It's a cheap trick, but in moments like these Emma isn't above exploiting the fact that a well placed 'Mom' or 'Dad' gets her her way more often than not. Judging by the way Snow's face softens, this time is no exception. "Don't worry about me."

Though she straightens and takes a half-step towards the door, the conflict is clear in Snow's eyes.

"I'll stay nearby in case she needs help," Regina assures her, and that at last is enough to move Snow along.

"Don't hesitate to shout for me," she needles on the way out, moving at a snail's pace.

"We'll be fine," Regina tuts, impatience clear, and Emma realizes too late the position she's put herself in.

Relatively clear headed for the first time in a long while, and alone with Regina, who likely has a whole hell of a lot of questions. Still, when Snow carefully closes the door behind her, there's one thing Emma finds herself able to relish in. With the voices of the darkness subdued, this is the most alone she's been with Regina in far too long.

Regina sets the clothes neatly on the bed then stands in front of Emma, awkwardly hovering. "Do you need me too-?" she trails off, worrying her lip.

"I'd like to try completely on my own first, if that's all right."

"Of course." She takes a couple steps back.

Emma fingers the bottom of the tank top her mother must have changed her into while she was under the effects of Regina's magic, hesitant. "Do you-" she clears her throat, cheeks warm, "Can you turn around?"

"Oh." Regina blinks down at her for a moment before nodding jerkily. "Right. I'll just-" Another couple of steps back and she turns to face the wall.

"It's not you," Emma hurries out, "I just think this is going to be...less than pretty. It's kinda embarrassing."

Thankfully the tense of Regina's shoulders seems to relax. Her voice is painfully soft when she speaks. "You don't have to be embarrassed."

"I know," Emma allows. "Just humor me, huh?"

And she does. Regina stares pointedly at the wall while Emma grunts and groans like an idiot as she struggles into the plaid pajama bottoms.
"Very graceful," Honrae sneers.

"Stupid fucking thing," Emma mutters under her breath as she squirms painfully, flopping about until the waistband makes it over her thighs.

"You seem more like yourself." The smile is clear in Regina's voice.

Emma stills on the mattress, flat on her back, staring up at the popcorn ceiling above as her body aches and aches and aches. "I feel more like myself," she whispers. "I think," she hesitates, fully aware of the leering faces all around, invisible to all but herself, "they're too worn out to do much influencing for the moment."

"But they'll be back." It's more statement than question.

Emma answers anyway. "Yeah," she sighs out, "they'll be back."

Regina hums her understanding, and Emma struggles into her sweater in silence for a time. Her arms are throbbing and hang heavy at her sides like lead, but she's reluctant to ask Regina for anymore help. Not after all the drama and chaos she's caused. Not when it seems as though Regina's put her whole life on hold to take care of her.

"Maybe," Emma startles a bit when Regina breaks the silence, "if you're not too tired after dinner, we can talk...later...." Regina clears her throat, "about...things..."

Despite it all, Emma's heart winds up being the most painful thing in her body. "Yeah," she chokes out, even as she resigns herself to being long gone before Regina can even think to get her alone again tonight.

The hospital had been a moment of weakness when the threat of death loomed over them. Emma had allowed herself to be selfish, to give in. But now, she resolves herself to being someone worthy of Regina. Someone who will protect her no matter what, even when that means walking away.

She'll be gone before the dessert plates are cleared. It's the only way.

"Come help me with this sweater." She gives in to distract them both. "Please."

She still has the tank top on, so it's not too intimate of a process. Regina is careful with her as she eases Emma's arms into the sleeves. Cautious in a way that betrays her anxieties over the past two months.

"So," Emma drawls as Regina guides the sweater over her head, "I was just worn out from all the magic?"

Regina stills for a moment, then sighs. Her voice is thick when she speaks. "We didn't know if you were going to wake up. I tried to do what I could with my magic, but for a long time there was no way to tell if any of it was helping."

"Well," Emma flexes her hands again as Regina finishes dressing her and steps back, "everything seems to be in working order even after a two month coma, so looks to me like you did a pretty good job."

"I kept your physical body in stasis so your muscles wouldn't degrade at all. Unfortunately that's made you as sore and tired as if you'd just fought that battle. Technically you're going to be two months younger than you really are for the rest of your life." Regina shifts between her feet. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to ask for your permission first."
Emma's tempted to remind her that she won't be aging at all because of her curse, but that will only lead into a fight so instead she shrugs and says, "Four months if you count from the time this all started."

"Four months then," Regina amends with a nod, though she doesn't seem very happy about it.

It's a bit awkward, there's some strain between them where there hasn't been for a good couple of years now. But even still, Emma sits on her little bed and allows herself to enjoy being with Regina, the curse little more than a quiet murmur in the background. It's been so long since she's been allowed this.

God, if she could just go back-

Well, she'd do a lot of things differently.

So many things.

That, Emma supposes, can be what she obsesses over when she returns to her isolation.

"It really is over then." Emma takes a deep breath. "You know, for a good while there I didn't think we were gonna find our way out of this one."

"Me neither."

Emma scooches to the edge of the mattress and holds up her hands. It takes a moment for Regina to register the unspoken question and hurry forward. She lets Emma hold onto her and pull herself shakily to her feet. It takes a few seconds for Emma to steady herself, but soon with Regina's help, she's managing a couple stuttering steps towards the door.

"When the sword didn't work," Regina says quietly, "I really thought it was over. I've talked to Gold about it since. He wanted to know every little detail about the whole affair."

Emma snorts. "Sounds like him."

"He has some theories on why the dagger didn't work."

"Hit me with them," Emma says as they slowly shuffle past Boolan where he sits on her dresser, determined to soak in all she can of their time together before it's taken away again.

This is going to be the last victory they share, isn't it?

"Well, the obvious answer is that Cora absorbing so many curses fundamentally changed the nature of the dagger." Regina wraps a steadying arm around Emma's waist when she stumbles.

Fighting back a groan of pain, Emma nods. "It did turn into a sword. I'd say that counts as fundamentally changing."

"Yes," Regina agrees. "But he also said he wouldn't be surprised if Cora herself was the reason it didn't work. She refused to be defeated in the end, gave away her soul completely just for the chance to take you out with her. So when you stabbed her."

"What?" Emma's laughter is pained. "She didn't die because she didn't want to?"

"Gold said each of the lives of the Dark One had the core of their essence amplified into something of an obsession while cursed. So yes, Cora's will, her ambition, it may have simply been too powerful for the dagger to overcome. The curse is affected by those it touches as much as they are by
It. Analath's sense of justice. Boolan's compassion. Honrae's greed. Zoso's loyalty. Rumpelstiltskin's cunning. Their greatest traits in life became exaggerated. Twisted into something harmful in one way or another. Either to themselves or the rest of the world.

They've come to the door at last, but instead of reaching for the knob, Emma stills. "What about me?"

"Gold says it's your strength. He called you a brawler with the way you've been using your magic." Regina catches her eye. "I disagreed with him."

Emma swallows. "What do you think?"

"I think it's your protective instinct that the curse has latched onto." Regina sniffs, gaze darting away. "You're so focused on taking care of everyone else, you've become little more than an over dramatic martyr."

A bark of laughter escapes from Emma, and it feels good despite the sharp stab of pain that rockets through her abdomen. "Don't hold back on my account." She reaches for the doorknob at last.

"You don't have to do this," Regina reminds her. "They'll understand if you aren't ready."

"I can handle a family dinner." Emma opens the door and steps out into the rest of the apartment, doing her best to rely on Regina's support as little as possible. She leans heavily on the railing instead and makes her way downstairs, one shaky step at a time.

She can do this. One last family dinner, and then onto the rest of her life.

Maybe she can leave town instead of hiding out in the forest again. The curse will still haunt her, influence her temper and moods, but she won't have the power to hurt anyone like she does now. At least, not in any way that the average person can hurt another.

In some dark, twisted way, maybe this can be a fresh start. Her family is safe. The Source was right. Her parents have a baby and Henry has a mother and Regina has a soulmate. Maybe Emma can go out and find her own purpose. Try and beat the odds to become someone she can be proud of.

Hook might have made her less lonely for a time, but she's been losing herself for longer than she's been the Dark One. It's time she finds Emma Swan again. Whatever is left past the darkness. Whoever she turns out to be. Wherever she ends up.

It's a thought at least.

- 

There's both turkey and ham this year. Apparently Snow hadn't been able to decide on what would be the centerpiece of her meal. They all sit crammed around her tiny table, platters of potatoes and stuffing and casseroles and all sorts of vegetables wedged between them. There's far too much food for the number of people, and Emma wonders as she butters a freshly made dinner roll if her mother had picked up Regina's habit of baking when stressed.

While the darkness lurks in the corners of the room, edging closer the more accustomed she becomes to being awake, Emma drinks in her patchwork family for whatever time she has left. She eats lightly
for show. Nibbling on the roll and taking a few bites of stuffing in between. Just enough to keep anyone from asking questions.

At the far end of the table Gold fusses over Belle. Refilling her water unprompted and tripping over himself to spoon generous portions of greens onto her plate. The way she humidors him with soft smiles and how his hand finds her abdomen more than once throughout the meal makes Emma think there will be an official announcement soon.

She wishes Neal was here to hear it. To meet his sibling. To watch his son grow.

Henry's eyes are bright with laughter as he watches baby Neal squirm in David's lap, grasping desperately for all the tempting goodies spread out before him that he's not quite ready to taste. Soon though. He's growing so fast. It won't be long now.

What will be his favorite foods? Will he have her sweet tooth? She remembers thinking, sometimes, before all this, about all the things she would show him. How she might buy him his first milkshake and help him figure out what kind of frosting he'd like on his doughnuts best. Movies and games and books and animals. He's going to grow into his own full, complete person, her little brother, and she was supposed to be there for it all in a way she's never been able to with anybody else in the whole of her life.

The ghost of Rumpelstiltskin watches her with hungry eyes, teeth gleaming behind his grin.

Emma averts her gaze. Skates over her mother - smiling softly down at the child she'll at last be able to raise - and focuses on Regina instead. The image of Analath stalks behind her chair, growing more defined and bolder with every passing second, but Emma pays her no mind. Instead she keeps her full attention on Regina, beautiful here with her family. Relaxed and content in her belonging. Light bags under her eyes from her nights at Emma's bedside, wide smile on her lips as she listens to their son.

Not too long ago, Emma had regained her memories in New York and returned home with this one great hope in her heart.

"I missed you," she had meant to say the day they had reunited at last. "I didn't even know you existed, but I still somehow knew you were gone. Every day I missed you."

But then there had been Robin and his fated tattoo. And she doesn't know where he is now, or what will become of the soulmates who never seem able to fit one another into their lives, but it doesn't matter anymore. Because wherever Regina ends up next, Emma lost this.

Holiday dinners at the loft when Regina's place is so much better suited. Bumping elbows around a too-small table with every cut of a knife. Dry meat from Snow and corny jokes from David and light giggles from Henry. Catching Regina's eye across the table and sharing a wistful smile when his voice cracks.

All this is now is the last remnants of a dream, and the what ifs don't matter because there was never a choice. Losing Regina or losing herself that night on the street with a dagger between them, either way it's clear they were never meant for each other. Always something in the way. A son, a prophecy, a curse, a soulmate, an immortal evil. Always something.

No, no matter her dreams, Emma was never meant for a holiday dinner at her parents house with her family beside her. Maybe she hasn't been since Rumpelstiltskin declared her savior when she was still just an unborn baby.
The only thing left is to say goodbye.

"I like you better when you're angry." Analath leans over the top of Regina, tongue poking teasingly between her teeth. She strikes a crystal clear image now, her voice loud enough to drown out the light conversation of Emma's family at last. "This is just embarrassing."

"Don't you think so, Emma?" Snow asks.

She missed the first part of the question, but Snow is watching her with wide eyes, affection brimming over, so Emma forces a tight smile onto her lips. She nods quickly.

"Excellent," Snow exclaims in a great rush. "I was hoping you'd agree. Regina didn't think you would but I told her-"

"Such a skinny thing." Honrae squats beside Henry's chair, long, slender fingers trailing lightly along the boy's neck, flexing every so often, threatening to squeeze.

Emma's own hands clench reflexively in her lap as the usual rush of euphoria overwhelms her. Images flood her mind of leaping over the table, pinning her son to the ground and feeling his fragile form in her tight grip. How the skin would give and the trachea would collapse and she'd squeeze and squeeze and squeeze until the bones far beneath were shattered into dust.

No.

Emma wants to scream at them for invading her mind with such violence. Wants to sprint out of her chair and straight for the door. Let her magic consume her and take her far away where her will can never be twisted to harm those she loves most.

She clamps her eyes shut and breathes deep through her nose and counts backwards.

Ten.

"It was just the cutest thing, Emma." Snow rocks Neal against her chest. "I was so sad you missed it."

Nine.

Regina's eyes are on her, curious and concerned. Emma hates the scrutiny. Feels naked as her heart begins to race.

Eight.

"Pluck them out if you don't like it," Zoso says and Emma feels the rush of the action bubbling just under her skin. The power. The satisfying squish of an eyeball popping between her fingers.

Seven.

"-for you at the station," David says, beaming. "Ruby even-"

Six.

- and Belle laughs and Gold's chair shifts gratingly against the floor as he shifts forward and the glasses clash harshly together when David fills his cup with water from the jug in a way that makes Emma's teeth hurt while Henry-

Five.
In a second she could stand and set them all alight with her power and there isn't a single thing any of them could do to stop her.

*Four.*

"It wasn't that good," Henry says, shoulders hunched and sheepish.

"Don't sell yourself short, sweetie," Snow coos. "You had one of the best in the class."

His cheeks are dark.

*Three.*

Boolan stands behind her. Whispers, "Flushed with life," and implants in her mind how good it would feel to change that.

*Two.*

Emma grits her teeth and grips her fork and prays, prays, prays that the noise will just *stop*.

*One.*

"Emma, I forgot something in the car." Regina stands. The chair gives a squeal of protests when she kicks it out behind her, but her usual poise seems forgotten, her hard gaze glued to Emma. "Come out and help me bring it upstairs." That's no request.

Snow frowns up at Regina, brow furrowed. "Emma just woke up, Regina. She's still healing. Wouldn't it be better for David to-"

"Emma can handle it just fine." She's angry. Her mouth a thin line and her jaw tight. She's glaring at Emma in challenge, daring her to refuse.

"Mom?" Henry questions, nose wrinkled at Regina's attitude.

"We're still eating," David tries through a mouthful of ham, clearly as confused as his wife. "Can't it wait until after?"

But Regina is already moving to the door, irritation clear as she roughly snags her coat from the hanger. "Now, Miss Swan, if you'd please."

"But-"

"It's fine," Emma cuts off any further protest from her parents. She drops her fork and stands, stomach roiling but rather steady on her feet now. All throughout dinner the curse had been doing it's job, healing her strained, sore muscles and easing all her aches and pains. "I'd like to stretch my legs anyhow."

"Well all right," Snow needles, caught somewhere between apprehension and suspicion. "Make sure you're back for dessert though. Granny finally gave up her toffee pudding recipe and I want you to try it."
Regina seems mad enough to start right in on the yelling, but surprisingly manages to contain her anger on their whole trip through the stairwell. She must want to get away from the danger of eavesdroppers. That's fine by Emma. She's not looking forward to how difficult it will be to remain calm while in the face of Regina’s wrath.

She keeps a slow pace down the stairs, nausea heating her system as she already has an idea what this is about. Regina isn't one easily fooled, especially when it comes to Emma. She never has been. Everyone else may have believed her tired and groggy, but Regina had been watching her carefully all throughout their meal, working things out on her own.

Still, despite her resolve to leave, Emma finds she's too weak to deny Regina whatever closure she might need. It won't be an easy conversation, but Regina deserves to have it. She deserves that and so much more.

When they reach the landing and step outside, the wind hits Emma, biting at her cheeks as a painful reminder of just how long she's been unconscious. Regina stops before even heading in the direction of where her car is parked across the street, just as Emma had expected. Instead she turns and takes a breath and in a surprisingly restrained voice says, "I didn't forget anything."

Emma stuffs her hands into her pockets and says, "I didn't think so."

For some reason, that only seems to upset Regina even more. "You're leaving again." No question, just pure accusation. Emma opens her mouth but Regina cuts her off before she can even begin. "Stop. I don't want to hear any bullshit. You know you're being ridiculous, otherwise you would have told us."

"I just want to keep you all safe," Emma breathes. The voices of the darkness cry out in protest all around her but she doesn't waver.

Regina storms forward, gets right up in Emma's face. "How did that work out for Boolan, hmm?"

"That's different."

"It's exactly the same." A bitter scoff. "No, you know what? You're actually right. It is different. You're being even more of an idiot because you can be free and for whatever reason you seem to be making plans to walk in the opposite direction."

"I'm dangerous," Emma says and it sounds almost like a plea.

"Then let us help you not be."

"If Henry-" Emma snaps, before stopping herself. She breathes. Calm. Calm. Calm. Again. "Gold failed." Her voice trembles as she speaks. Fear and anger and desperation all fighting for dominance. "He failed, but he was lucky because even in his failure, he was still strong enough to just push his cure away." She locks eyes with Regina, begs her to shove away that ridiculous ability to always have faith in Emma and understand the reality of their situation. "I might not be that strong."

"You-"

"Don't you understand? Henry just stands there in the same room and I want to-" A low growl slips out of Emma. "He just stands near me and the things that go through my mind- I can't imagine if I approached him with the intent of destroying this curse." Even saying the words has the darkness thrumming with excitement inside of her. "I can barely look at him, Regina. All it takes is one mistake. One wrong move and like that," she snaps her fingers, "he's gone. Just one second and it could all be over." She shakes her head, stepping back and breathing hard. "I can't take that risk,
Regina. You don't want me to take that risk. I am not worth it."

They're both quiet for a time then. Emma stands, fist clenched and head bowed, awaiting judgement. But for a long while, Regina seems content merely to study her. The anger has faded from her tiny frame and instead she's left with a sort of quiet resolve.

"We can't risk Henry," she agrees at last, and Emma sighs in relief even as the curse rejoices inside her. It recoils quickly though when Regina holds out a hand. "Will you come with me for a few minutes? I have something I want to show you." She offers a wry smile. "For real this time."

Emma hesitates. The abrupt shift has thrown her off, but Regina doesn't seem bothered by her confusion. She just slides her hand into Emma's and tugs gently.

"Not far," she soothes. "Just over to Granny's."

The curse rolls and whips and surges and as Emma dedicates all her concentration to not gripping the delicate hand in hers too tight, all she can manage to murmur is, "I don't think they'll be open on Christmas."

Regina laughs and tows Emma along, unaware of the way Rumpelstiltskin circles her, muttering about just how good it will feel when they finally tear flesh from bone.

"We don't need to go inside," Regina assures her.

"How far in will her kneecaps go before they shatter completely?"

Emma shakes off the shiver of pleasure that skitters up her spine and gives Regina's hand a squeeze to remember what's real.

They pass quickly over the empty sidewalk. The stores around them are still and quiet, everything locked up for the holiday. There's no snow on the ground, but Emma's cheeks are beginning to sting and a light layer of frost coats the dead grass in an icy sheen. Emma does her best to focus on the sights around them, on the cold wind and the closed signs and the icy ground. Focus, focus, focus.

Delicate skin and fragile bones and warm blood.


Emma closes her eyes and lets herself be pulled along. She doesn't open them again until Regina leads her to a stop. As promised, they stand outside Granny's. Instead of pulling her up the steps and inside though, Regina takes Emma to one of the old patio tables out front. The ones that have long since gone unused since early fall.

It doesn't make much sense to her, but Emma does as she's told when Regina orders her to grab the lip of one of the round tables.

"Just help me move it to the left a little."

Emma nods obediently while Analath snarls. "Where does the bitch get off ordering us around? Fucking crush her. She couldn't stop us. She couldn't even put up a fight."

It's juvenile enough that the words don't affect her. Analath rarely does beyond general annoyance. She doesn't get to Emma the way calculating Rumpelstiltskin or cold Zoso or pompous Honrae do. But that rush of endorphins is hard to ignore. It's so real. The feel of threading her fingers through Regina's hair before gripping tight. Driving her face into the cement until she can hear bone give
way. Just thinking about it feels-

Feels like-

"Emma?"

Emma blinks. She'd stopped moving and Regina stands on the other side of the table, expectant. With a tight swallow, Emma frantically clings to her focus. Focus. Focus. Focus.


She grips the table and together they lift it before awkwardly sidestepping to the left. When they've got the furniture out of the way, Regina kneels in the dead grass. Emma follows suit without question, focus intent on the smell of the frost and the way the cold seeps through her pants where her knees press into the dirt.

A flick of the wrist, and a gardening spade appears in Regina's hand. "It might take a bit longer this time around," she says before she sinks it into the ground. "It's gotten cold, hasn't it?"

Emma hums in agreement. Honrae squats next to Regina, tilts his head, eyes glued to the sharp tool in her hand. "That could probably get through the neck pretty easily, no?"

Analath claps her hands in delight just over Emma's shoulder. "No, no, I've got it. We use it to carve out her heart. No better fate for the Evil Queen, right? We have to do it."

Emma doesn't give her the satisfaction of attention. She just keeps her eyes glued to the dirt Regina digs up. Watches her steady hands at work and the furrow of her brow as she concentrates and the way her breath shallows ever so slightly at the light exertion.

Lunch dates and movie nights and sleepy smiles over wine.

"Here it is." Regina digs a little faster and eventually abandons the trowel altogether to start brushing the dirt away with her fingers. For a moment the hole seems empty, but then Regina waves a shimmering hand over the top and Emma's dagger fades into reality.

"Finally," Boolan whines, hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his trousers as he rocks back on his heels. "We have everything we need now. Get rid of her and let's go."

Emma's fingers twitch at her sides.

Regina pulls out the dagger, but she doesn't immediately hand it over. She holds it in a loose grip and looks down on it while Emma clenches her fists tight and tries her best not to listen to the whispers of, "Just fucking take it already," that are being chanted around her.

"When you asked me to keep the dagger safe, I knew I had to be careful where I chose. " Regina doesn't look away from the blade as she speaks. Emma doesn't look away from her. "I'd been carrying it with me since you left, but that was only the safest option when I was the most powerful person in town. After facing Cora though, I knew I couldn't keep it up. She could just swoop down and take it from me at any time. That's why I decided to bury it here."

"Ripping the tongue out should be enough to shut her up, right?" Honrae's eyes are bright.

"That's how I used to do it," Zoso agrees. "Lots of blood though. Very messy."

Analath grins. "I'm good with blood."
Emma's ready to snap at them to shut up but Regina looks up at last. She catches Emma's eye with a soft smile.

"Do you know why I picked this place, Emma?"

Emma shakes her head and Regina looks as though she was expecting that answer.

"It was a simple thing. Probably normal for a lot of people, forgettable, but for me-" Regina trails off, releases a little hum, a flicker of embarrassment flashing across her features. "Well, for me it was different."

"Tell me," Emma murmurs through the voices around her.

"We sat here together once, you and I. It was cold, so Granny's was packed. You wanted a hot chocolate though. Said you were starting to go through withdrawals." Regina rolls her eyes and the flickering light Emma's been frantically grasping at for the past few months is bolstered deep within her. "We waited an obscene amount of time for something you easily could have made at home, and then we were forced to huddle up out here in the freezing cold because the diner was too crowded and you were too impatient to walk the five feet it takes to get to the loft."

"Bitch," Analath scoffs. "Let's take her feet and make her crawl there. See how easy it is then."

"I remember," Emma says. "We were talking about Henry. About his operation."

Regina nods along. "Mongoose."

"Mongoose," Emma repeats as though she's forgotten the word.

"Yes." There are tears in Regina's eyes now. She smiles past them. "We didn't really have any sort of substantial plan. We had no idea what we were doing, not really. But you still met up with us all of the time. Still tried so hard to help Henry. To help me." She laughs at herself a little. Soft and unsure.

"I know it's foolish but the day we sat here, the day I was so defeated and over the whole thing, and you pushed me and soothed me and promised you'd never give up, that was the first time I really sat back and considered the fact I had a friend. A real one. Someone I could confide in and rely on and trust completely. Someone who would be on my side no matter what. Someone who, despite a rocky start, would never hurt me. Not anymore."

"Okay, there's a fancy name for what's about to happen when we rip her head off right?" Analath cackles. "Cruel irony, isn't it?"

Rumpelstiltskin licks his lips.

"I've thought those things before, Emma." Regina continues, drowning out the darkness. "Dreamed of having them with other people. But then something would always happen and-" She swallows, voice thick, eyes glossy. "But here, sitting at this table with you, for the first time I didn't have any doubt."

Emma stares at Regina, so beautiful in the failing light. So bright and radiant and everything that's been lost to her since this wretched curse seeped into her blood.

"That's why I buried it here, Emma." Regina lifts a hand, and Emma shakes a little as gentle fingers trail against her cheek.

"Break them."
"Rip them off one by one."

"What right does she have to touch us after _everything_?"

Emma swallows and raises her own hand. Brings it up to Regina's shoulder. Slides it along the slender curve of her neck and rests it there. Thumb brushing over the hollow of her throat. Stroking.

Up and down.

Up and down.

She stares at the spot, mesmerized, whole body thrumming.

_Squeeze._


Regina doesn't flinch away from the touch. She sits still at Emma's mercy, as though determined to see this through, even when Emma is quivering, so close now to just giving in.

"I still feel that way, Emma," she says. "I know you won't hurt me. Not even now when I know—well," she laughs a little and the vibrations skitter through Emma, "I think there might be a few voices in your head asking you to."

Emma just keeps her thumb moving.

_Stroking._ Stroking. Stroking.

_Squeeze. Squeeze. Squeeze._

Stroking.

"Do you know why I'm so confident in that?"

Emma can't answer. Can't move. Won't move. Because she's so, so afraid that she might mean to shake her head and wind up crushing Regina's windpipe instead.

But Regina, stupid, beautiful Regina who always manages to think Emma can be worth something, scoots forward. Presses herself against Emma's hold.

"Because there were four other people on the street with us that night, Emma. And even though I've hurt you as much as any of them, before they could even consider picking up that dagger it was already in your hand."

Heart thundering, hammering in her ears, Emma shudders. It's too much. She can't-

_Squeeze._

She jerks her hand back. Jerks away.

She can't-

_She can't._

Emma can't catch her breath. She's panting. Chest moving, shallow and tight and—

And—
"It's okay," Regina soothes, moving forward when she should be running away. When she should-
"It's okay." Regina's hands are on her. On her cheeks, smoothing her hair. "It's going to be okay."

"Just grab her. Just squeeze."

It doesn't matter who is saying it. It's one of them.

"Just fucking grab her and squeeze the air right out of her lungs."

Maybe it's all of them.

"That's nothing. She's nothing. Just do it."

Emma's shaking.

She's shaking and she's lost and she can't see and her throat is closing up and she's-

She's-

"Emma."

She looks up and finds Regina's eyes. Bright and clear through the darkness just like-

Like-

That moment floods her. A dark street. Staring Regina down through the swirl of magic that makes up the most evil of curses.

How Emma had stood, faced with the sight of Regina about to be consumed, and how it had been the easiest thing in the world to pick up the dagger and run towards destruction because she was in danger and she was Regina and Regina was everything and there was nothing in all the world that Emma wouldn't do to keep her safe.

Oh, that's right.

Regina is-

She's-

Yes.

Okay.

"May I kiss you?"

And Emma moves before the voices even have a chance to react. She tugs Regina forward and their lips meet at last. Regina matches her. She doesn't hesitate or pull away. She keeps a tight hold on Emma like she's been waiting for this all along. For so long that now that the moment is here, she's not giving it any chance to slip away.

Life sparks low in Emma's body. Bright and warm and real and it pulses through her veins. Spreads like fire under her skin. It's enough to overwhelm her, and yet she can't bring herself to register anything but the way Regina moves to fit against her. The way she feels. The way they feel. Right and whole and perfect.

In the end, after everything, they hardly even notice the burst of magic that ripples out around them.
Chapter End Notes

Thanks for stopping by! Hope you got some enjoyment out of it. Expect some short lighter stuff for awhile because this took way too long and was kinda a drag haha. Oh well, I wanted to try something different.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!