Keep Your Enemies Closer

by SpookshowBabyx

Summary

Venturing out into the grittier side of Boston to rid herself of unfinished business, Regina stumbles upon a recently incarcerated young blonde that has her own ideas about help and hospitality after stepping in to play tour guide. Realising who her curious Saviour turns out to be, a game of cat and mouse gets complicated when emotions get involved. Set 10 years before Season 1.

Notes

A/N: I was supposed to be wrapping up my fanfics... oh well... This is AU, as is probably obvious, and will centre around the idea of Regina trying to find Emma/ thwart her after finding out who she is following Sydney's fax in 'Saving Henry'. For any future sexy business- if there is any- Emma is eighteen in this, and what I mean by 'if there is any' is, this is going to be a 'fanfic’ in the purest sense. Let me know what you want/ what you want to see, and I'll try and make it happen. Please review, and please request/ comment, and I'll shape this fic around reviews as it goes on. Enjoy! :)

The first section of dialogue in this chapter is lifted directly from the episode.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

A/N: I was supposed to be wrapping up my fanfics... oh well! Enjoy! :)

(The first short scene is lifted word for word from the episode Saving Henry.)

"You knew..."

"Knew what exactly?"

"The child that you located for me in Phoenix?! His mother was found in the woods, outside of Storybrooke... Eighteen years ago..."

"... What a startling coincidence."

"Eighteen years ago?!"

"I'm afraid I'm missing the significance? You'll have to forgive me; my memory's not what it used to be..."

"Henry's mother was found as a baby, on a very significant day... The day this town... The day this town..."

"This town what?"

"...She's important isn't she? This... Mother...?"

"Is she important?... I suppose in as much as she gave birth to your son..."

"You... You built this... Into a whole thing, didn't you? You made this happen! Because the mother... She's... She's..."

"She's what, Madame Mayor? This mother that you seem to fear so much?"

"Oh... You really know nothing of what I'm talking about?!!"

"Well, I know you're upset; that much is clear..."

"You told me I'd come to you... That I had a hole in my heart! And... You want this to end... This town what I built... You want to destroy it all by bringing this mother back! That's why you did all this!"

"...Did you know you have dark circles beneath your eyes? And a weary tremble to your voice?... Look what motherhood has done to you..."

"Play dumb all you want, you little imp! You should know who you're dealing with by now... I sacrificed everything to build this life! And nothing will tear me away from my revenge!"
Heated words.

The brunette frowns as she studies herself in the looking glass; tweezing away the few errant imperfections to her brow.

*Gold...*

... *The mother...*

Her scowl deepens as she purses her lips and shuts away her makeup case.

She is unsure what to make of the information gleaned from Sydney's fax. It is ominous... *More* than ominous... But what to do with such a threat, she knows not.

What to do about this *Emma...* This *Emma Swan...*

Henry's birth mother...

... And a woman found abandoned- according to her files- not much more than a mile away from where she now sits.

"*Woman?*"

She sniffs dismissively; her full lips curling a little at their sides.

*Hardly.*

*An eighteen-year-old* hussy *more like.*

Not unheard of in that old, better world, but *here,* in *this* world, the girl she seeks isn't even old enough to buy *liquor.*

... *Whom I seek?*

Dark eyes glitter behind glass, but she supposes some truth lies in that notion.

The imp seems oblivious to the reasoning behind her anger, and thus she concludes her curse has worked... Shoddy, then, to allow this last little nuisance to live.

The girl.

The girl found in the forest.

... *Emma.*

*Snow's whelp.*

The Savior.

She chuckles darkly at the thought... At the thought of some pale wretch born of that traitor's womb coming to best her... She can see the little bitch now; soft spoken, fair skinned, and sporting dark, raven hair just like her mother's... Perfect...

And that simply won't do.

Plucking her phone from the dresser, she dials impatiently and waits for Sydney to answer.
The reporter heralds her upon the forth ring.

"Sydney?"

"Madame Mayor?"

"I need you to look after Henry for a short while. I have some business to attend to out of town... I don't imagine it will take too long..."

Regina grimaces; stretching her back with a wince as she has been sat behind the wheel of her Benz for the past two hours.

She studies her surroundings shrewdly.

Nervously.

Ordinarily, nerves are not customary in her way of approaching things, but to be so far beyond Storybrooke's walls- out here in the unknown- is something entirely unheard of. True, she had travelled beyond her little town's boundaries in order to collect her son, but that had been both a special occasionion, and in an area far less worrisome than that in which she finds herself now.

Ghastly words sprayed upon dirtied walls.

Streets that appear to lead nowhere.

A curious woman with a fat paunch and skeletal limbs swaying against a garage door, with metal links binding her scrawny wrist to a mean-mannered dog.

A young, olive-skinned boy strutting the street in a cardboard ensemble informing onlookers that their greed will amount to the world's end; two-toned hair greasy and unkempt.

The brunette wrinkles her nose; checking the placard at the corner of the street for the third time.

PLEASANT VIEW.

... The irony lends her an ill-humoured grin.

"What a joke..."

Not that getting this far has been all that much of a joke...

Quite the opposite.

It has proven harder than she'd anticipated to track down the Swan woman; this elusive 'Emma' born of the Fair Wretch's filthy deceit seeming to favour the road over any concrete address.

Not that the 'address' registered in Phoenix could have been any more concrete.

A jail cell.

And doesn't that just fill in any areas of doubt...

Regina smirks; hands tightening around the wheel of her car.

It has taken her a lot more effort than she might have liked to wind up here (wherever here might be), but her search is at an end. The Swan woman pays rent to a landlord that owns the buildings that
surround her, and she doesn't plan on leaving until she susses out which one.

And then what?

She doesn't know.

Originally, she had entertained the idea of concealing a small blade on her person in order to render her business with the Fair Queen and her hateful spouse final once and for all, but she has learnt to take caution where the Golden Imp and his creations are concerned.

Death may prove a little too permanent for the promiscuous little bitch she seeks.

Best play it safe.

Let it suffice for now to at the very least spy on the enemy.

Giving an authoritative nod of resolution, she steps from her car; making her way to the first of the beaten doors that line the militant block of apartments. She raises her fist to rap upon flaking iron but is interrupted by a wolf-whistle that sends the hairs along her spine rippling on end. Turning swiftly on a sharp heel, she scans the dilapidated parking lot for her perpetrator.

"Oh..."

She utters as her gaze falls to the far right of the tarmac baking in the summer heat. It seems she should have factored in a plural threat; three men pushing themselves to their feet to stalk closer in a fashion that hardly speaks of kindness.

"Hey Baby-"

"-What you doing here?-"

"-What you want, mamacita?"

The brunette's brow furrows and she shakes her head irritably

"Excuse me?"

"You lost, bella?"

"... I'm looking for someone. Maybe you could-"

"-Ain't we all, ain't we all? And you, girl, you got a fine piece of meat out on offer. You-"

"I beg your pardon?!"

Regina hisses; tightening her stance as her companions draw ever closer.

"You had all better stop-"

"-That real silver round your neck? That real silk hiding the prize? That-"

"-Why? Looking for an outfit to wear to trial, Denny?"

A low growl from the Queen's left.

Feline.
Predatory.

The man closest to the brunette scowls—offering a remarkably visual gesture as to where their new guest can shove their opinions—before striding off with his apparent cronies lumbering in his wake.

Frowning up at the eroding stone that lines the path above the lot— and hosts the owner of the low growl that had sent her possible assailants on their way— Regina flicks back dark hair with practised arrogance; narrowing her eyes at the skinny blonde regarding her curiously from her perch.

"You—"

"-You stupid or something? Rocking up here dressed like that?"

"No... I'm looking for someone."

"Uhuh, I heard you say."

"... Who are you?"

"Who's asking?"
"... Who are you?"

"Who's asking?"

The younger woman counters with a grin, while the curious brunette in her seductive shoes and creaseless suit crosses her arms over the soft swell of her chest and offers a bemused expression in return.

"Regina. Regina Mills... I'm the Mayor of a town called Story-"

"-Mayor?! Well, shit... What the hell are you doing here, Madame Mayor?"

"Looking for someone."

"Yes, we'd established that. Who?"

The blonde cocks her head with lazy curiosity, swinging long legs that dangle precariously from her crumbling perch. Sniffing irritably- not appreciating the girl's bored tone in the slightest- Regina tosses back glossy locks as she squints slightly against the harsh light of the sun that plays her companion's backdrop.

"Someone who lives here."

"... Hmm."".

"What?"

A low purr; the Mayor finding herself becoming quickly agitated as cool green studies her from above.

"Well, no offence or anything, you just don't look like a woman who might have much business with anybody around here."

"Perhaps looks can be deceiving."

"Oh, for sure, they can... That's not it though."

"Not what?"

"Well... You're not a cop playing a role; your shoes are real, and your hair's been very recently blown out-"

"I hardly think that's-"

"-Seems to me, you're exactly what you look like... Someone that doesn't belong here."

"... I believe I can make my peace with that."

Regina growls, before raising a brow when the blonde chuckles lightly in response and offers her a wide grin that brightens slightly arrogant features sunnily.

No, not arrogant... Aristocratic, almost...
Frowning, the Mayor ponders bare legs beneath time-beaten shorts and dirty yellow curls that fall unrulily over one skinny shoulder. The girl's dusty desert tan is out of place in relation to her surroundings, but her cheap tank top and the fading bruise colouring her right bicep seem just about right. Her features are remarkably refined however; high cheekbones lending her the look of one born of good breeding.

"Well, good for you. This place is a dump."

"You live here?"

"I might do."

An impish glint in wide eyes, and the brunette purses her lips as she decides she has yet to make up her mind on just how to take the young woman perched above her.

"Well? Do you?"

"Somewhere around here, sure."

"I-"

"-As you said, looks can be deceiving. If I asked you for your address, would you give it to me?"

"Why should you wish to know my address?"

"Why do you want to know mine?"

"I don't, I just... I'm trying to ascertain if you might be able to help me."

"Oh, then, by all means, ascertain away."

"I-"

"-And didn't I just come to your rescue, Madame Mayor?"

"You-"

"-Or did you have it all under control?"

"... If you want me to thank you for speaking out of turn and imposing on a situation that had nothing to do with you, then-"

"-Nope. Just clarifying who owes who is all."

The brunette narrows her eyes, regarding her unwanted saviour stoically.

"You were meddling. I hardly imagine that was a calculated move on your part; three men turning tail at the mere bark of a little girl..."

"Perhaps they've felt my bite."

"...Have they?"

"Nah. We've had some pretty loud exchanges of opinion, but on the whole, once you get to know guys like Denny, you get to know them to be nothing but pervy fucks. They don't want to get into anything in case you bring up evidence of that fact. The guy's an asshole... He also squeals like a
little bitch."

Regina blinks as she thins her lips; unaccustomed to such a use of language, especially in the flippant fashion the blonde seems to favour.

That is no way for a lady to speak...

No, but then she doesn't imagine there's much danger that the young woman running her mouth is going places.

"Charming... So? Will you help me? Or do you plan to continue rambling from your perch like some ill-mannered parakeet?

Again, husky laughter at this, and the Mayor struggles to comprehend what it might be the younger woman finds so amusing. As far as she's concerned, this little dialogue has been both pointless and tiring.

"Oh, I'll help you. Firstly by warning you that you don't want to go leaving your car there."

"I'm not planning on sticking around."

"Then what do you want with them? This person you're looking for?"

"I..."

The brunette frowns; not entirely sure what the answer to that question might be herself.

One step at a time.

Let's just find the bitch to begin with.

"It's not a friend, that's for sure."

"No... Not a friend."

"Then-"

"-My... Niece."

"Your niece? Your niece lives here?"

"... I believe so."

"Well... Without sounding entirely racist, that doesn't really narrow it down."

The Mayor's cheeks flush with dusky colour, as she regards the blonde coldly.

"What does that mean?"

"That you lucked out on complexion and hair, and I'm sure you're an excellent dancer."

"A little presumptive... What, and that would make you...?"

"I suppose. I mean, I've never tasted your cooking. And, it doesn't make me anything, apart from more of a sore-thumb in this dump than your niece will be."

"... We're related through marriage."
The blonde holds up dusty palms in surrender.

"Fine, fine. I'm not the one that called you mamacita, Madame Mayor."

She rolls her tongue to offer the title a hispanic flair, and the darker woman sighs irritably.

"I-"

"-But, I'll help you if I can."

"Yes?"

"Well, sure... No one should have to go looking for their own family."

"... Quite."

"Who's your niece?"

"Her name is Emma. Emma Swan."

"... Emma Swan is your niece?"

Green eyes narrow as the blonde studies the Mayor shrewdly; the silence that follows putting the brunette on edge, although she is unable to place exactly why.

"Yes. Do you know her?"

"... I do."

And there is something curious to the younger woman's tone, but then she springs down from the wall to land neatly on her feet, brushing her backside down dismissively. Moving to stand toe to toe with Regina, she regards her coolly; absent-mindedly assessing the darker woman's unique beauty.

"Can you tell me where she lives?"

The brunette pushes for an answer.

"Better."

"I-"

"-I'll take you to her."

"You-"

"-But first we'll move your car."

"Wait, we?!"

"Wouldn't want to leave it here, not a nice ride like this."

The blonde shakes her head, stalking over to the Benz and helping herself to a seat on the passenger side. Following quickly behind- her heels rapping out an irritated staccato on the hot tarmac- Regina opens her own door and addresses the younger woman with uninhibited confusion.

"What are you-"
"-Come on, I know a place."

Thrown by her sudden loss of control over the situation, the Mayor slips behind the wheel with her brow furrowed as she studies the young blonde; utterly perplexed.

"I... I mean-"

"-It's cool, you can totally trust me... Although I suppose I would say that. What kind of engine does this thing have, anyway? Is this real leather? I-"

"-I don't even know your name!"

"Oh... Uh, Alice, I guess."

"You guess?!"

"Sure. Alice. Now can we go?"
"Well, come on! Keep going! You still have about six feet of space in front of you!"

The blonde grumbles; motioning with her hand that the Mayor should continue to pulling in to an old lean-to.

"Are you sure about this?"

The older woman asks dubiously; dark eyes flickering repeatedly to her rearview mirror where she spies the owner's worse-for-wear bungalow looming behind them.

"Sure, I'm sure. What, you don't trust me?"

The younger woman grins, and Regina sighs as she switches off the ignition. Stepping out from the Benz, she wrinkles her nose as she spies her vehicle's neighbour; a beat-up VW beetle painted ghastly sunshine yellow.

"Not when I look at what's become of that wreckage... Not that the scrapes and dents serve to make that poor choice all that much worse."

"It was like that before... And, I don't know. It's kind of... Well... Fun, I guess."

"Fun? That thing?"

"Well, I mean-"

"-Whoever owns that piece of junk needs to rethink their notion of 'fun' in that case. An eyesore would be a more appropriate description."

"Whatever. Just lock her up. This place is totally safe."

The blonde shrugs as she makes her way out onto the sun-scorched tufts that are all that remains of what once was a lawn.

"The owners won't cause a fuss?"

The Mayor tilts her jaw in the direction of the bungalow and her companion shakes her head dismissively.

"Owner won't see it."

"How do you-"

"-The woman that lives there's in her nineties. Her husband died just recently, and she's been afraid to leave the house ever since. 'Agoraphobia' that's called; I've read about it. Anyway, she pays some kid to come deliver her groceries once a week. Waste of time... It's a good day if she gets up in order to make it to the bathroom."

The blonde shrugs and continues on towards the road as the brunette throws her a cold glance and voices boldly

"That's a charming attitude you have there... But, I'm guessing if it works for you to know you have a place to pawn off all of those tools missing from that dusty rack in there- and whatever else you get
out of this arrangement- then-"

"-I didn't do that."

The younger woman snaps, and when she stops in her tracks to turn and face the Mayor, Regina detects a deeper emotion behind obvious irritation.

Not the flippant agitation the younger woman has shown so far, but offence.

She raises her hands placatingly and retracts her words

"Okay, I just-"

"-Just what? You figured I saw a golden opportunity to screw someone over so I took it?"

"I don't even know you... I-"

"-That's right. You don't."

The younger woman growls, but she remains at the brunette's side, and doesn't show any immediate signs of storming off. Frowning as she tries to gather her thoughts- her curious tagalong in no way a part of her original plan- Regina glances pensively at the blonde when the latter elaborates quietly.

"I didn't take her stuff."

"Okay, I-"

"-When I got here, her husband wasn't dead yet; he was still busy dying... That's worse, you know? Back then, before it got hot like this, she'd be sat out on the porch every time I walked past. She never raised a hand back at me when I waved at her. I'm not sure she even realised that anybody else was going about their lives apart from her husband- clinging to his- and herself struggling through what's left of hers... Don't think she even saw me... But I saw that lean-to, and I saw the apple tree starting to blossom out there behind it... I wanted the apples, okay? She wasn't using them, and they were going to waste. I didn't take any of the stuff missing from that shitty little garage. I just saw the apples, and I saw that she would be sitting out there daily - you could just about depend on it- eating one of those packets of Ritz crackers with the peanut butter in. Every day."

"Fascinating. I-"

"-The kid that does her groceries doesn't get her the peanut butter kind."

"... No?"

"No... One day, I came by and she wasn't sat outside. Not the next day either. Then, I come across this kid with a bag of bread and milk and toiletries and stuff. He had a box of Ritz crackers too; the regular kind. The kind without the peanut butter."

Opening her mouth to offer up a snide comment as to the blonde's storytelling technique, Regina abruptly decides against it. The girl that strolls beside her with her hands shoved into the pockets of her shorts is young, and hard to get a handle of. Matching the blonde's silence for a minute or two, when she does speak, she does so without contempt.

"...Did you tell him he was buying the wrong kind?"

"No... That time when I saw him and what he'd bought her, he dropped a scrap of paper halfway down the block. She'd made him a list. It said 'Ritz crackers', that's it. In the end, the kid gets ten
dollars; probably doesn't give much of a crap, but then why should he? He could be working over at Wendy's down in town and earning a little more. He chose to run a few errands here and there instead; he's probably a good kid. Just unobservant.

"Whereas, you are?... If that's your point, then I'll accept it. If I offended you by-"

"I didn't take her stuff. Only the apples... I pick her some too, and I get the crackers- the right kind- and leave them out by the door. Just beside it... I've left a book there once or twice, too... I'm not even sure her eyes would make much of the print, but, I figured I liked them, and maybe she would too... What I'm getting at is that she doesn't know you're using her garage, but then again, she's not using it, so how would she?... Is that so wrong?"

"... I didn't mean any offence."

Regina repeats, and to her surprise, the younger woman's spirits seem to raise instantly; the blonde offering her a small grin and a shrug.

"Oh, well. At least you know your hubcaps are safe."

"... Alloys."

"Well, shit."

"If you say so... So, where are we going? Where does she live?"

"Who?"

"... Emma."

"Oh. Right. Not far... No, not far... She might not be there, though... I mean, maybe if we got something to eat or whatever, and then went over, it'd-"

"-I don't-... Fine."

The brunette concedes irritably. She has little inclination to spend much longer with her rather eclectic tour-guide, but she has yet to decide on her course of action once she's reached her goal of finding the hateful woman she seeks.

That, and the girl beside her looks to be rather lacking in the 'grabbing something to eat' department. It has not escaped the Mayor's attention that the blonde carries no purse or bag with her. Neither has she detected any kind of notable bulge in distractingly tight denim where she might be hiding a cellphone.

Perhaps things work differently out here, perhaps-

-But she knows they don't. Storybrooke is where things work differently, and, as curious as the young blonde may be, she is a valuable asset while wandering unknown territory. That, and she knows Emma.

That... And... There's something intriguing about her... In an odd sort of way...

"Yeah? You want to get some food?"

"I suppose so."

"Great! I know a place."
"... Of course, you do."

"You're allowed to chew, you know..."

The Mayor frowns with disdain as she toys her fork through wilted lettuce unenthusiastically. The stoic attitude with which she approaches the puffy burrito in front of her isn't shared by the blonde; the younger woman devouring hot-sauce soaked rice at an alarming speed. Narrowing green eyes as she chases her mouthful with a gulp of beer- straight from the bottle, and in no way what the brunette had meant when asking her if she would like a drink- her companion swallows with a little difficulty and swipes a finger through the sauce glistening on her now empty plate.

"And you're allowed to smile..."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Smile... You know; lips stretched, teeth out... And if you're not going to eat that, I will, so quit shoving it about on your plate."

"You're afraid I'm tampering with the haute cuisine in front of me?"

"Oh, come on! What, this not the kind of food Mayors eat back where you come from?"

"No one eats this sort of thing where I come from."

"Huh. Their loss."

"We'll agree to disagree."

The blonde laughs at this, before picking up her bottle and resting the rim against her bottom lip. She regards the darker woman thoughtfully, her eyes wide with youth and the Mayor imagines there would have been little chance of her getting served if she had been alone.

"So, what do you want?"

"I'm sorry?"

"With Emma. What do you want with her?"

"Oh... Well... It's just been a while since I last saw her, I suppose, and... I... I suppose we have some things to discuss... Family matters."

"... Family matters..."

"Mmm."

"Like what?"

"It's... It's not really an interesting story... It's-"

But the blonde shakes her head, holding up a couple of fingers which cause the brunette to frown in confusion, before two bottles of beer trickling with condensation get dumped unceremoniously on their table by a waiter already taking his leave.

"-It's ok, I have time..."
The younger woman interjects with a hint of persuasion, sliding one of the bottles over towards her companion who regards the offering with a look as though the blonde has just served her up a vial of poison.

"I-"

"-What do you really want with Emma Swan?"
"What do you really want with Emma Swan?"

Glancing down at the bottle in front of her before looking back up at the blonde who sips from her own beer indulgently, the Mayor sighs; recognising the younger woman's question as one she's unlikely to let lie. Attempting to turn the tables, she raises a brow and enquires coolly

"How do you know her, anyway? Is she a friend of yours?"

"Something like that."

"...Something like that?"

"Hey, if you're allowed to use the phrase 'it's complicated', then so am I. I know her, that's what you wanted to know and that's what I've told you."

"And yet, you're rather evasive."

"Then that makes two of us. You tell me what I want to know, and maybe I tell you a little more about Emma."

"Or, perhaps we split the bill and go our separate ways..."

The brunette suggests silkily, meaning to do nothing of the sort. Still, she is denied the uneasy response she'd expected when asking the young woman to front up any form of payment; the blonde simply shrugging and eyeing her with a curious sense of superiority that sits oddly between the two of them.

"Nah... You don't mean that."

"Don't I?"

"Nope. You're buying me dinner- in case you hadn't realised that that's what you're doing- and I'm pretty sure you have no interest in getting into my pants. I'm not an expert at reading people, but I'm pretty good at it, and-"

"-I have no interest in you in that way or any other, and quite frankly, I'm outraged that you'd-"

"-Oh, cool it. It's nothing to get all upset about... You could do a whole lot worse, Madame Mayor."

The blonde grins with a matter-of-fact shrug that has Regina taking a hurried sip of her beer despite her dislike for the stuff... Better a graceless nip from the neck of a bottle than to offer the young woman smirking at her the satisfaction of her gaze.

"But it's cool if that's not your thing... It doesn't matter, anyway. The ball's still in my court."

"How so?"

"You want to find Emma Swan? You need me... And I need another drink."

"I beg your pardon?! I will not tolerate such demands from a-"

"-I'm not 'demanding' anything. I'm thirsty. It's your choice whether you actually buy another
round... I'll tell you something for nothing, though; if you decide to look for Emma without my help, and you'll never find her."

"You sound so sure."

"I am."

The blonde agrees simply, and the Mayor finds herself unequivocally certain that her curious companion tells the truth. Sighing, she slides her barely touched bottle across the table towards the younger woman and heralds a waiter with a request for wine.

"There. Happy?"

"I'm not unhappy."

The blonde smirks and Regina rolls her eyes as she concludes that the manners of folk outside of Storybrooke are truly horrendous.

"Good. I'm terribly relieved."

An impish grin at this, and the brunette almost finds herself smiling back before the younger woman wriggles about on her stool in order to bring her knee up in front of her behind the table, and she decides such positivity is unwarranted. Carrying on from the blonde's original question, she progresses with caution.

"I don't really know what I want with Emma Swan if I'm honest. I suppose some sort of conversation would be the first point of call... As I said, it's been a while."

"Oh? When did you guys last see each other?"

"... A number of years ago."

"Hmmm... Where was that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm just curious where you might have last seen her."

"Why?"

"I guess I'm just a curious person."

A shrug.

A frown.

"... Phoenix."

"Really?... That's a long way to have travelled to talk to someone you rarely see... Must have been important. Memorable even."

"... It was a long time ago."

"So you've said."

"So I have..."
"So why the sudden urgency to track her down? Are you looking of your own accord, or did somebody send you?"

"Who would have sent me?"

"You tell me. This is your story."

"Nobody sent me... I just... I need to find her."

"Why?"

"Because... Because I fear that she might otherwise come and find me, and that would be unfavourable, to say the least... There is a lot of history between her mother and I, and I fear that-"

"-Oh, right, yeah. You know her mother... How is she?"

"Who?"

"Her mother? Is she well? Happy? Frequently much too busy to talk as she thinks up fun things for the two of them to do together?"

"I..."

The brunette frowns; something spiteful in the younger woman's tone that makes her inexplicably uncomfortable.

"I'll bet she's just full of tales about your favourite niece. I-"

"-As I've already explained; we see very little of each other if we can help it... As such, Emma is rarely a topic of discussion."

"And yet you fear her?"

"... I fear that things may become complicated should she attempt to seek me out."

"And why would she do that?"

"I'm unsure. And, I don't like to be unsure."

"So... What? You're warning her off? Warning her not to come to wherever it is you said you're from?"

"Storybrooke. Maine. She-"

"-Maine?"

"Yes. And it's not so much a case of warning her off. I simply can't let her go there... I won't let her."

"I see."

The blonde nods; her brow furrowed as though deep in thought.

This expression causes Regina only minimal cause for concern, as the younger woman swiftly resumes gulping from the bottle in her hand; seeming once more entirely unfazed by the situation.

A well-honed act in the blonde's case.
Similar to the guise of not caring she has donned so many times before.

In reality; Emma tenses in her seat as she feels her mind begin to kick into overdrive. She is unsure what to make of what the attractive brunette has said, but she knows her own instincts well and she has learnt to trust them.

She doesn't believe this hoity-toity Mayor in the slightest; how *could* she?

Doesn't know what it is that the darker woman could want...

She understands that the prim and proper woman sat across from her is *dangerous*, though.

She might not mean 'Alice' any harm, but the same can't be said for sure about Emma...

And she knows that's her cue to split.
Chapter 5

And she knows that that's her cue to split.

Eyes bright, she regards the darker woman shrewdly as the latter waits expectantly, and the blonde finds herself ever so slightly torn by her decision. She has lived her life predominantly by the ethos of trusting her instincts, something which has kicked into overdrive somewhat following Neal's betrayal- made all the worse by the subsequent little 'incident' that train wreck ended with- and right now her entire being is telling her that the alluring woman sat across from her- with her sooty lashes and scarlet lips- is not to be trusted. That said… She finds herself curiously drawn to the pretty brunette, and the fact that Regina seeks her out is something both disturbing yet intriguing. Old habits die hard though, and she feels her adrenaline kick in as she recognises a darkness in the Mayor's eyes that sets her on edge. She has little clue how this woman has come to know of her whereabouts- hell, her existence- as she most certainly isn't from around here… But then… Neither is she.

Not really.

Wracking her brain for any instance where she might have crossed paths with the brunette in the past, Emma comes up empty. She has lived a short life- a short life, but a hard life- and she is fully aware that she has succeeded in pissing a fair number of people off. 

I would remember her, though… Surely?

Without a doubt.

She may not be the most empathetic person in the world, but she's more observant than most, and she knows it. She would recall having met someone as dangerously captivating as the Mayor of wherever-the-fuck-it-was.

Yeah… Sure… Super observant, Swan…

Maine.

It was somewhere in Maine…

And isn't that just a little bit-

-no. It's nothing. So what she's from Maine? So's Bette Davis, and candied bacon.

Swallowing the last of her beer, the blonde licks her lips, playing with the chain of her necklace as she slips her legs down beneath the table and touches her feet to the floor.

"If you didn't come to warn Emma, what did you come for? You say to stop her… Do you mean to hurt her?"

Regina blinks- surprised- but she considers the question for a moment or two; debating how best to answer. In her head she sees a kitchen knife catching the light, and a flash of dark, raven hair and perfect, smirking teeth. She clenches her jaw as she thinks of the innocent babe slumbering back in the comfort of her home. The child Snow's little princess cast aside as though disposing of trash. She thinks of simpering kindness and the deceitfully humble poise that had so irked her back in that other world. She imagines Emma looking down upon her snidely just as her mother did; clad in this
world's version of tailoring and extravagant skirts. Prim, proper and pretty, and everything Snow would have wished for.

"… I…"

She frowns, seeming to suddenly snap out of her thoughts, and she offers a small shrug.

"I simply mean to talk with her. After that, I really can't say."

She finishes dismissively, but she has said enough to make up the younger woman's mind, and Emma slips from her stool with a smile.

"Fair enough... I need to go to the bathroom, I'll be right back."

Regina nods dismissively, watching the younger woman stalk towards the back of the bar with vague curiosity as she muses that the blonde's hair is almost unusually long, and she imagines that this, coupled with pale, slender legs so appetisingly-on display beneath battered shorts mean that Alice is no stranger to the crass comments she herself experienced earlier on in the parking lot.

She blushes lightly as she recalls the blonde's statement as to her disinclination to 'get into her pants'.

"Honestly…"

Sighing as she locks herself in the left-hand stall of the dingy bathroom, Emma bites her lip as she pulls down the lid of the toilet and takes a seat with her chin in her hand.

"What the hell…?"

She mutters; more confused than anything else as to her time spent with the brunette.

"I mean… It's not like she came right out and said that she meant Emma- you- any real harm… And this whole 'Alice' thing is kind of amusing, I-"

The loud clearing of a throat from the stall next to her own has the blonde biting back a giggle as she supposes that musing to oneself in a public restroom is possibly a little distracting for others trying to go about their business. Drumming her fingers pensively on the bare flesh of her thigh, she reads the fading graffiti that decorates the back of the door absent-mindedly.

She wonders if any of the bathrooms back in the brunette's little town sport similar vandalism and imagines not.

Sighing as she makes up her mind, she clambers up onto cracked porcelain and jams open the dirty glass of the window with a few heavy thumps of her fist.

"Hey!"

Glancing down at the outraged throat-clearer over the top of the stall wall- the latter sat glaring up at her with her underwear caught around her ankles- Emma raises her hand

"Hey…"

Before pulling herself up and through the narrow opening with a small grunt of exertion.

Lowering herself carefully onto the lid of a dumpster, she jumps down from the sun-bleached plastic
and lands in the dust of a back-alley running behind the bar. Glancing up at a lazy moon, she shivers and shoves her hands into her pockets; stalking back towards the lot in which she'd first met the brunette with the last, lingering streaks of scarlet sunset illuminating the hollows of her cheeks.

"Alice?"

Regina frowns, entering the bar's bathroom impatiently.

She has waited for no less than fifteen minutes for the blonde to reemerge but has seen no sign of the younger woman. Now, as she pushes open each of the stall doors in turn with an irritable scowl at the nothingness revealed within, her brow furrows deeper.

Turning back towards the door, she hesitates, before casting a glance up at the hinged scream of the open window above the last of the stalls. The lid of the toilet has been pulled down, and, when she takes a curious step closer, she purses her lips as she makes out the vague lines and curves of a shoe-print on the dirty white oval.

"What the… You little minx..."
"What on earth..."

The brunette mutters as she makes her way back through the dingy light of the bar. Her nostrils flare with the scent of cheap cigarettes and summer sweat, and she suddenly finds herself confronted by a small hint of fear. The atmosphere of this place reminds her of the Rabbit Hole back home- a ghastly establishment that she has only once frequented- yet at the same time, she knows that it's nothing like the Rabbit at all. For one, the scantily clad bodies surging and milling around her consist of nothing but strangers. For another... She can't just walk out the door and leave this dire squalor behind.

This whole city is her Rabbit Hole.

And it most certainly isn't Wonderland.

"Alice..."

She curses irritably; not one to find much amusement in such newfound irony. The girl had been odd, yes, and a little unnerving in a way she can't quite put her finger on, but she had provided a peculiar sort of security blanket, however obscure her mannerisms might have been.

And now she's gone.

Regina frowns, skirting around a pool table overseen by a gaggle of rather enthusiastic players, and pushing her way out the door and into the tungsten glow of a nearby streetlight.

Why did she take off?

Why indeed, as there is no doubt in her mind that Alice has done just that, and, by the looks of things, she'd done so by climbing out of a tiny, awkwardly high window. A momentary thought goes through the Mayor's mind as to the dirt and grime sure to have coated the flaking wood of the frame- she even goes so far as to picture a couple of shards of broken glass- but she recalls the dusty streaks that had patterned the blonde's sinewy limbs and doesn't imagine Alice will have paid such things much mind.

Still. The effort to which the younger woman has gone to escape her is a little insulting.

"What did I say?"

She doesn't know. She has an inkling that her enquiries about Emma might have had something to do with it, but it's hard to say just what. All in all, the blonde's vague attitude when questioned about the Lost Princess had been progressively strange, but it is only now that she really thinks upon it.

Still, she supposes it makes sense. The younger woman had been reluctant to give a straight answer when asked whether Emma might be a friend, but, if she had been worried that dinner and any possible payment for her services might have been on the line, that would add up... She might not have wanted to admit to or deny anything before reaping her reward.

... Yes, except she took off before even attempting to flush out my wallet...

Odd.

And incredibly irritating.
Still, Regina refuses to be bound by the blonde's arrogant statement that she might be unsuccessful in locating Emma without her help, and she supposes she'll simply have to chalk her obscure exchange with the young woman up to a peculiar waste of time.

She'll simply have to carry on alone...

A thought that doesn't sit as well with her as she might like.

Down the street a car backfires, and she jumps to the side of the pavement with an irritable growl.

"It was just a car..."

She consoles herself impatiently, but her heart negates to desist its rapid beat, and her palms begin the sweat.

*Just a car, yes, just like the argument breaking out across the street is just an argument, and the snarling fleabag at the end of that man's leash is just a dog.*

She wishes for her powers.

For her magic.

She wishes for the first time since coming to this world that her clothes were a little dowdier.

Her heels a little less sharp.

Wishing is *pointless* in this hateful land though, and she is forced to simply clench her teeth as her stilettos rap out a militant beat down the sidewalk.

She avoids making eye contact; staring straight ahead of her so as not to look down at the ground as a servant girl might.

She makes her way back towards the lot in which she had first parked her Benz; deciding to begin looking where her instincts and research had first taken her.

At least... She *hopes* that's where she's headed.

"Hello, Caskett..."

Emma greets, as an old tabby darts between her legs and into the darkness of her apartment.

Cass offers her a petulant glance in response and leaps gracefully up onto the peeling paint of the windowsill with her back turned to the woman toeing off her shoes with her palm flat against the wall for balance.

Paying her companion's disdain little mind, Emma pads over towards the cupboards lining her workbench and tuts at their meagre offering.

*I suppose* you'll be wanting tuna, Your Majesty? Do you know how crappy that is that your dinner costs more than mine does? Not that *I* can really complain tonight; burritos and beer, one must never complain about burritos and beer."

Cass offers a small miaow of boredom, and shakes her head; eyes yellow and scouring the tarmac down below. Rolling her own eyes at the cat's disinterest in her social life, Emma locates a can opener and serves up feline gourmet after grabbing herself a drink from the small fridge humming
beneath the kitchen table. Sliding Caskett her dinner and pulling herself up to sit with her legs dangling out the window, the blonde sips from her beer thoughtfully.

"So, tonight was weird..."

Cass shoves her face into the small tin of tuna flakes; offering up a politely silent audience.

"I met someone- oh, don't look at me like that, it was a chick... A lady, actually...- she was looking for me... She came all this way looking for me."

Cass gives her arrogant disregard that Emma should continue.

"Didn't really tell me what she wanted though... Not that I came clean and introduced myself, I mean, I'm not an idiot..."

A cool, yellow glance and the blonde glowers back.

"Anyway... It wasn't a total bust. I got dinner... But... It's weird... No?"

Taking Caskett's dutiful devouring as a sign of agreement, Emma sighs, thudding her heels lightly against the crumbling brick of the side of the building as she stares down into the narrow alley a good fifteen-foot drop from where she perches. A little ahead of her is the slanted iron and worn stone of one of the hold-alls that line the lot, and it had taken her only two weeks of living in the small apartment in which she resides to first attempt leaping onto the corrugated roof from her window.

Well... No...

She supposes that's not strictly true.

It hadn't been quite that innocent... But it is how she chooses to remember the jump, so that's what happened. No one could say otherwise. Not even Cass, who hadn't shown up until a couple of days later.

"She said she knew my mother, Cassie... Can you buy that? I mean, I don't... But it's a funny thing to say, right? And I mean... What possible reason could anyone have for looking me up? Who even knows I fucking live here? And who fucking cares? The only person that would have reason to be tracking me down is Sandy, and he already knows I'm good for my rent for the next three months... Unless you've been up to no good? Hmm, Cass?"

The tabby flicks her tail at the very idea of such an insinuation.

"Didn't think so... Don't think she came all this way for pussy, either."

The blonde smirks into her beer and Caskett raises her head to offer a stern stare of disapproval.

"Oh come on, that was funny... No?... Well, fuck you, then."

Cass yawns and paws aside the remainder of her dinner with a sniff of feline distaste. Studying the contents of the can with a wrinkle of her nose, Emma sighs and leans back awkwardly to place it behind her on the table.

"Not good enough for you? What did your real family feed you, you dumb shit? Caviar?"

She growls irritably, although she knows deep down that she's secretly glad the ageing tabby decided to claim squatter's rights a month or so ago. It had been lonely living here on her own after spending
over a year in the constant company of others.

Miserable.

As if on cue, next door's baby begins to scream for attention, and she curls her fists as she finds herself wishing- hating herself for it, but wishing- that the fucking kid would just roll over onto its stomach and be silenced by its pillow. It's a terrible thing to think, and she knows that, but... Why a baby?... Why the hell did the Koziaks have to go and have a fucking baby?

"Little shit..."

Cass purrs in agreement; stretching lazily, before climbing into the blonde's lap and positioning herself so that she can join the young woman in her sentry duty over the parking lot. Emma strokes greying fur idly, wishing sorely for another beer as she swallows the dregs of her bottle, but not bothering to get herself up only to face sure disappointment.

Eyes glittering as a loud bang echoes from down the street, she places the sound as a car backfire after a brief moment's panic.

Not that gunshots would have been a first.

"Home sweet home, huh?"

Caskett closes her eyes and simply lets the chaos of the outside world go on without concern; content with her choice of human, and happy to let the rest of the world burn.

Emma finds herself a little less at ease.

Probably shouldn't have bailed like that... Not when it was getting dark...

So what it was getting dark? She was a grown woman!

Yeah... And total bait walking about like she was; heels where her common sense should be...

She doesn't quite buy that analogy, though. The brunette had seemed remarkably well put-together... Just... Clueless.

Like she'd never been outside of the little hick town she'd professed to preside over.

"Welcome to Boston, Madame Mayor."

The blonde sighs, though, she feels like what she really means is 'welcome to the real world."

After all... It's all the same. All these faceless cities... Boston is just another 'place'. Cooler than Phoenix, less windy than Chicago, more nasal than Oregon, and whiter than El Paso.

Yeah, for you... You know how it all works around here... What? She's supposed to know which streets to walk down and which to leave well alone?!

"She shouldn't be putting her nose where it doesn't belong."

The blonde mutters irritably; not often one to experience guilt, and not wearing the emotion well– yet another benefit of associating with as few people as possible.

"I mean-"
But she stills, and Caskett raises her head as she feels the blonde tense beneath her.

"-Well... Speak of the devil..."

Emma breathes, watching as a familiar figure stalks into the spotlight cast down upon the tarmac by tarnished lampposts.

Cass follows her lead; peering down at the woman standing out in the open with her head cocked as though deep in thought.

Two sets of eyes...

Unknowingly joined by three more.
Looking up at the disarray of crumbling brick that surrounds her, the Mayor feels her sense of doubt deepen. The sun that had earlier cast its blazing rays down upon the lot has set in favour of a mild-mannered moon, but the lingering scent of hot tarmac remains. Still, what had seemed like some forgotten pocket of a cesspool city by the light of day now seems all the more ominous and foreign, as the quiet echo of several arguments is met with the underlying static of television sets blaring through open windows, and the whir of rickety old fans.

Boston is hot tonight.

And Boston is dark tonight.

Still, she tries to find solace in the possibility that it might be easier to find her prey by the light of the moon, as it is unlikely that she will still be roaming the streets.

_Oh really? And you're surmising this from what previous knowledge exactly?_

None. For all _she_ knows, the young woman she seeks could work nights in this world's version of a tavern... In fact, she almost _wishes_ for it.

_What might Snow make of that?..._

She finds the notion unlikely, however. She had been surprised upon reaching the address she had noted down, as she hadn't pictured the Lost Princess becoming quite, so, well... Lost. That said, there is a vast difference between living in squalor and selling one's body, and she simply doesn't believe that Emma Swan having stooped to doing the latter would be genetically possible.

"Alice didn't seem to think she'd be gone all that much longer anyway..."

No, but then _Alice_ had also seen fit to climb up onto a cistern and escape through a bathroom window.

_So perhaps we won't take her word with all too much meaning..._

Sighing, Regina purses her lips and scans the yellow pockets of light stippling hulking brick once more. She has no clue where to start; her call to the gentleman listed as the landlord for this prestigious establishment having been answered with a grunted reply that he wasn't at liberty to divulge any personal information, followed by the irritating shriek of a dial tone.

_There may be little less in the world as offensive as the mocking ring of a dial tone..._

She has a sneaking suspicion that if she had provided a little more incentive than just the sultry purr of her voice, she might have been rewarded with what she'd wanted, but had refused to give in to her pride and try Sandy Heffernan again.
Supposing she'll simply have to do this by means of elimination, she squares her shoulders and prepares to make her way over to the first of the doors she had been interrupted in knocking upon earlier today. 

She doesn't get that much further this time around.

"Well, look who's back..."

Whirling around with her eyes wide, the Mayor scans the open lot before her dark gaze falls on two of the men she remembers from earlier.

_Denny_

She reminds herself; remembering the blonde's words as she had sat perched up on the wall.

The brunette casts a quick glance up to her side but determines that- this time- she is alone.

Well... Apart from Denny.

And his friend.

And their dog.

The mutt is small- coming no higher than to his master's knees- but stockily built and with a large jaw hanging open to reveal a great number of teeth.

"What do you want?"

She snaps irritably, refusing to take a step backwards, however much she might like to.

"You still looking for someone, darlin'?"

"I'm warning you..."

"Warning us?! You hear that, Rav? The little lady here is warning us!"

"What are you gonna do, sweetheart? Just what are you gonna do?"

"I..."

"I think you better quit your big talk yapping and give a little thought to our situation... Maybe try being a little bit nicer... A little sweeter... A little sugar goes a long way..."

"I... Shut up, Denny."

She snarls, before understanding very swiftly that she's made a grandiose mistake. The pockmarked face of the man to the left falls in an ugly fashion, and his meaty fist whitens around the chain of the leash.

"What you say...?"

Denny takes a step closer, Chomper or Rex or Cujo or whatever the mutt's name might be tugging at his restraints and snarling audibly.

Up above, Emma scratches Cass dismissively behind the ear and murmurs softly

"Uh oh..."
Pushing the cat off of her lap with a low follow up of 'oh boy', she offers a wistful glance at her shoes, before catching the telling rumble of Max's growling and simply shrugging; pulling herself up to stand silhouetted in the open window before leaping lightly onto the roof of the hold-all with practiced ease.

The corrugated iron clangs under her weight, and she pushes herself up onto her feet so that she stands looking down on the lot with her arms folded irritably over her chest.

"Can't you guys ever just play nice?"

She growls, but unlike before, Denny shows no sign of taking her arrival as his cue to leave.

"Oh no you don't, not this time, you little bitch! This time you're gonna keep your nose out of our business..."

"Business? What business? All you guys are doing, if you ask me, is fucking around where you shouldn't be... It's a shame that that's not a business; you'd be stinking rich!"

"Get lost, doll."

"How about you back off, Rav?"

The young woman warns, but her bark doesn't seem to be having the same effect as it had before, and both men simply laugh.

"The bitch was dumb enough to come back. She's asking for it."

"Asking for what?"

Regina interjects with a strained quality to her voice, and the men simply laugh.

"Oh, don't worry, doll, we'll show you..."

Denny drawls as he moves in on the brunette. Watching as the darker woman begins to move back nervously- her heels loud and jarring on the tarmac- the blonde frowns and jumps down from her perch; wincing as several small stones bite at her bare feet.

"Look, why don't you guys just-"

But the rest is lost as the Mayor makes a panicked move to the side and the mutt takes this as a cue to attack; wrenching himself free of his master's hand and running forth with the metal links of his chain sparking as they drag against the ground.

"Max!"

Denny yells, but his dog is having none of it, and the brunette screams before her voice gets drowned out by the shrieking of tyres.

Headlights flare across the lot, and the dog dodges with a yelp of surprise; the Mayor falling to her knees during her own attempt to escape a nasty bite. Reacting to the dangerous roar of the engine- the lime green of the Dodge responsible lost behind the blinding white of its lights- the blonde falls down on top of the darker woman and struggles to pull her up, shouting in her ear over the sound of ominous revving

"Get up! Get up! Get up! Come on! Fuck! Up!"
She hoists the brunette clumsily up onto her feet and half drags, half pushes her towards the corner, just before squealing rubber heralds the monstrous vehicle entering the lot in a tailspin, accompanied by several loud cheers and whistles of exuberance.

With the driver's side window down, an ageing blond sticks his head out of the tinted glass and yells "Come on fuckwads! Get in! Pigs are out! No time to play! Leave Swan be and get your asses in!"

Whistling for the mutt-

Max, the brunette thinks hazily

-to follow, Denny and Rav jump into the car with the dog springing up and over to land in-between them on the back seat.

Tyres screeching as the Dodge takes off in a streak of lime green, the two women are left panting in the receding scarlet of the taillights.

"Shit! What the fuck is wrong with you?!"

Emma yells as she snaps out of her fear and brushes herself down shakily.

"Why did you leave?!"

"Why the hell did you come back?!"

The blonde growls, doubling over as she massages a stitch in her side from where her tugging at the darker woman has caused her to strain herself.

"I..."

Regina simply shakes her head, looking down at the torn knee of her dress pants in shock.

It is only once the younger woman straightens herself back up and runs a bloodied palm through her hair with an irritable huff that she is able to process what just happened.

"... Swan."

"Huh?"

"... Your name's not Alice... Is it?"
Chapter 8

"... Swan."

"Huh?"

"... Your name's not Alice... Is it?"

A silence falls between the two women as each regards the other testily- eyes glittering in the darkness- before the blonde drops her attention dismissively to the Mayor's knees and remarks quietly

"Your leg's bleeding."

"I... You-"

"-Should get that seen to. Come on."

Frowning as the younger woman simply turns around and stalks into the shadows, Regina offers the vacant lot one, last, nervous glance before hurrying along in her wake.

"Wait, are you-"

"-Watch your step here, the bricks are a bit crumbly."

And that's all the blonde offers; making her way briskly up a set of eroded steps before tugging at the splintered wood of a sheltered door with a low sigh.

"Fucking keys..."

She hisses, but before the Mayor can offer up any form of retort, she grips the door's handle tightly in both fists and kicks her bare sole forcefully against a carefully selected spot and the creaking wood and metal give way.

Beckoning that she wishes to be followed without looking back at her guest, the younger woman leads them up a narrow flight of stairs where the clinging stench of mildew is almost unbearable, and the heat sits thick and muggy in the air. Repeating her previous trick with the door when they find themselves outside an unmarked, peeling panel of brick red at the end of the hallway, she leads them into a small apartment and asks the brunette to close the door behind her.

Regina does as she's told, but not without a great deal of apprehension.

"... Where are we?"

"Home, sweet home."

The younger woman growls, making a sweeping gesture with her hand as if to showcase the meagre offering of her surroundings. The Mayor purses her lips; sniffing in distaste as she takes in the strewn bedding that covers a mattress pushed into the far corner and several items of clothing decorating a hideous carpet.

And not a whole lot else.

Still, it doesn't smell as badly in the younger woman's apartment as it had down in the hall, and she
notes that the reason for this might have something to do with a large bay-style window that gapes open and offers the room its one redeeming feature. She spies a familiar scene down below and understands that her curious host must have been watching her before deciding to intervene.

Turning to the blonde, she regards her levelly.

"You're Emma..."

Raising her brow in return, the younger woman shrugs and denies her any real closure on the subject.

"Take a seat. I'll get you something to clean yourself up with."

Regina opens her mouth to argue but is left standing in the middle of the room as the blonde disappears off into what she presumes is the bathroom in a flicker of curls. Sighing- and feeling very much out of place- she stalks over to an overstuffed armchair wedged into the corner adjacent to the mattress and prepares to settle herself down, before letting out a shocked cry as a ball of fur streaks from between the chair's legs and brushes against her calves. Whirling round in surprise, she narrows her eyes as she spots a cat watching her warily from in front of the door.

When the cat seems to narrow its own eyes in return, she smiles.

"Oh, that's just Cass."

The blonde explains as she pads back into the room with a small bowl of water and a rather ratty first aid kit. Regina raises an eyebrow; silently challenging the younger woman as to her openness with any other's name but her own. Seeming to understand the reasoning behind the darker woman's humour, Emma offers a small smirk in return and nods towards the brunette's knee as she takes a seat on the carpet in front of her.

"If you would, Madame Mayor..."

Sarcasm sits rich in the blonde's dry tone, and Regina finds herself both irritated and amused as she indulges the curious young woman sat cross-legged at her feet and tries to pull up the soft fabric of her dress pants.

It soon becomes apparent that the material isn't going to go any higher than a little over half way up her shin bone.

Sighing, the blonde shrugs.

"Well, that's not going to work. Just take them off, it'll be easier."

The look the brunette offers in return has the younger woman rolling her eyes and pushing herself to her feet. Stalking over to a small box beside the mattress from which an eclectic array of fabric spills chaotically, she rummages around before selecting a pair of shorts and holding them out to the Mayor whose expression only darkens.

"They're clean."

Emma reassures, though as she eyes the attractive brunette up and down, she doubts hygiene is even the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the Mayor's displeasure. She hides the small grin this assumption lends her carefully and simply waits.

Regina regards the flimsy cotton the younger woman holds out to her with an air of disgust; not one
for borrowing clothes, and even less enamoured with the idea of donning a pair of running shorts. Still, she finds herself conflicted, as knowing what she knows- what she thinks she knows- as to who the blonde really is, she doesn't wish to offer up any reason to excuse herself too soon. Not without doing a little research first.

*And then what?*

Well... And then she doesn't really know...

She recalls her previous inclination whilst back in Storybrooke to bring along some form of discreet weapon and be done with it, and studies the fair young woman pensively. Deciding that she's going to have to buy herself a little more time, she takes the shorts and makes her way primly towards what she guesses to be the bathroom, and locks the door behind her when she's proven correct.

---

Staring at herself in the mirror, the brunette attempts to introduce some order unto the chaos of her thoughts with little success.

She glances around the dingy room curiously; still thrown at finding herself trapped within such despicable surroundings, yet intrigued when she thinks about Snow's child seeking refuge in such dismal quarters.

The shampoo and conditioner that play sentinels either side of the shower match in neither brand nor style. A bar of soap rests on the enamel floor beside a yellow razor and a long-empty bottle of shower gel.

No bath.

Several rolls of toilet paper are stacked high on the back of the cistern as there doesn't appear to be any sort of holder or dispenser, and the brunette notes that several of them have been used and partially unravelled.

Running her tongue over her bottom lip pensively, she fingers the side of the mirror and pulls back the glass when she confirms it to be the front of a medicine cabinet. Ignoring the small pack of store-brand tampons and the remaining three razors that had once accompanied the one forlorn in the shower, she spies what she seeks and studies the neat little packets and pills carrying various annotated labels.

Birth control pills without their box, but meticulously taken by the looks of things.

*Not all that surprising...*

A bottle of Tylenol, and a smaller container of little green and yellow capsules. The label on the container is peeling, but she makes out the little letters printed on each pill easily and recognises the term 'Prozac' from the depths of the obscure false knowledge plaguing her in this world.

Pulling the last box off the shelf, her eyes widen as she finds what she's looking for.

Evidence.

The label on the box in her hand hasn't peeled away to make the inscription it carries illegible.

High-grade pain killers.

*Where from?*
Phoenix.

_And who might they be prescribed to?_

Emma Swan.

"Got you."

She breathes, before gently closing the cabinet back up.

Closing her eyes in concentration for a moment, she sighs as creaking floorboards from the other room lead her to imagine the blonde might be growing impatient. Thinning her lips and fiddling with the catch on her pants, she allows the ruined material to fall from her svelte frame in a whisper of linen; grimacing slightly as they kiss the graze to her knee.

Folding her discarded pants up neatly, she leaves them in a little pile beside the shower for lack of any better idea and holds out Emma's proffered shorts dubiously. Stepping into the flimsy fabric with her nose wrinkled in displeasure, she pulls dark cotton over her hips and runs her fingers over the twin pair of sport stripes down the sides.

Go faster stripes.

_Not that this crazy day hasn't gone fast and unpredictably enough._

Making her way back into the living room hesitantly, she raises her jaw to make up for the obscenely uncharacteristic feeling of awkwardness that washes over her as she has her legs on display to mid-thigh. It's not that she doesn't believe the sight to be an appealing one, more just that it is not a look she has ever donned before, nor one she believes to look all too dashing when coupled with the crisp lines of her shirt.

The younger woman's smirk suggests that she's in agreement.

Glaring at the blonde, who sits on the mattress with her feline companion curled against her side, Regina takes a seat in the armchair and clears her throat; picking up the small bowl of water Emma had left on the floor by her feet.

"So..."

"... So."
"So..."
"...So."

Silence cloaks the room heavily as the brunette purses her lips and wrings out the tattered cloth the blonde has provided along with the tepid bowl of water resting in her lap, while Emma pets the tawny cat slumped across her thigh a little nervously.

"Why did you lie?"
"Huh?"
"Why didn't you tell me who you were?"
"Because, I'm not an idiot..."
"How's that?"
"Well, I mean... What do you want with me? I don't know anyone here... I don't know anyone anywhere... So how do you know who I am, and what do you want with me? And who are you?!"

A good question, and one the Mayor is unsure how to answer. After all, she can't very well go telling the young woman the truth.
Not any of it.
Not who she is. Not where she comes from. And definitely not why she's here.
Not that she has yet to make up her mind as to whether to let the young Saviour live.
"I already told you... I know your mother."
"You're lying."
"Actually, dear, this time I'm not."
"... I don't have a mother."
"Oh? Then, excuse me for saying so, but this is a rather run-down abode for the world's- arguably-second divine babe..."
"Huh?"
"You came from somewhere. Belonged to someone, once upon a time."

The blonde sighs at this and speaks more to Cass than the darker woman who goes methodically about cleaning the graze to her knee.
"For all of five minutes, maybe..."

Regina looks up- curious- as there is a definite note of anger in the younger woman's voice, and she supposes she hasn't ever really considered the Saviour's side of things before.
She had simply been collateral damage.  

*Still is...*

She reminds herself; not one to form any sort of attachment to those around her, and yet strangely drawn to the young woman sat on her sorry excuse for a bed.  

"What you just did was pretty idiotic."

She sighs; wincing as watered-down ruby trickles slowly down her shin. She glances over at the abused flesh blemishing pale palms pensively but doesn't elaborate.  

"You shouldn't have come back."

Emma reiterates moodily, but she slumps back against the wall behind her in a way that suggests she has no intention to start up any real argument as the hour grows late. As if supporting this notion, she closes her eyes wearily, and the Mayor frowns as she detects the faint shadow of a bruise lining her cheekbone. Placing down bloodied water, she clears her throat and continues cautiously:

"Perhaps not, but I did... And I'm right, aren't I? You're Emma... You're Emma Swan?"

She knows the answer to this question already, but still feels a small sense of victory when the blonde nods slowly without opening her eyes. Raising a brow when Emma speaks up softly, she swallows as she strives to find an appropriate response.  

"Yeah. I'm Emma... Happy?"

"Well... I suppose it's a start."

Regina murmurs before she pushes herself up and wanders over to the window to survey her surroundings.  

"You jumped onto the roof from *here*?"

And, whether her final intention is to dispose of the younger woman or not, there is a definite note of alarm in her otherwise sultry tone.  

"Lucky for you that I did!"

Emma growls, studying slender legs with a vague sense of appreciation from her position slumped against the wall. She has yet to figure out just who the fuck this strange woman might *actually* be—after all, she's not the *only* one who has been curiously evasive when questioned— but as for the brunette's aesthetic appeal, there is very little to doubt.

She recalls the outrage the Mayor had shown towards her little quip as to whether she might have any carnal interest in her and she grins before Regina shakes her from her inane train of thought.  

"Lucky for you that I *did*!"

"Lucky for *me*? Lucky for *you* that you didn't miss your mark and wind up breaking your neck down there in the alley!"

*Although that would have saved me from what is threatening to become a rather more difficult decision than I had anticipated.*  

"You know, you have a funny way of showing gratitude, Madame Mayor... Or did you have it all under control again?"
Regina rolls her eyes but is met with the rather undesired memory of the electric fear that had coursed through her blood as the dog had broken free, and the crass insinuations that had sent her heart beating at an alarming rate. There had been little pretence in the way those men had approached her, and she shivers now despite the heat.

"No... I just... I'm grateful you decided to assist in this instance, but I do stand by the fact that I believe your manner of doing so was rather foolish."

"I suppose I can live with that."

"Mmm, much as I believe that climbing your way out of a dirty bathroom window only to land in god only knows what kind of waste was rather foolish also."

"Okay, that one I'll agree with... Sorry... I guess I kind of panicked."

"I noticed."

The brunette smirks despite herself as she remains stood looking out onto the lot below. Her knee still stings a little, but as the minutes tick by, she becomes slowly aware of the fact that it is her arms that ache more than anything. Frowning as she tries to recall the source of the pain, she concludes it might have something to do with the way the blonde had buried her fingers into her flesh with bruising force.

Yes, to pull you clear of being flattened by a car...

Looking back at Emma, Regina purses her lips as she studies hollow cheeks and a wariness that doesn't quite masquerade as harmless curiosity, although the Mayor imagines the blonde believes she has the world fooled.

This isn't what I was expecting...

No, not at all.

And, it's one thing finding a dark sense of glee at the thought of Snow's offspring being stuck in this dump that parades itself as a city, but it is a little less humorous when they share such close quarters.

That... And it is something else entirely looking around the younger woman's sorry excuse for an apartment and imagining any sensible attempt at raising a child inside these four walls.

From the looks of her, the blonde still has a thing or two to learn about raising herself.

And she's young... Very young... That shouldn't come as a surprise as her age was the one thing I knew before coming to this hateful place... And yet...

And yet it still comes as a bit of a shock. In that other world, she supposes she wouldn't spare such things much interest, but in this world things are different.

In this world, there are bad men with mean dogs that speak to a Queen in a way that would land them at the gallows back where she comes from.

Bad people that do bad things.

So what? That's why you would do well to find out what you can and be done with the wretch... That you would lean towards sympathy on this of all occasions is pure madness! Do not forget who the little beast is, nor where she's been. She may look like an innocent, but let's not forget the cell she
... You should clean up those cuts to your hands, Miss Swan."

Cool green flickers up to study her with an unreadable expression before the blonde's sharp features break into a smile and she laughs huskily with open glee.

Frowning, Regina waits for an explanation as to what exactly has the younger woman so tickled.

"Miss Swan? Oh, that's rich... I like that."

Emma smirks, while Cass offers up an irritable glower as her mistress's slim frame shakes with laughter and jostles her about in a way she has no wish to be jostled.

Ignoring the brunette's similarly perturbed expression, Emma wipes her palms distractedly on the bare flesh of her thighs, and Regina decides she doesn't quite have the energy to call her out on such negligence.

 Doesn't have much energy left at all.

As if on cue, Emma yawns widely, before adopting a pensive expression and regarding the Mayor shrewdly.

"So, there are a bunch of questions yet to be answered, I guess... But I'm pretty certain you were at least telling the truth about not being from around here, and it's a bit fucking late to go traipsing around looking for a hotel... You owe me for what I did down there, so I'm going to call in that favour and presume you're not about to stab me in my sleep."

"I..."

"I'm not cooking you breakfast though, and I'm not leaving any fucking mints on the pillow either."

"Excuse me?"

Regina snaps; a little confused as things seem to be moving swiftly from her grasp of control once again.

"I guess you can have the bed; it's way too hot to sleep together anyway."

"To what?"

A look of naked disconcertion crosses fine features, and the blonde chuckles lightly as she shakes her head.

"In the same bed, under the same covers, Madame Mayor."

She explains with a small flicker of her tongue between grinning teeth. The brunette sighs irritably before lowering her attention dubiously to the mattress in question. Crossing her arms over her chest in a manner that speaks mildly of offence, Emma gestures towards the covers.

"I laundered them the day before yesterday, and you're already wearing my damn shorts. Take it or leave it, but I'm not leaping onto any more roofs for you if you decide to go searching for something a little more your style."

Smiling herself at this- while inwardly finding herself bemused that she should offer up the
expression in such a genuine fashion- Regina shakes her head and places her hands on her hips.

"I believe I've made my thoughts on your acrobatics quite clear, Miss Swan... Although, now I am left wondering where you plan to sleep?"

"Oh, don't worry about that."

Emma shrugs, pointing to the chair recently vacated by the Mayor in a fashion far more amiable than the brunette deems suitable for one submitting themselves to such a fate. Catching the small pull to the darker woman's- really rather lovely- full lips, the blonde smiles and pushes herself from the bed with a feline stretch.

"Seriously, don't worry, I can sleep just about anywhere."

Regina refrains from asking the question as to whether this is a skill born naturally or of necessity. Instead, she simply snaps

"It was a question, dear, I wasn't worried."

She sighs when this answer garners her another chuckle despite the practised venom lacing her words, before looking swiftly away when the younger woman shucks the rough denim of her shorts in an entirely unreserved fashion and tosses the time-tattered material carelessly towards the bathroom door. Catching the flicker of unease dancing behind sooty lashes, Emma shrugs once more as she unhooks her bra and slips it out from under her top.

"I wasn't exactly expecting company, nor do I own any pyjamas, but, in the interests of our new, blossoming friendship, I'll keep my top on and sweat the night away like a bitch."

Opening her mouth in sheer shock as to several parts of that sentence, Regina finds herself surprised when laughter falls from her lips in place of the scorn she had been expecting.

Rolling her eyes, she stalks over to the mattress and lowers herself down as she surmises that this trip is so far proving to land her in the most obscure situations. Pulling the thin sheet primly up over herself, she glances over at the younger woman who climbs into the armchair and sits curled up with her knees pulled up in front of her and quite a vast amount of flesh on display beneath a scrap of grey cotton.

Emma leans back and flicks the lights off via a small switch to her left; leaving them bathed in the eery glow of the moon.

"Well... Goodnight."

She offers with a peculiar sense of shyness, and the Mayor reciprocates with the internal thought that it might be a long time coming before she drifts off to sleep in these strange surroundings.

Still, the mattress is a lot more comfortable than she'd been expecting, and the creased sheets she lies beneath are light and carry the delicate scent of laundry detergent and summer.

She smirks as she glances towards her obscure host to spy the younger woman sat with her eyes closed and her lips slightly parted with sleep.

Her grin widens as the Saviour mumbles something unintelligible and curls up a little further into the chair.

...The Saviour.
Snow's offspring.

The woman that deemed it acceptable to toss away her own child.

...Still, you owe me for what I did down there, so I'm going to call in that favour and presume you're not about to stab me in my sleep...

The Queen's amusement dissipates into an uneasy frown, before she lets out a quiet cry of surprise as a ball of fur leaps lightly onto her chest.

"Go away!"

She hisses down at the cat, but Caskett simply paws at the sheets before making herself comfortable. Yellow eyes regarding her unblinkingly in the darkness.

She swallows and tells herself that it's just a cat and that she doesn't imagine she sees any sense of knowing in those unforgiving orbs.

From the other side of the wall, the weak wails of a baby join in with the continuous whir and city noise of summer.
The brunette's sleep is fractured; her dreams a hazy delirium spanning between worlds. Faces from the past, faces from home, voices long gone and several that may just be the creation of her own uneasy mind.

One face in particular seems hell-bent on flashing up to greet her as she fluctuates in age and stature. 

_Charming._

_Snow's imbecilic loved one with ruby fate spilling down the white relief of his chest as he lies bleeding on the ground- dead by all rights if the world would have been just- with a smile of relief touching dry lips; successful in putting prophecy into motion._

_Successful in saving the Saviour._

_She frowns as her subconscious allows her a panoramic view of the forest she knows so well- tarnished and incorrect through her mind's eye- and she takes several hesitant steps forward- dressed in black, in white, in a suit, in lace- to spy a newborn swaddled in a crocheted blanket._

_'Emma'.

_Purple letters embroidered by a masterful hand, and the young babe fusses and squirms as small fists open and close over cream wool._

_Impossibly large eyes wet with tears stare up at her from within the wounded carcass of an old maple tree._

_Green eyes._

_Filled with a terrible knowing that juxtaposes the time spent on this planet- on every planet- in a way that sets the young Queen's, Mayor's, Regina's heart beating fast._

_Taking another step towards her find, her lips form a slow smile that promises only darkness, and she raises her hand; slim fingers toting a knife, her powers, a pillow._

_Blinking with the idiocy of infancy the child takes in a shuddering breath- almost adult in its terrified understanding- before naked gums bare themselves in a distraught grimace, and the product of all of the darker woman's pain begins to howl damningly._

_Bawling._

_Wailing._

_Screaming._

Awaking with a start, Regina blinks in the darkness of a strange apartment and places her palm over
her chest as though to slow the frantic hammering of her heart.

Through the wall, the piercing shrieks of a baby echo jarringly, followed by a muffled hollering.

"Get your fat ass up, woman, and see to the brat before I do it myself!"

"Leave him alone, John! He's sick! He can't help it!"

"He's sick because you've been smokin' those damn cigarettes over his damn crib!"

"Well, if you would just help for once, and-

But the rest is an inaudible blur of voices accompanied by an ominous thud.

The baby continues to wail.

Distress crosses sharp features in their slumber, and the apartment's tenant curls up deeper into the lacklustre comfort of her chair and covers her ears.

Regina jumps at this sound of movement to her side; entirely disorientated.

Swallowing in discomfort, she glances around her shadowed surroundings, cataloguing what she sees and slowly piecing together the events of the previous evening.

The darkness that cloaks the room suggests that only a couple of hours have passed since she and the blonde- Emma, Emma Swan- retired to bed.

Well, figuratively.

She frowns, pushing herself up into a seated position on the old mattress- the yellow light of a generous moon highlighting high-born features eerily- and she studies the young woman curled childishly up in the chair opposite her.

Light curls- silver in the moonlight- fall messily over skinny limbs and hollow cheeks. The blonde's position begs the question of comfort, but sooty lashes cast long shadow over pale flesh as she sleeps deeply. The flimsy cotton of her top rides up on one side to show a strip of skin between the thin slash of her underwear cutting across her hip and the rumpled fabric which moulds to the soft swell of her chest in a manner the brunette finds strangely pleasant.

Curiously innocent.

Vulnerable.

Dark coals glitter in the shadows as the Queen looks upon the sleeping woman with a disquieting raptness.

The tortured wails of the neighbours' burden fall finally silent, and the soft whisper of the blonde's breathing is just audible as the night becomes still.

The brunette swallows once more; feeling as though her senses have been somehow heightened to pick up on that gentle sound.

Licking her lips, she glances down at her pillow.

Touching the worn case pensively, she looks back up and takes in a sharp breath as yellow eyes shine at her from beneath the younger woman's chair. Thinning her lips as Cass stares back
unblinkingly, Regina removes her hand slowly from the pillow and places it in her lap beside the other.

Offering a low purr in return, Caskett springs gracefully up to settle down in her mistress's lap; Emma dropping her fingers down onto soft fur and moving to accommodate the tabby's weight with a deep sigh.

Yellow orbs remain fixed on the Mayor as she lowers herself stiffly back down onto the mattress, locked into that all-seeing gaze.

"You want to become a pair of mittens; keep staring."

She hisses irritably; striving to believe the damned cat knows absolutely nothing about what's going on in her head.

And, of course, logically, she knows this to be the case... It's just...

Closing her eyes and turning away from the troublesome feline, she forbids herself to think on such matters any further as slumber reclaims her swiftly.

*They say only the guilty sleep...*

_Padding from the bathroom and picking tattered denim up from the floor, Emma inspects her shorts with a yawn and deems them suitable for another round with the world._

_The apartment basks in the hazy glow of sunrise, and what little she owns is bathed a warm ochre._

_Tiptoeing past the mattress in the corner, she rummages through the meagre selection of garments her hamper has to offer and pulls out a fading t-shirt. Offering her guest a cursory glance, she slips her top off and reclaims her bra, before donning fresh cotton._

_Making her way over to the large window that overlooks the lot, she scratches Cass behind the ear and watches a fat, city pigeon forage for food down below._

"Morning."

_She murmurs quietly, and Caskett ignores her in favour of watching the plump bird's movements with villainous intent._

"Remember what happened _last_ time, Cassie..."

_Emma warns with a smirk, and large, slitted pupils blink up at her reproachfully; the deep gash marring the cat's underbelly still visible from where the tabby had caught herself on barbed wire in pursuit of a rat._

_The subsequent scratches littering the backs of the blonde's hands as a result of cleaning and patching up the wound are now nothing but a few faint lines._

"No acrobatics she said, that goes for you too, Cass..."

_Emma warns, before turning round to study her peculiar guest with open curiosity._

_The Mayor lies on her back with her jaw tilted towards the warm glow of the sun; soft light playing over pretty, unblemished skin, and dark tresses fanning out richly over her pillow. The expression of unguarded peace that finds enviable features lends her a much younger look than she had worn the..."_
previous evening, and full lips lift ever so slightly at the corners in a way that causes the younger woman to smile herself.

Taking a hesitant step closer, the blonde notes a small scar lining the darker woman's top lip and she raises a brow curiously.

Shoving her hands into her pockets and yawning widely, Emma cocks her head to the side before glancing dubiously over towards the kitchen counter and tackling the vague hint of embarrassment that accompanies her knowledge that the cupboards beneath are all but bare.

Her attention falls to the plush leather of the Mayor's bag.

Playing her tongue between her teeth, she hesitates for a moment, before catching a disdainful glower from the windowsill as she reaches out her hand.

Narrowing her eyes in return, she glares at Cass guiltily, growling at her in a husky whisper.

"Oh, quit it, fleabag, no one asked you..."

Pin-needle teeth flash as the cat yawns, and Emma sighs and shoves her hands back into her pockets.

"Okay, okay, fine... I'm not gonna do it, see? Happy, Your Majesty?"

An apathetic blink and Caskett turns her back on the blonde with a swish of her tail.

"Ass-wipe."

The young woman offers in a friendly enough tone, before looking back down at the sleeping Mayor and furrowing her brow.

She has yet to make up her mind as to what she makes of their peculiar situation, but she understands herself well enough to know that by simply inviting the brunette up into her apartment, she has already made the decision to sleuth a little deeper.

That she had lied outright to the darker woman they are now both aware, but she doesn't think she's the only one who has been twisting the truth when favouring it at all.

The thought sets several alarm bells off in her head, but she tunes them out with a sigh.

She has questions.

Questions that mean Madame Mayor will at least be spending the best part of the morning in her company, and courtesy dictates that she should probably offer the darker woman some breakfast.

Stalking over to the breadbox and pulling out a small, white envelope, she doesn't bother checking inside as its meagre weight tells her what she already knows.

"Well, I guess we'll just have to do this the old fashioned way..."

Grabbing a light jersey from the concoction of clothes stuffed in the hamper beside the slumbering beauty, she pulls it on over her head, before asking herself the belated question of whether she should harbour any concern about leaving the brunette unattended in her apartment.

Smirking as her eyes fall to beaten garments, the worse-for-wear chair, and the litter of dog-eared paperbacks on the counter, she surmises that she can probably trust Regina not to steal anything in her absence.
Finding a spare scrap of paper and a temperamental ballpoint, she scrawls a short message to let the Mayor know that she'll not be gone long. Attempting first to head the page with the brunette's name, she contemplates the spelling while tapping the pen against her teeth, before crossing out a spiky 'R' and something that cleverly resembles both an 'i' and an 'e' and simply addresses her messy cursive to Madame Mayor.

Leaving the note on the counter, and weighing it down with her empty beer bottle from the night before, she slips from the apartment with a small wave to Cass, who mews before turning her back on the sun and settling statuesquely in place to keep her guard on their sleeping stranger.
Hurrying down the sun-drenched sidewalk, the blonde slows her pace only when she has turned the corner and started up the street towards her apartment; a paper bag bearing a selection of groceries clutched against her stomach.

A paper bag swiped from an unattended till upon entering the store and loaded surreptitiously on a quick tour of busy aisles.

An old trick.

And one she imagines she would do well to keep to a minimum lest she get caught.

"Not today, though."

No, not today, but there had been a time- no less than a year or so ago- when she would have believed such a fate to be impossible; considering herself invincible in a rather reckless manner.

Still, she's learnt that lesson, and she's learnt it the hard way, and her face falls moodily with the memory as she stalks slowly back to the empty shell waiting for her.

The Mayor awakens with a little more grace then when she'd been pulled from her tainted sleep in the early hours of the morning; studying the cracked paint of the ceiling pensively, before rolling onto her side.

She lets out a short gasp as she moves against something warm, before realising it's the blonde's cat, curled up beside her on the mattress.

Frowning, she debates whether to shove the tabby away, before playing her fingers over warm fur gently.

Glancing up towards the chair, she raises a brow when she finds it vacant. Looking over towards the bathroom door, she notes that it has been left ajar and understands with a sense of confusion that she has been left alone.

Pushing herself up from crumpled sheets- and thanking any gods that might be interested that her own bed doesn't call for such exertion when wishing to leave its comfort- she stretches stiffly before looking down at herself in surprise; having completely forgotten that she had donned the younger woman's running shorts the night before.

"Well, this isn't going to work..."

She mutters; running a hand over a large crease down the side of her shirt with an irritable sigh.

Stalking towards the window, she looks disapprovingly out onto the concrete wasteland below.

Caskett springs up beside her and offers their view a similar look of disdain.

"Where's your human, Cat?"

She inquires, receiving a low purr in return.

Looking around for some sort of clue, she spots the blonde's note almost immediately and narrows
her eyes as she tries to decipher complicated scrawl. While messy, the younger woman's scripture is strangely intricate, and the brunette finds herself absentmindedly surprised as it doesn't seem to fit with what little she has found out about her host.

Well, you only found out she wasn't called Alice several hours ago, so...

There is that.

She smirks, looking around with new intrigue as she finds herself free to explore.

Five minutes later, and she's found that there is very little to see in the younger woman's flat that isn't immediately obvious; cabinets and airing cupboard bare but for a few dustballs and the odd piece of mismatched crockery.

Flipping idly through the pages of one of the worse-for-wear paperbacks that rest beside a metal bread bin- an empty envelope inside that she decides must have been placed there by accident- she goes back on herself as she catches a flash of blue ink on one of the first few pages.

Someone left this in the park, and the mention of trauma, gore and betrayal had me thinking you might like it.

Can you move the car to the Other Place when you wake up?

I'll be back around 12.

X

Spiky, uppercase letters, and she studies them curiously before deciding she doesn't much care about their meaning.

Sighing as she plucks at her shirt, she comes to the realisation that- despite the sun still hanging low in the sky- she is uncomfortably warm, and debates the idea briefly, before padding over to the small bathroom and locking the door.

Having already checked the airing cupboard and finding it bare, she sniffs in disgust as she glances first towards the shower and then at the crumpled towel discarded on the floor. Pinching up the soft fabric between two fingers, she studies it with a scowl but deems it to be both relatively dry and seemingly clean enough.

"Well... I suppose this is a trip of firsts."

Shucking shorts and shirt, she steps into the pokey cubical of the shower and turns the tap.

Letting out a high-pitched cry as liquid ice hits her skin- eliciting a colony of goosebumps down her spine- she leans away from the water as far as the cramped space will allow and waits for it to warm up.

When a minute has come and gone and she's sensed no change in the shower's temperature, she grits her teeth and picks up the small bar of soap from its enamel throne. Holding it out under the frigid spray with a grimace, she creates a rich lather by rubbing it between her hands in the hopes of sanitising its surface of any trace of the blonde. Deeming the bar to be acceptable, she proceeds to scrub herself down, before biting the bullet- and holding her breath- and stepping beneath the water for six, torturous seconds.

Shutting the spray off with a second gasp of displeasure, she steps from the shower and wraps the
younger woman's towel swiftly around her shivering frame.

"Good god, what an ordeal."

She growls, hesitating as she walks towards the door in nothing but fluffy cobalt.

Listening for life on the other side of peeling wood, she hazards a guess that she remains alone in the apartment and pokes her head around the door. Finding herself correct, she collects her neatly folded dress pants from the floor and stalks out into the main room.

Slipping into plush linen with a shudder of humiliation as she does so with nothing underneath, she dons her bra before considering the creased mess of her shirt with a frown.

Running her finger thoughtfully over her bottom lip, she closes her eyes as she strives to maintain her patience, before walking over to the small hamper beside the mattress.

She braces herself as she picks her way through its dismal offering, pursing her lips as she plucks at several items of underwear amidst the blonde's clothes.

She finds herself a little surprised by Emma's choice in lingerie, although she endeavours to think on such things as little as possible.

It's just... Before she came here, she'd had a vague preconception of what she had been expecting...

A warped expectation; both hatefully sinless by mere birthright, and despicably defiled if one was to look into her history.

She had considered it to be a certain kind of girl that might find herself pregnant before turning eighteen.

As such, the scraps of fabric that bejewel the rest of the young woman's garments come as a surprise. Scant cotton, but simple in design and cut, and, if anything, more disconcertingly childish than provocative.

Not the lace and flimsy fabric she might have expected.

Let's not give credit to the preposterous notion that you've spent any time pondering the Saviour's undergarments...

Selecting a plain navy top from the hamper with the unenthused theory that it comprises the least opposable option, she pulls the worn material over her head and fusses it into place. Not the most flattering of outfits to say the least, but she notes that the grey tinge to the blue matches the pinstripes of her pants, and the simple V-necked t-shirt fits her moderately well. It isn't to her liking, but nor does she deem it to be a choice that will turn heads or beg for judgement.

Jumping as a key turns in the lock of the front door, she composes herself swiftly as the blonde enters with a paper bag held at her side and her long hair falling over her shoulder.

"Hey!"

"Good morning."

She replies, allowing a small smile to touch her lips in response to Emma's own before she can think better of it. Correcting her mistake with glib carelessness, she continues airily

"I presumed you'd attempted another disappearing act, dear."
"Why, did you miss me?"

The younger woman teases as she places the bag on the counter and starts unpacking her spoils. Realising for the first time how hungry she is, the Mayor watches on approvingly, before frowning as she comes to the belated realisation that the blonde doesn't seem to possess any dining furniture. Hesitating for just a second, she pushes such nuisances aside in fear of appearing lost and makes her way over to the armchair and takes a seat.

"Coffee?"

"Please."

She nods, striving to get her head around this almost domestic little scene played out opposite her sworn enemy's abandoned brat. Watching as Emma goes about boiling an ancient kettle and sprinkling granules of instant coffee into mismatched mugs, she bites her tongue as to her virginity when it comes to the caffeinated fraudulence being served up to her. Accepting the mug the blonde pads over with, she inspects the black pool it offers with clinical efficiency.

"I take mine with milk or cream."

She informs, trying to hand it back to the younger woman who glances over at the items waiting on the counter before shaking her head.

"Don't have any, sorry."

Regina pulls a face of genuine surprise as Emma stalks back to the shabby kitchenette and ignites the two-hob stove.

"You don't have any milk?"

Thinning her lips with her back to the brunette, the blonde shrugs; adopting a dismissive tone.

"No... I'm, like, vegan or something."

She explains; cracking a couple of eggs into a small pan.

The brunette opens her mouth to point out several flaws with this last statement but decides against it. Instead, she simply watches as Emma goes about making breakfast; keeping her mouth shut when the younger woman negates to season the eggs, nor toast the bread. To question such things would be pointless, as she already knows the answers, and- regardless of who the young woman might be- she doesn't deem it courteous to bring attention to another's affluence- or lack thereof- over breakfast.

Leave that to disdainful looks and inner judgement.

Accepting the large plate of bread, eggs, and several slices of apple when the blonde brings it over along with the appropriate cutlery, she tucks in as Emma takes a seat perched in the windowsill to face her.

"So, how do you want to do this?"

The younger woman asks through a mouthful of food.

"Excuse me?"

"Well, like... Do you want to take it in turns, or...?"
"Take what in turns?"

"Questions."

"Questions?"

"Well, yeah. I have them. You have them... Almost sounds like the recipe for a conversation or something."

She grins teasingly as she pauses with her fork halfway up to her mouth, and the Mayor finds herself once again struck by just how young her host actually is.

Dark coals flickering about the room as she chews her own mouthful pensively, Regina finds herself suddenly hatefully homesick. She has always been one to enjoy the finer things in life- even as a girl- but, rather than relishing them for their value, her interest has always been in the comfort her belongings might provide.

A comfort that has been lacking in other aspects of her life.

... There is no comfort here.

Nothing.

The blonde's grin is infectiously sunny, but it does little to blind her to the reality of this place.

Quick wit and amiable manners are a good facade, but not good enough.

They beseech their recipient to accept at face value 'yes, I'm fine, I'm happy, I've got it covered.' Regina doesn't think the girl sat in the window her has it covered. Not in the slightest.

Because beneath that impish smirk is still an eighteen-year-old girl living alone in a miserable excuse for an apartment with a battle-scarred stray for company.

She recalls the anger that had laced the blonde's words when she had spoken briefly of her mother and understands that for one unfamiliar with the lore of her homeland, Emma might well believe that she had been tossed aside.

Still... She had then proceeded to do the same to her own offspring, and the boy had ended up in a loving home.

A curious home... But a loving home.

Somehow, she doesn't think things worked out quite so smoothly for the blonde. Else somebody, somewhere would surely have noticed that their little girl was living in a bad part of town and leaping out onto roofs with the carelessness of one indifferent to their mortality.

Somebody would care.

"...I do have questions... As for the order I ask them in, or when I am asked, I don't suffer much of a preference."

"Ok, well-"

"-I do, however, have a phonecall I need to make first..."
"-I do, however, have a phonecall I need to make first..."

Placing her knife and fork together on her plate- a few pieces of bread still remaining- Regina pushes herself up from her chair and stalks over to the counter and leaves them to be washed up. Finding her bag and rummaging around inside, she retrieves her cell and glances up at Emma who nibbles patiently on a wedge of apple.

"Is there anywhere I can go... It's private."

She asks, and the younger woman points towards the door.

"If you go just outside the front of the building, no one really uses that alley."

Voicing her thanks, the Mayor lets herself out and hurries along the musty hallway and down the stairs. The fresh air when she makes it outside is a blessing when compared to the dark shadows of the communal hell of the building, and she catches the door as it swings shut behind her and props it open with a small rock.

Deeming the alleyway to be empty but for the hard rays of the sun, she glances up to spy a large, open window and supposes the blonde might still be privy to her side of the imminent conversation.

_Not that it really matters._

No, she had just needed to get out of there.

She had needed to call home.

Placing a call to her mansion, the phone rings three times before being answered by a polite drone.

"This is Sydney Glass, currently presiding over the Mayor's residence?"

"Sydney."

"Madame Mayor!"

The glee in the reporter's voice is tangible as well as predictable, but she finds a sense of appreciation for the fact that has previously been lacking.

"Indeed."

"It's good to hear from you. I am wondering as to your plans?"

"As am I... They are yet to become entirely clear to me."
"Are you alright?"

Dripping with concern.

"Yes, I've merely hit a bit of an unexpected obstacle, but all is well... How's Henry?"

She asks with a little more emotion, and she feels her heart jump as she catches a low grizzling in the background on Sydney's end of the line.

"He's fine. Whatever fever or illness he suffered a little before you left seems to have cleared nicely. He's been good as gold."

"... Is that so."

Regina muses; recalling the way her son's fretting had stilled once passed over to Mary Margaret to hold and pursing her lips. Glancing up at the window, she tells herself not to look too deeply into such things.

The boy had been sick.

*Had* to have been.

And that's all there is to it.

"May I speak with him?"

"...Madame Mayor?"

"Hold the phone to his ear, Sydney, I want him to remember my voice."

She snaps irritably, and she catches a rustling sound accompanied by brisk footsteps as the reporter complies. Picking up the quiet murmuring of her son as he fusses in his crib, she speaks to him quietly, as her lashes become inexplicably wet.

"Henry... Hi, Henry... Hi, Sweetheart, it's mom... Hi, Henry..."

A low gurgle in response followed by a hiccup and she sighs as she finds herself suddenly desperate to go home.

To go back to her family.

Wiping her eyes as Sydney speaks tentatively down the phone, she snaps at him irritably.

"Madame Mayor... It's me."

"I know that, you moron."

"Will you be coming home today?"

"I... I'm unsure. I would hope so."

"... Are you *sure* everything's okay over there?"

Looking up at the open window the brunette sighs.

*No. Things are far from okay over here...*
"Everything's fine. I will call in later, Sydney. Good day."

When the Mayor reenters the small apartment and closes the door, she finds Emma helping herself to a second cup of coffee with a curious expression gracing pale features.

"Who was that?"

"What makes you believe that it's any of your business?"

She snaps irritably, before tensing up uncomfortably as the younger woman leans in towards her on her way back to the windowsill and brushes a finger gently against her jaw. Holding up intricate whorls glistening with salt, the blonde shrugs and takes her seat.

"You were crying."

She states simply, as though merely looking for some sort of explanation rather than passing judgement or concern, and the Mayor sighs as she takes up her own seat once more in the armchair and laces her fingers neatly together in her lap.

"Nothing to worry yourself over."

"I wasn't... Are you homesick?"

Emma asks tentatively, and the darker woman raises an eyebrow in surprise. Understanding she is being called out for eavesdropping, the blonde splays out her palms and shakes her head.

"I wasn't trying to listen in or anything, you just didn't sound angry, and you don't look sad... I-

"-Yes. I am homesick... I miss my son."

It's the younger woman's turn to look surprised- almost comically so- as she cocks her head to the side and studies her guest curiously.

"You have a son?"

"You sound shocked."

"Well... I guess I am a little."

"Why?"

"... I don't know..."

Emma replies uncomfortably, not missing the baited annoyance in Regina's question. Smiling, she pushes her hair from her face and takes a sip from her coffee, attempting to clear the air.

"You'd make a good mom, I reckon."

"Is that so?"

"Sure... How old is he, your boy?"

The blonde asks, and Regina regards her thoughtfully as she catches just the faintest hint of discomfort still lacing the younger woman's tone.

No... Not discomfort... Force.
She's forcing herself to ask and be friendly.

She doesn't want to know.

She doesn't want to hear about your child.

Her child.

Thinning her lips as she reminds herself that the girl smiling at her had abandoned an infant without a care, Regina answers curtly.

"Almost nine weeks now."

The emotions that cross the blonde's face in response are complicated, but she is unable to hide the initial distress that causes her mouth to fall. Bringing herself swiftly back under control, Emma reappplies her smile and nods genially to the brunette's svelte frame.

"Well... You look pretty good for it..."

*I wish I could say the same for you, dear.*

"Yes... Well."

Raising a brow as piercing wails recommence from beyond the wall - *talk about timing* - the Mayor watches with interest as the younger woman grimaces and bounces her knee with something akin to nervousness. Cass mewls to announce her own displeasure at the interruption and climbs into her mistress's lap.

"... You don't like children?"

The brunette inquires quietly, and Emma looks up at her in confusion as she pets Caskett wearily.

"Huh? No... I mean, yes, I do... I just... I do."

She frowns, and Regina nods and drops the subject with a small sigh.

"Well, dear, you said you had some questions... Perhaps you would like to start."

"Um, ok... I... Well, I guess I still don't really know what you're doing here. I don't really know how you know me, and how much of what you said before was true, and like... What do you want with me, other than to keep me away from someplace I've never even heard of?"

Steeping her fingers beneath her chin as she studies the blonde silently, the Mayor frowns as she supposes she is now a little less sure as to the answer to these questions.

Is, in fact, now a little unsure about her reason for coming here.

"I came to find you... I was telling the truth when I said I knew your mother and that she and I are family through marriage... Just as I told you the truth when I explained that she and I have little to say to one another and that there is no love lost between us... As you well know, however, I never came to visit you in Phoenix, nor anywhere else... The last time I saw you, you were minutes old... That is also the last time that I spoke with your mother."

Regina explains carefully; surprised that she elects to tell the young woman a version of the truth, but thrown when Emma looks up at her angrily.
"You... You were there? When she... She didn't want me?"

"... Yes."

"But I... She... What she did to me!"

"...What did she do to you?"

"What did she do to me?! She fucking left me! She fucking... She didn't ask them to take me away... None of that... She left me... She took me out to the woods and she left me there!"

"... I see."

"You didn't know that?!"

"...No."

"But you knew she got rid of me?"

"I did."

"How old were you?"

"... Old enough to understand the situation... Not so old as to have become involved..."

Regina replies cautiously; wary of tallying the years in her head and getting anything wrong.

"Then why have you come to find me? Why now?"

"I only just found out where you were. Who you were."

"You've been looking for me?"

"Not a day has gone by that I haven't thought of you..."

Regina murmurs truthfully. Catching the complicated look the blonde offers her, she sighs and continues on matter-of-factly; a little disconcerted to find that she feels any level of empathy for the product of deceit sat before her.

"But understand also that I have had my own life to live. With no name to go off and a town to run, it was only through a chance discovery of your name on some official documents that I was coerced into broadening my search... Somehow, I just knew Emma Swan was right... That may sound curious, but one must never discard what they feel in their gut."

"... Is that why you were so evasive? You were trying to figure out if I was who you thought I was?"

"Indeed."

"What, uh... What official documents?"

Pursing her lips as she supposes she has no plausible reason for why she might have come across any such papers, Regina goes on to explain the 'what' but not the 'how'.

"Pertaining to your incarceration... You spent some time in jail?"

"... Yeah."
The blonde growls, seeming suddenly entranced in the brindle hairs colouring Cass's right leg.

"Then, I suppose my question to you might be why that was?"

"...I stole a bunch of watches."

"And that landed you in jail?"

"They were expensive watches. We were going to sell them."

"We?"

"Me and... And a friend of mine. We were going to sell them and get out of town."

"And you got caught."

"I did."

"Your friend?"

"No. I never said anything."

"Why?"

"What would have been the point? I was wearing one of the watches when the cops showed up. Nothing would have changed."

"Well, but if it was both of your idea..."

"It wasn't my idea at all... But that's life."

"... Quite."

_That's life... Some rise and some fall. It doesn't have to be fair._

The brunette sighs; gaze wandering about the apartment gloomily.

"So what now?"

"How do you mean, dear?"

"Now that you've found me, what now? Why were you so scared I would come looking for you when I don't even know who you are?"

"... I was afraid you might be angry... I would look down at my son and I would remember that you were out there somewhere. It was a strange concern- unfounded- that you might somehow come looking for me... But..."

"... You went with your gut."

"I did... To what end, I am unsure... I just..."

"Sated your curiosity."

The younger woman sighs, and the brunette nods silently as she comes to the slow realisation that all of the questions that have been plaguing her these last few years have been answered not by the blonde's words, but by what she has seen while staying here.
Emma isn't dangerous.

She isn't going to come sniffing after her.

She isn't the righteous, demanding young woman she had been expecting.

She is not the Saviour.

She is simply a very hardened, underfed young woman with a mask in the shape of a smile and no hot water.

"I am unsure what more to say now...."

"Don't be."

Emma replies with a tone of surprise, pushing Cass from her lap and walking over to the sink to wash up her mug.

"I kind of thought you were here because you meant to, like, shit, I don't know... I almost felt like you were here to kill me or something."

She giggles shrilly, before turning back to her rather disgruntled guest with a shrug.

"I know that's crazy, and I can't imagine you'd want to get blood all over yourself- even if you are wearing my shirt- but it was just..."

"A gut feeling?"

Regina replies with a sneer.

"Something like that... I read a lot of horror though, so..."

"You see ghosts wherever you go."

"Skeletons."

"Excuse me?"

"Skeletons. Ghosts are a thing of the past. Skeletons are unfinished business."

"Is that right?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. It's all a bit poetic for the truth. I see strangers wherever I go."

Emma offers simply, and the darker woman swallows, before pushing herself up and confiding quietly.

"That makes two of us."

"But, you're the Mayor? Don't you have a bunch of people working with you, and people in town and stuff?"

"Oh, there are people I see every day, Miss Swan. My town is simply brimming with people..."

"...But none that you truly know."

"None that truly know me."
"I guess that must be lonely."

"It can be."

"You're lucky then... To have your boy... You'll be his first word and his first conscious thought. You have someone."

"... I suppose I do."

Regina agrees quietly as she extends her hand between them.

"Well... I really should be getting home to him... Thank you for your hospitality last night, dear."

"You're leaving?"

"I am. You asked me what I came here for, and I was unsure. Until now. I came to answer several questions about who you might have become..."

"And?"

"... And, I am pleasantly surprised. That is the honest truth."

"Then I'm dying to know what in the hell you were expecting!"

"The past can poison us... I could sit here and ask you more about yours, but for what purpose? It can make us ugly... You are not ugly."

Swallowing as she feels an obscure wealth of emotion threatening to overwhelm her, Emma smirks and chides throatily

"Maybe you are trying to get into my pants after all..."

"I'll stick with the shirt for now. I'll send it back to you, don't worry."

"I'd tell you to keep it, but I imagine I'll get more use out of wearing it, than you will with it kept as a spare duster..."

"I would imagine so, too."

"Regina... Can I ask you one more question?"

"By all means."

"My mother... Did she hold me?"

"... I can't answer that; I don't know... Would it make a difference?"

"Yes. It would to me."

"It wouldn't change what happened."

"No. But it would change how I felt about it."

"You would find solace in her having held you before making the decision she made?"

"No... I would hate her for it."
"I presumed you might have hated her either way."

"... I tell myself she must have had a reason."

The blonde whispers, her tone somewhere between anguish and anger. Thinning her lips as she finds herself struck with unwanted sympathy that reeks of danger, the brunette summons up a memory of Henry lying sweetly and contently in the cot she has provided, in the house she is now willing to share, and she replies cruelly

"If that were true... Why take you into the woods? Why discard you like that?"

Her words hit their mark, and the younger woman blinks as though slapped, before visibly shutting down and offering a tight smile.

"Who knows why anyone does anything... Shall I see you out?"

"No need."

"Well then... I suppose it was nice to meet you."

"And you, Miss Swan."

"Do you want me to pinky swear I'm not about to show up on your doorstep?"

"I'm not sure what that means, but I think I can live without finding out... Here."

"What's that?"

Emma asks curiously as Regina makes her way over to the table and reaches for the note bearing the blonde's messy scrawl. Picking up the pen and adding a small embellishment at the bottom of the page, she reapplys the lid of the ballpoint and shoulders her bag before turning to leave.

"That number will come directly through to my home telephone. If you ever need to use it... Please do so."
Making her way across sun-baked tarmac that she feels she has come to know uncomfortably well, Regina forbids herself from looking back at the large window belonging to the blonde's apartment. 

Forbids herself from thinking about the younger woman at all.

Well... She tries to.

But it's hard. She doesn't want to admit to herself that what she feels as she walks away briskly and with purpose- trying to get out of sight without breaking into a run- is regret, but the notion sits heavily at the back of her mind nonetheless.

She tells herself to think of Henry and to relish the excitement she feels at the thought that he will be back in her arms in only a couple of hours.

Tells herself to think of this, rather than the girl left behind in the apartment above.

What business of yours is it what she has made of her life? Why should you feel the need to worry about such things?

Theoretically, there is no reason. As far as the curse goes, she feels no remorse; not for those trapped in Storybrooke, and certainly not for the alleged Saviour born to bring her plans to ruin.

Emotionally, though... Well, it just doesn't sit quite right with her to have played voyeur only to find herself curiously taken with her subject, before leaving them to rot.

But such is life.

Emma had said as much herself.

Stop this. She is nothing to you... You should be pleased with what you've found out! Relieved!

She should... And she is...

But...

You should never have stayed there last night. A foolish decision.

Yes...

She'll leave it at that.

Padding over to the window and pulling herself up onto the generous sill, Emma nibbles her bottom lip as she watches the brunette make her way across the tiresome grey expanse that plays her
uninspiring view.

"Having visitors is strange..."

She murmurs to Caskett who suns herself lazily beside her owner.

The tabby glances up at the blonde uncomfortably; sensing a strange undertone in the soothing sounds of her mistress's voice that is unfamiliar and therefore not to be trusted. It is the same note her previous master had adopted once his illness had settled in to stay and had caused him to smell rotten and unclean. That note of resignation. Of defeated acceptance. Mewling quietly, she moves to lie against denim and flesh, nuzzling into her girl's leg as a gentle hand falls down between her ears and massages sweetly.

Sighing heavily, Emma lowers her gaze as the Mayor slips from view, and she studies the dull brick of the hold-all opposite and the nasty fall in-between.

She remembers changing her mind at the last second and slicing her palms on the gutter in a frantic attempt to scramble up onto the roof after reaching out blindly with the harried thought flashing through her mind that life is like a coin toss.

"And Icarus fell, while no one was looking."

Cass purrs softly in response, before raising her head with a sniff of disquiet as an ageing human ambles down the alley below.

"You'll fall out of that window one of these days, little one."

A cracked voice, and Caskett bristles her fur while Emma raises her hand to her downstairs neighbour warily.

She doesn't really know much about Pete, save for the fact that he lives alone and isn't one to cause any trouble. He has asked her in for a drink twice, and twice she has declined. He works at a local factory- his payslips emblazoned with their emblem on the envelopes posted through the door- and smokes Lucky Strikes.

Delivered along with his payslips come the occasional magazines.

The glossy kind in plastic wrapping, with young girls on the front and many more promised inside.

He likes to call her blondie and she lets him. She calls him Mr Clayton, and he enjoys this fact immensely.

He drinks too much, and his daughter doesn't visit him anymore.

"Hey, Mr Clayton."

"How's the morning treating you, sugar?"

"It isn't."

She shrugs, and the greying man's face cracks into a yellowed smile as he stands with his hands clutching a paper bag to his chest and his neck craned back to look up at her.

"That's a rather sorry look you have going on there, little blondie. What's got you down?"

"Nothing much... Just thinking, I guess."

"I see."
"Well, a young girl like you should spend less time thinking and more time out enjoying herself. Ain't you got a fella or anything to keep you busy?"

"Nope."

"Well, that is a shame..."

"I guess."

She replies, but she wrinkles her nose, and wheezy laughter greets her from down below.

"Well, you mind yourself now, sweetheart."

"Sure."

Pete nods, and fumbles around in his pocket for his keys; allowing her a glimpse of what his bag holds, and she licks her lips jealously as she recognises the bottle catching the sun to be whisky.

Oh hell, but she could do with some of that right now.

Glancing back at the emptiness of her apartment and feeling an unwanted twinge of depression gnawing at her gut, she looks back down and shuffles a little closer to the edge of the windowsill; leaning over the sharp drop beneath.

"Hey, Mr Clayton?"

"Huh?"

"... Would you like to come up for a little bit?"

Hard blue eyes study her thoughtfully for a second before Clayton grins and pushes his key into the lock.

"Why, yes I would, little lady."

Letting out a sigh of relief as she finally rounds a corner and spots the old bungalow visited yesterday at the end of the street, Regina grumbles as she resents her host for convincing her to park quite so far away.

And just assuming I would remember how to get back here!

The blonde's shirt sticks to her uncomfortably as the sun bakes her surroundings with unmerciful brutality. She casts a curious glance over towards the empty porch of the bungalow and at the apple tree beyond and frowns; thinking on Emma's defensive attitude when accused of stealing the items from the shed.

"You should have done it... You could have done with the money."

She mutters, as she makes her way over dried-up grass and into the sympathetic shadows of the lean-to.

As promised, her car stands untouched beneath the cobwebs, and she reaches into her purse for her keys before cocking her head and regarding the dusty yellow Volkswagen that stands beside her Benz.
It was like that before. And, I don't know... It's kind of... Well... Fun, I guess.

Fun?... That thing?

Well I mean-

-Whoever owns that piece of junk needs to rethink their notion of 'fun' in that case. An eyesore would be a more appropriate description.

"It's yours..."

She breathes with sudden understanding and allows a small smile. Walking over to take a closer look, she raises a brow when she notes the small catch of the lock to be up; indicating the bug to be open.

"Don't do it..."

She scolds herself, before her hand travels of its own accord to the handle of the driver's side door and she opens up the car and slips behind the wheel.

Drumming manicured nails on the steering wheel, she takes in her surroundings with intrigue.

Several neatly folded, empty gum wrappers litter the ashtray, along with a tube of Chapstick and a couple of loose nickels. A stripy scarf sits bundled up on the passenger seat which hosts several circular cigarette burns, and a pair of winter boots peek out from the shadows below.

None of these things serve to captivate her attention, however.

What does that is the books.

Piles of them.

Stacked in irregular towers along the backseat, with several more lying fallen on the floor.

Scanning the titles visible on the jackets that face her, the brunette muses as to the rather eclectic array of genres and styles. Cheap thrillers stacked atop classics, stacked atop non-fiction case studies, stacked atop fantasy.

Infiltrated here and there with titles that spring out to her disconcertingly.

The Little Mermaid.

Alice in Wonderland.

Red Riding Hood.

And a curious anthology titled The Grimm Fairytales.

Reaching behind her and selecting a book at random, Regina flicks through the pages and sighs as the small print is embellished untidily with dark scrawl and messy brackets enclosing small sections of prose. Reaching the back page, she stops to study her find silently. A detailed illustration depicting several individuals she presumes to be characters from within the story, along with a couple of speech bubbles she struggles to decipher.

Selecting another book, she finds much the same.
I see strangers wherever I go...

"That must be lonely..."

Regina repeats the younger woman's own words as she drops the book back on the pile behind her with a sigh.

Running her hands through her hair, she covers her eyes with her head pressed back against the headrest, before lowering her forehead down onto the steering wheel and attempting to gather her thoughts.

That number will come directly through to my home telephone. If you ever need to use it... Please do so.

Yes... But how likely is it that the young woman will actually do such a thing...

Not very likely, she believes.

Not very likely at all.

"So what?"

She grumbles; striving to think of Henry, but instead plagued with the image of Emma sat grinning at her with her fork halfway up to her mouth.

Eggs and bread and coffee, but no milk. No seasonings. A single apple, but no vegetables or any staple foods pulled from the bag in the kitchen.

An odd selection.

Not really things one would choose and neglect when shopping.

"Because you didn't... You didn't go shopping. You took whatever sprung to mind and got out of there..."

And just smiled it away...

"Damn it!"

Turning back onto the tarmac lot with a sense of irritable discomfort, Regina parks her car and looks up at the window above. Taking in the rest of her surroundings, she deems the lot to be empty for the time being and tells herself to make the most of that fact and get on with it.

Get on with what?

Well... She doesn't really know.

All she knows is that she had been half an hour into her journey home when she had turned around with a low expletive muttered beneath her breath.

"What on earth am I doing here?"

Not knowing the answer to her own question, she huffs moodily as she slips from the air-conditioned sanctuary of her car.
"I suppose I could at least offer her some lunch... While I decide on a more scenic route home."

It is a weak excuse, full of holes, and she knows this. Still, it provides her with some sort of vague plan, so she'll take it.

*But if the little wretch deems it her place to make any sort of comment about this at all... I'll... I'll... Well. She won't be getting any lunch, that's for sure...*

Regina sniffs, stalking across the lot and round to the alley between crumbling brick.

Studying the front door with the slow realisation that she never *did* get this far into her investigation, she notes that, while there are several rusting plaques displaying apartment numbers, there is no way of calling up to any specific one.

Taking the door handle in both hands as she had witnessed the blonde do the previous evening, she kicks the sharp toe of her heel against peeling paint in an attempt to get the door to swing open.

Her fourth try ends up being successful.

Making her way upstairs with a peculiar sense of shyness that simply doesn't suit her, she frowns as she crests the last couple of steps and spots Caskett sat out in the hall with her fur raised and her eyes trained on the blonde's front door which stands cracked open to allow just a small amount of light to bleed out into the hallway. As the brunette takes another step closer, the cat turns her attention towards the noise of her footsteps and purrs; springing to her feet and padding down the hall to brush up against the Mayor's legs.

"Well, you've changed your tune..."

Regina murmurs down at the tabby, before raising her brow at a low melody of voices coming from the blonde's apartment.

*Leave. See? She doesn't need you feeling sorry for her.*

*Leave.*

Husky laughter is met by a voice cracked by years of cigarettes, and the brunette glances down at Cass as the cat bristles her fur once more and eyes the door with clear distaste.

"Not fond of visitors are you, dear?"

Funny. She had assumed much the same went for the blonde.

Leaning down to pet Caskett for lack of an idea what to do next, the Mayor frowns as dry laughter is met by an irritable murmur and the sound of glass chinking against glass.

"Come on, pet, don't fall behind."

A soft mumble in reply, and more laughter in response to this.

Gathering herself under control, Regina stalks self-importantly down the hall and knocks lightly on the open door, before pushing it open to make herself known.

"Hey..."

Comes the confused growl of a greying man sat splayed out in the old armchair.
"You're back..."

Emma offers with little more grace than her companion, and the brunette eyes her shrewdly as the younger woman lies slumped against the wall on her mattress. Taking in the mug in her hand— the strong smell cloaking the room suggesting that the blonde isn't exactly drinking coffee—and bare flesh as Emma sits in her shorts and bra, Regina crosses the threshold and leans down to pluck chipped china from unsuspecting fingers.

"Hey!"

Turning to the man sat watching on in inebriated confusion, she barks at him angrily.

"You need to leave, please."

"Well who the hell are you to tell me what to do, you dumb bitch?"

"Get out."

"Hey, lady, mind your own business... You don't have any right to come here and tell me to... You have no business here..."

He slurs, and she leans forwards and warns dangerously.

"And you have no business here either, Sir. She is eighteen years old. You have no business giving her liquor and allowing her to sit around in her underwear. She could be your daughter!"

"She's legal-"

"-Not to be drinking this, she isn't. Get out. Now."

"I-"

"-You do not want me to make this a problem for you, I'm warning you of that now. I'm sure things like this happen all the time in these places, but I strongly suggest that this time, you don't allow them to continue, because this time, if you touch her, I will make sure that people you don't want knowing about such things are made aware of the fact that you presented liquor to a minor in exchange for your current view..."

"She was hot..."

The greying man argues, but with a hint of doubt, and he makes to push himself drunkenly from the chair as the pretty bitch with the shitty attitude has said just enough to make him uneasy. She might have a point...

"Was she?... Did he tell you to undress?"

Regina snaps, looking back down at Emma who regards her blearily, before slurring

"Seriously! Why are you back?"

"Yes or no? What did he-"

"-Look, lady, cool your shit. I'm going. Fuck! I haven't got time for this! I don't need this kind of grief for a girl like that!"

"Get. Out."
The brunette warns, following him to the door and holding it pointedly open, before slamming it shut behind him.

"What the hell is wrong with you?!

She shouts, turning back to the blonde and placing her hands on her hips.

Emma merely regards her sullenly, and Regina opens her mouth to express her annoyance, before deciding against it with a sigh. She recognises the unhappy pull to the younger woman's mouth and the blank disconnection that shines back up at her from behind green eyes. Looking down at the amber that swills in the bottom of the mug in her hand and the almost empty bottle beside the chair, she shakes her head before stalking over to the bed and picking up the younger woman's top.

"Here, put this back on."

She requests softly, watching with pursed lips as Emma clumsily does as she's told.

"Get yourself some water."

But even as she says these words, she takes the younger woman's mug over to the sink and washes away the last of the whisky and replaces it with water, taking it back to the blonde with a frown.

"Why would you go and let a man like that in here and see you half naked?"

She scolds, but not without a hint of unease.

"I wanted a drink."

Emma shrugs.

"You're too young to drink."

The Mayor murmurs, taking a seat heavily in the chair as the younger woman laughs jarringly at this.

"Yeah?... Well, who the fuck's gonna come and tell me off, M-Madame Mayor?"

"I am."

"Huh?"

"I just did, didn't I?"

"I guess... Why did you come back, anyway?"

The blonde asks, and the Mayor looks around the apartment thoughtfully, before offering a curious smile.

"Why, did you miss me?"

"No."

Emma grumbles as she lowers herself down to lie on the mattress; curling up with an unhappy sigh as she closes her eyes tipsily.

"Well... Never mind."

Regina muses softly, drinking in pale thighs and finding herself biting her tongue angrily as she
doesn't imagine she would have opened the door to a palatable scene had she debated coming back all that much longer.

"Get up."

"No."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because... You're coming with me."
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

A/N: This has clearly been a bitchingly sociable Friday night! Ah well, I did get locked out in the garden in my underpants for singing to my housemate, so that fulfils the Friday night mishaps quota. Hope you enjoy :) Please review :)

The blonde stares up into dark eyes blankly as the Mayor stands looming over the mattress impatiently.

"Well? I haven't got all day. I already told you, I need to get back home. A town doesn't just run itself, you know."

"But... Why?"

"What do you mean, why?"

"I thought... I thought you didn't want me coming anywhere near your town. I thought..."

Emma frowns as she tries to figure out what she's trying to say through a heavy haze of whisky, and the brunette thins her lips as the younger woman's words set her own mind into panic mode.

Why are you doing this?! Are you insane?! She can't come back with you! She can't come back to Storybrooke! To Henry!

But what choice is there?

I can't leave her here!

No. As disconcerting as this realisation is, the Mayor knows it's the truth. She can't leave the blonde to self-destruct alone in this crummy little apartment. For one thing, it just doesn't sit well with her to do so, and for another... She has the inexplicable feeling that her visit might have served to light a rather dangerously short fuse. How? She isn't entirely sure... But she doesn't think that finding out someone knows about her past has had a positive effect on the young woman... Not if that someone proceeds to simply walk away within twenty-four hours of meeting her.

You were just sating your curiosity...

True... But when worded in such a way, it now seems rather cruel.

And, all past titles and what they might mean aside... She doesn't see how she's supposed to just walk away after witnessing the moronic situation the young woman has managed to get herself into not even an hour since her departure.

He could have hurt her!

It's possible, but she doesn't actually deem this to be very likely.

The girl who had jumped onto the roof of the hold-all and mouthed off at the men leering across the
tarmac hadn't seemed like the sort to take a beating and not give a little back.

No, she doesn't think the ageing man so recently dismissed would have physically hurt the blonde.

*But he would have slept with her... And that's really almost the same thing...*

Yes, most likely.

And Emma would have let him.

"*I wanted a drink.*"

Shaking her head, Regina urges softly.

"Please get up; I don't imagine either of us fancies me wrestling you down the stairs."

She sighs, walking over to the counter and stacking the younger woman's prized books under her arm.

"I can't just... I can't just leave... What are you... I mean... I don't even know where you *live*... And I... I can't just..."

The younger woman mutters clumsily as she struggles to push herself up; her complexion peaky and hair tousled, and the Mayor imagines that however hard Emma might have laughed at the idea of being too young to drink, she is no veteran of drinking quite so *much* and quite so *quickly*.

...*He was sweetening her up*...

She bristles at the idea.

"Why not? What have you got *here* to stay for? You- If you're going to be sick, do it in the bathroom!"

She warns suddenly, and the blonde nods, before hurrying off in that direction.

Sighing as the sound of running water comes from the other room to drown out weak retching, Regina raises her voice and muses irritably

"Though, I warn you; such behaviour as you've displayed today is *not* tolerated where I come from. Honestly, dear, inviting a man likely three times your age into your apartment just so that you can have a *drink*?! Do you have any *idea* how dangerous that could have been? I mean, what if he'd-"

"-Okay, okay, I *get* it. Shit, what are you, my *mother*?"

The blonde grumbles, moving to stand in the doorway of the bathroom with her eyes pink and her hands shoved sheepishly into her pockets.

"I am not, Miss Swan, but right now, I'm the best that you've got, so you better get your act together because I am not a patient woman."

"Well, no shit."

"And you can stop with that kind of language as well."

The Mayor snaps, though she has a feeling that she suffers the need to do so more out of discomfort than any actual irritation. The younger woman's way of speaking might be disgustingly crass, but it is
most certainly not a case of not knowing any better... She is clearly very well-read, and she has shown that she can be exceptionally eloquent in a bizarre sort of way... It would simply seem that she's chosen her manner of speaking to fit her circumstances, and Regina supposes she can understand why that might be.

Still. When she had been Queen and things hadn't been to her liking, she hadn't fouled her tongue to make such things known, and nor will she accept this from Emma.

*She can be better than that.*

"Miss Swan, if you wish to stay here, then, by all means, that is your prerogative. But, I am offering you a way out, and you would be a fool not to take it."

"A way out of what?"

Emma growls testily, and the brunette holds her dangerous glower easily; recognising a worthy adversary in the young woman when it comes to saving face.

"You know what I'm talking about. Do you want me to spell it out for you? Is this *really* what you want from life? To rot away in an apartment that I hesitate to ask how you've paid the rent for so far? To inevitably get caught for shoplifting a bag of *groceries*? Not to mention, what with your record, to then spend some more time in jail for something so ridiculously *menial*?"

"Of course not."

The younger woman hisses back, looking around her at the peeling paint of the apartment before eyeing the brunette with an obscure blend of dignity and chaos.

"But this is what I've *got*, Madame Mayor. This is what I've made of myself. I did what I could, and this is the result... I can't help it that it's not good enough."

"I never said-"

"-This *isn't* what I want from life, but everybody gets their lot. I took mine and I did what I could with it because there are no fairy godmothers out there. People aren't just going to come along and grant you three wishes. There's no *magic* in this world, Madame Mayor..."

"...No. There isn't... But that doesn't change the fact that I'm offering you a hand."

"Why? Why the *hell* are you trying to help me?"

"... I don't know."

The brunette sighs, and she feels she couldn't have offered a more truthful answer if she'd tried.

Tossing back long hair and squaring her shoulders, the younger woman bites her lip and tries to comprehend the craziness of what seems to be happening.

"Regina... What will I *do* when I get there? I don't have anything I can offer you. I'm not good at *anything* much, and I don't exactly have a long list of references that'll get me anywhere... I... I don't know if I-"

"-Well, that's just *one* of the perks of being invited to come and stay in a town by that town's *Mayor*. You can read and write, which is something I often wonder about with *many* of those working beneath me."
"But-"

"-No more buts. I'm going out on a limb here, dear, and I'm growing bored of arguing-"

"-I'm not trying to argue! I just... This is..."

"It's a lot."

"Yeah."

"I know."

"I mean... No one's ever... Like... N-no one's ever-"

"Hush. Grab whatever you might need and let's get out of here."

Regina interrupts sternly; in no way prepared to witness the waterworks threatening to break the barrier of the blonde's lashes, nor suffer the consequences sure to accompany having observed such a break in character.

Accepting the trembling smile Emma offers in return- the younger woman's thinking seeming to be on much the same level- the Mayor waits as the blonde fishes several items of clothing from the box by her bed, before collecting anything she might need from the bathroom.

"Okay... I-I guess this is it... Wait! Cass!"

Wide eyes as the young woman looks around the apartment for signs of the missing feline and Regina purses her lips; the small matter of the cat never having crossed her mind.

Seeming to sense a shift in tension, Emma regards the brunette cautiously, her voice timid when she continues

"I can't leave her here... I mean... She needs me. She'll get into trouble if I'm not here."

"She managed alright before deciding to claim her territory on your windowsill."

"Regina, I can't."

"Fine... Well, go on then! Hurry up and find your damned cat."

The Mayor sighs irritably, though she watches on with some amusement as Emma doesn't seem quite steady on her feet as she undergoes a brief search of the apartment before stumbling downstairs to look in the lot.

The brunette's amusement falters somewhat once they get out into the baking sun, and she waits while the younger woman makes her way unsteadily to a gap between the hold-alls in hopes of spying Caskett. The way the blonde stumbles every now and then sets her teeth on edge; thinking of the men who had accosted her in this very place just yesterday, and what they- or anyone else for that matter- might make of such an easy target. It is not a way of thinking she is used to utilising, and it serves to make her all the more anxious to get home. Home, where things all work as she wills them to. Home, where everything is safe unless she wishes otherwise.

You're taking an awfully big risk allowing her to enter the fray... She's not like the others... You don't control her... She could ruin everything... Ruin your life with Henry...

Well. If it comes to that... She'll simply have to be gotten rid of... But it hasn't come to that yet.
She sniffs resolutely, before raising her voice with purposeful annoyance.

"If she doesn't want to come to you, then she clearly isn't that attached. Stop pestering the poor beast and get in the car."

"She *does!* She's just... Fuck... Come *on*, Cass!"

The blonde grumbles, before leaning over to scoop up a passing streak of mottled fur and landing clumsily on her knees.

"Ah, crap."

Regina watches as Emma pushes herself back onto her feet and rubs down shallow grazes with a sigh.

"Get in the car, I'll do it-"

But Caskett suffers a moment's curiosity as to her mistress's injuries, and the blonde snatches her up easily.

"-S'ok, I got her."

"Yes, with war wounds to tell the tale."

"Ah, it's nothing... Now we match."

"... I'm thrilled."

Regina rolls her eyes and stalks over to the driver's side; unlocking the doors with a click of her keys.

"You best hold on to that cat, Miss Swan, I'm not having it shed its hair on my seats-"

But, no sooner has the blonde slipped into the car, when Cass scratches and squirms for release; springing free from Emma's grasp and leaping neatly through the seats to settle down contently across the back row with a superior yawn.

"... Oops..."

Emma offers with a sheepish grimace, and the brunette sighs, before jamming her keys into the ignition.

"*Why* do I get the feeling I'm going to regret this?"

But when she catches the flicker of doubt creeping across pretty features, she adopts a small smile of her own as she backs out of the lot.

"Still... I never do anything like this. I am not one to live life by the seat of my pants as the saying goes."

"Well, I am... And you saw how well *that* worked out."

"Perhaps a middle ground might suit us both."

"I'm not so sure I *have* a middle ground."

Emma mutters, wide eyes scanning their surroundings nervously as they get out onto the city streets.
"Are you still feeling sick?"

Regina asks with more concern as to the interior of her car than the blonde's stomach.

"No, I'm okay... Just... Nervous I guess..."

"Nervous?"

"I don't much like new places..."

"Funny, for one who seems as stir-crazy as yourself..."

"Oh, I like a change of scenery... Just... New places means new people... Sometimes that's nice... Nice to get away from ones you've gotten on the wrong side of... But... New people, or, rather, people... I'm not so good with."

"Well... Where we're going, I doubt the people will be like any you've met before... And there's only one person whom you would do well not to cross, and that would be yours truly."

"Give me a week, Madame Mayor."

Emma chuckles a little apprehensively, but the brunette doesn't miss the shy glances that flicker every now and then in her direction.

"You better not mean that, Miss Swan."

She smiles.

"Oh, pissing people off isn't something I cherish... But it's something I'm very good at."

"Somehow, I don't doubt that... But, I would advise you to refrain when it comes to myself. You have no idea what I'm capable of."

Husky laughter at this and Emma mimics her in a deep voice.

"You have no idea what I'm capable of..."

Well, dear... I suppose I'm about to find out...
Chapter 15

Please comment :) 

Crossing the state line into Maine, the Mayor casts a glance to her right and smiles as the blonde sits curled up in her chair with her mouth open as she sleeps off any lingering spell of the whisky. Spotting signs for a rest stop up ahead, she deploys her turn signal and pulls into a large parking lot overlooked by several brightly lit fast food joints. She imagines that the various names and menus might mean more to Emma than they do to herself, but doesn't deem it a good idea to admit this to the younger woman as Emma already seems a little curious as to her lack of understanding of the outside world.

Picking the least unappealing option, she leans over to shake the blonde awake and hisses irritably when her hand is slapped away.

"What?!"

Pale limbs pull in; suddenly tense and defensive, before the younger woman processes her surroundings and relaxes somewhat as she scans their surroundings.

"Are we getting food?"

She inquires hopefully, and the brunette smirks as she points out that she isn't stopped between two badly modified cars for the scenery.

"Will the cat be alright in here?"

"She has a name, you know. It's Caskett... And she's asleep."

Emma shrugs, winding down her window a crack as she peers back at the slumbering tabby.

"She's not really used to being stuck someplace though, so..."

"We'll make it quick. I could just do with a drink. A soft drink."

Regina adds pointedly with a sniff of irritation, and the younger woman grins sheepishly, before pulling a face and speaking down to her knees.

"I think you've probably already clocked onto this, but, I don't, uh... I don't have any money with me."

"Any money with you? What, did you leave your fortune back at home?"

The brunette snipes with a roll of her eyes, before softening the blow as she catches a small snarl play across pretty lips and reminds herself that she has invited the younger woman to join her, and should perhaps refrain using the same tone as she has grown accustomed to adopting when dealing with the cretins back in her town.
"I know you don't have anything with you; I watched you pack. If I had a problem with it, I wouldn't have stopped. If you have a problem with it, then wait in the car. It's entirely up to you, but I don’t wish to discuss the matter any further."

"Well, when you put it that way..."

Emma grins, and the Mayor shakes her head as she slips from the car and slams her door. At the sound of the blonde doing the same, Cass raises her head, and the younger woman waves at her through the glass, promising softly that they'll be back soon.

Caskett yawns and turns her back; apparently entirely disinterested as to whatever plans the humans have made. The car is hot, but not unpleasantly so, as the open expanse of the lot offers a breeze as each establishment opens and closes continuously to let out precious bursts of air-con, and she simply moves a little to her right to stretch out in a patch of sun.

"I've never had cats before, but that one seems to be the laziest little shit I ever-"

"-What did I tell you about speaking in such a manner?"

"This is how I speak!"

"Well don't. It's crude, and you're clever. You don't have any business speaking like that."

"I'm clever?"

Emma chuckles with a wrinkle of her nose, and Regina sighs as she leads the way into a dismal looking sandwich shop.

"All recent evidence to the contrary aside, I believe so, yes... That was your car, wasn't it? The yellow thing?"

"Shit... The bug!"

"Miss Swan!"

"Sorry!... Sorry... Yes, it's mine."

"Well, you can have it sent over, or go and collect it, but I didn't deem a stomach full of alcohol to be the time for such things... And the books?"

"Yeah. I like to read."

The blonde offers a little defensively, and the Mayor cocks her brow curiously.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"No... No, it's just when you put the book down, and, like... Reality stinks, you know."

"Sometimes it does... As you said yourself; there is no magic in this world."

"Nope, sadly not."

Emma shrugs, following the brunette up to the counter.

Perusing the various selections listed up above a gum-chewing waitress's head, Regina sighs as none of the calorie-laden options on offer appeal to her. Selecting a sugar bejewelled apple pastry from
behind scratched glass instead, she accompanies her choice with a large coffee and a bottle of spring water. Turning to the blonde, she instructs

"Order whatever you like."

"Um... Okay..."

The younger woman mumbles shyly; placing her order and complying when the brunette asks her to go and find a table. Addressing the waitress as she slips her card from her purse, Regina orders a garden salad on the side of the blonde's order of fries with a sigh. Heading over to a booth by the window, she takes a seat opposite Emma as they wait for their food to be brought over; handing the younger woman her soda as she cracks the seal to her water.

"I've ordered you some greenery to go with the beige ensemble you've elected suitable to put inside your body."

"There are pickles on the sandwich... And tomatoes."

"Well, it won't kill you to branch out a little further. As much as I am sure there are numerous health benefits to three different varieties of melted cheese."

She scoffs disdainfully, and the blonde shrugs and murmurs her thanks.

"...Why the sudden bashful attitude? You had no qualms with me ordering for you last night."

"That was different."

"Ah, so it's okay to behave in such a manner when you're Alice?"

The brunette smirks, and Emma grins sheepishly as she feeds a straw into the narrow neck of her coke bottle.

"Exactly."

"Hmm... And I suppose that's why you chose that alias. Alice in Wonderland? The irony amused you?"

"Not Alice in Wonderland. Alice Through The Looking Glass. It was a mad chase."

"It was rather vexing."

"But the name suited."

"I suppose it did."

"And I always liked the idea of Wonderland, I guess."

"It's a ghastly place... By the sounds of it."

"How so?"

"A senseless kingdom housing hooligans and madmen... I can only presume that you would find it to be quite tiresome if you were actually stuck there."

"Well, sure... But I imagine being snacked on by a shark might be tiresome too, but Jaws is still a good book."
"I am unfamiliar."

"What?! You don't know Jaws? Where the hell have you been?!"

"Running a town, Miss Swan."

The brunette growls irritably, before raising a brow when a waitress comes by to deposit their plates.

"Do you think you have enough there?"

She enquires with a smirk, and the blonde snaps up one of her fries with a smile, and challenges airily

"I still bet I finish before you do."

"I would rather you didn't. I would find it tedious were you to choke."

"Oh, well then, I wouldn't want you to find me tedious."

The younger woman winks, and Regina sighs as she imagines she might find the blonde to be a great many things before all too long, but she doubts any of those things will be tedious.

"Hey, Regina?"

"Yes, dear."

"About what happened earlier... I-"

"-I don't need an explanation... I just want you to promise me you won't do that again."

"Well... I suppose if I have the Mayor vouching for me, I hardly want to show her up."

"Indeed you don't."

"How come you're doing this though... Like, really?"

"Well, Miss Swan, I believe I might finally have gone insane. That is as good an explanation as any."

The Mayor muses, watching curiously as the younger woman makes startlingly swift work of her lunch. Cocking her head to the side as Emma grins at her response, she asks quietly

"You weren't alone before, were you? I mean before moving to Boston. Your friend with the watches- or, not friend, as the case may be- you say you were going to run away together. You were already living together though, weren't you?"

"... Why do you say that?"

"Because I can't fathom anyone living the way you have been for a long period of time... You're chaotic. And you don't take care of yourself. Someone else did."

The blonde flashes her companion a dangerous look, before skewering a piece of cucumber violently with her fork.

"Just because you're preceptive, doesn't mean you have a clue, with all due respect, Madame Mayor."
"So, tell me I'm wrong."

"... I lived with someone for a little over a year. I lived alone before that."

"You were a child."

"I was fifteen."

"That's my point."

"... You know, it's not very fair to play this game when you have the advantage."

"Game?"

"You're trying to suss me out. Well, it's not going to be that easy... I mean, this is only our second date."

The younger woman smiles impishly with her straw in her mouth and the Mayor sighs as she finishes off her coffee and leans back in the booth.

"Must you keep doing that?"

"Doing what?"

"Making those little quips... I assure you that that is not the reason I decided to take you with me."

"No, I know, you did that because you're insane, you told me already."

"Oh, lord..."

"And it's tit for tat."

"It's what?"

"You made me uncomfortable... I retaliated. It's a cruel, cruel world, Madame Mayor."

"Isn't it just..."

Regina replies as she hides her amusement. Pointing to the blonde's coke, she adopts a tone of authority and pushes their strange conversation firmly aside.

"Take that with you if you want the rest, I want to beat the traffic."

"From what I know about this road into Maine, that's impossible to do."

"What do you know about this road into Maine... You've been here before?"

"Once, yeah. Only to a little town towards the coast though. Kittery."

"Kittery? Kittery's not a town. It's a couple of outhouses and a roadside cafe, and that's if one were being kind."

"... Yeah... Well..."

The blonde shrugs, and Regina's eyes flash with sudden understanding but she drops the subject with the simple explanation
"Well, Storybrooke isn't far from there... Just over the town line in fact."

"Oh."

"But, I'm sure we have more to offer than you found out in Kittery."

"... I didn't find anything out there."

"I'm unsurprised. I imagine if you weren't on a hunt for food poisoning there would be very little to discover out there. I suppose it all depends on what you were looking for..."

"... I guess so."

"Now come. You may be right about the traffic, but I have little desire to endure the smell of fried foods any longer."

"I'm coming... But... Regina, what happens later?"

"Miss Swan?"

"When we get there... To, uh, Storybrooke? What happens then?"

"... I suppose we'll see, won't we?"
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

A/N: Enjoy! Please review :)

As they near Storybrooke, Regina casts a couple of surreptitious glances towards the blonde; aware that they are fast approaching the small stop of Kittery just outside the thicket of trees surrounding her town, as well as what relevance the rundown truck stop has for Emma. When the younger woman keeps her expression meticulously neutral, the brunette allows a silent moment of respect, before entering heavy woods and turning on dipped headlights.

"Well, Miss Swan, this is it... This is my town."

Emma takes in their surroundings with intrigue as they cruise down a narrow road; turning her head to watch a large, white placard bearing the town's name disappear behind them.

"It's a weird name for a place, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

Regina murmurs distractedly, already feeling lighter with the town border safely behind them.

"Kind of... But I like it. It's a good name... Like it's a fairytale town or something. It even looks that way."

She grins; twisted in her seat with her hands clutched below the window as her eyes flicker with the passing trees. Glancing to her right, the brunette allows herself a small smile; resisting the urge to put her foot down on the gas, and instead allowing ample opportunity to drink in lush evergreen and thick moss sprawling out to their sides.

"It is rather scenic, I agree. A pleasant relief from city streets, I am sure. The land circled by the town itself is a little more manicured, but it is just as pleasing to the eye, as you will soon see."

Emma smiles, turning to the Mayor and studying her curiously; the pride the darker woman takes in her town is evident in her tone, and somehow fantastically refreshing.

When was the last time anyone back home had anything nice to say about concrete and wire?

Home...

An obscure concept- not one she really understands- but Boston had fit for the time being as well as any other place.

"Do you have a town square?"

She asks curiously; matching their surroundings to a series of books and poems, and beginning to feel just a little excited as well as warily apprehensive.

"A town square, a town hall- or municipal building if you prefer- several small shops..."
Regina lists off, deciding that, if she is going to end up regretting taking Emma back with her, this curious little pocket of time shared with the younger woman will still have been an enjoyable experience regardless. It has been a long time since she appreciated not just the security, but the simple beauty of her home, and she finds the blonde's gleeful attitude towards their surroundings pleasantly infectious.

"It's so green!"

"Right now it is. Come winter and some of the fields just look like great, white blankets. Come spring and they'll appear painted yellow and purple with the wildflowers."

"I want to see everything."

The younger woman grins, before catching herself in such wistful, naive thinking and clearing her throat shyly. Pretending not to have noticed, the brunette simply points out a couple of stores as she slows down and cruises into the main town.

"I'm sure you will have time for such things tomorrow-"

Regina smiles; carefully ignoring the blonde's true meaning

"-but perhaps tonight should be dedicated to sorting out what's to be done with you."

"Done with me?"

Emma asks with a small frown, and the brunette chuckles as they begin the slow ride down Main Street.

"Oh, there's no need for any alarm, dear. I simply mean where it is that you are to stay."

"Oh... I guess I just kind of thought... I mean... I didn't really..."

"Thought what, Miss Swan?"

"... I don't really know... I guess I never thought that far ahead."

"Hmm... Well, fortunately, I am a little more prepared. You will stay at Granny's. I will come with you and make arrangements."

"Granny's?"

"No relative of mine, I assure you. Simply the town's bed and breakfast for any who come to visit... Not many do... It's rather secluded out here."

"I know. It's weird... Like a whole separate world through the trees... This all looks like something out of a book."

"I take pride in my town."

"It shows! This place is the shit!"

"Pardon me?"

"It's cool... This town is... It's nice."

"Thank you. I'm glad you think so."
Regina smirks, pulling in to one of the vacant spaces outside Granny's. Observing the way Emma looks up at the humble building open-mouthed, she adopts a small smile of her own, before falling into a more business-like manner.

"Well, this will be room and board for the foreseeable future. Let's go in and make the relevant introductions; I do wish to get home in time to prepare a suitable dinner after the meals suffered whilst away."

The younger woman remains too overwhelmed by the surreal peace of the place to roll her eyes, but the spell is broken somewhat when the brunette opens her door to step out. Realising that the curious little bubble she has shared with the darker woman for the last couple of hours is about to be popped and infiltrated, she feels an old, familiar twinge of nervousness climb up into her chest, and twists round to pet Caskett anxiously.

"Come on, Cassie ... You better come along, too."

She leans around awkwardly and scoops up the rather disgruntled looking tabby and holds her close against her ribs; seeking comfort in Cass's familiar warmth.

"Is that everything?"

Regina asks, taking the younger woman's books from the back seat and passing them over.

"Yeah. That's it."

Emma mumbles, walking around the car to stand behind the brunette.

"Regina, are you sure whoever owns this Granny's place is going to be okay with this? I haven't got any way of pay-"

"-Granny owns Granny's. And why should it be a problem? I'm the Mayor. If I want her to provide you with a room then she will do so."

"Oh... I knew this guy that owned a bar once. He used to give his friends free beer... Didn't have quite the same amount of sway as this, though. I mean, you must be really important."

The blonde offers with a notable hint of admiration and Regina smiles arrogantly.

"You'll soon find that that's very much the case, dear. Now, come on."

Making her way briskly up the steps, she doesn't allow the younger woman any more time to stall, and Emma follows her dubiously.

Entering a cosy, wood-panelled room, the blonde finds herself at a loss of what to think as, while inexplicably reassuring, the very existence of such a perfectly humble place seems too idealistic to be true. Clutching Cass ever tighter, she feels incredibly out of place as she slinks after Regina towards a high, maple counter.

_There's even a little fucking bell!_

The Mayor presses down on the small, brass circlet impatiently, and the soft click of footsteps crescendos down a hidden flight of stairs before a young brunette slips behind the counter with a harried expression.

"Madame Mayor...?"
From the look the young woman offers her guest, Emma would guess Regina isn't exactly a regular. Still, there must have been something to the brunette's declaration of importance, as the woman behind the counter seems rather flustered in her presence, and the blonde supposes she can understand why somewhat, having spent time with Regina herself.

"Where is your grandmother, Miss Lucas?"

"She's working the restaurant... Can I... Can I help you at all?"

Bright eyes travel past the Mayor to study her companion with unmasked intrigue, and Emma acknowledges her awkwardly before allowing her own eyes to flicker down to worn oak panels.

"I wish to speak to her. Perhaps you could see to any matters of importance in the kitchen and send her through."

The Mayor proposes with a sigh that suggests that such a course of action should be painfully obvious.

"Uh... Alright... One second."

Offering Emma one last curious glance, the young brunette disappears around the corner to the sound of a door creaking on its hinges. A minute later, a woman in her late sixties comes bustling through with a frown.

"I just cut Marco off in the middle of showing me how to fix the cupboard beneath the register. What was so important that Ruby couldn't see to it?"

She huffs, although Emma has a feeling the grey-haired woman might like to say a whole lot more, were it not for the repute of her present company.

"I need you to hand over the key to one of your rooms."

"Why?"

"I have a guest... She needs somewhere to stay."

Regina elaborates, before turning around and beckoning Emma over to the counter with an impatient roll of her eyes.

"Um... Hi."

The blonde offers, holding her hand out woodenly and introducing herself when the old woman takes it with an assessing sweep of her eyes up and down.

"I'm Emma."

"Please to meet you, Emma. Most around here just call me Granny, and I suppose you may as well do the same."

Granny informs the young woman briskly, before returning her attention to the brunette with distracted curiosity.

"I can't remember the last time we had a guest around here. What's she here for? And who's been looking after the child? There's nothing of her!"

Emma bristles visibly at this, but Regina simply continues on as though growing tired of having her
time wasted by such questions.

"Then allow her to help you with dinner. She is... She is going to be staying in town for a while to help me with some of my clerical work.-"

"I am?-"

"-Yes, Miss Swan, you are... And surely, as the proprietor of a bed and breakfast, the arrival of a guest should be a positive thing?"

The brunette sniffs irritably, before gliding swiftly over the matter of any form of payment. Granny huffs irritably at this, but seems to know better than to argue; turning to Emma and holding out a heavy key with her other hand wedged firmly on her hip.

"Up the stairs there and first turn to the right. Room overlooks the garden. I'll send Ruby up in a bit with a towel."

"She'll need more than that. She has nothing with her."

"Is that so? Nothing but a cat... You know we don't allow animals-

"-Just as I know you will look the other way just this once. I'm sure Miss Lucas might have a spare shirt to sleep in that the girl can borrow for the time being."

Regina declares; turning to Emma before anything more can be said on the matter.

"I'll let Miss Lucas know that she is to show you to my office tomorrow morning. For now, get yourself settled in and get a good night's sleep. We will talk tomorrow."

Recognising dismissal, the blonde gathers herself awkwardly as she fingers the heavy key in her hand; giving a small nod to the woman behind the counter before offering the Mayor a shy smile.

"Okay... Thanks... Madame Mayor."

"Good evening, Emma."

The brunette responds with a nod of her head in the direction of the stairs, and she watches as the young woman hurries up them with Caskett clutched to her side and her books and small bag of personal items under her arm.

Turning back to Granny, she places her hands on her hips dismissively.

"We didn't eat all too long ago, but I imagine she might be hungry before retiring to bed."

"And I'm just supposed to feed the girl?"

"I would very much appreciate it."

Regina offers with a smile that suggests little alternative.

"How do you know her? She doesn't even look old enough to drink!"

"She's not, and I would ask that you don't allow her to. As for how I know her, I would request that you respect my privacy, Widow Lucas. How I know her is irrelevant; she is your guest, and you will treat her as such. If this vexes you; put her to work... She can draw."
Regina offers over her shoulder as she makes her way towards the door with little care as to the irritable frown crossing weathered features.

Padding lightly across her plush bedroom carpet, the brunette sighs contently as the monitor on her nightstand whispers with her son's gentle breath. She 
walks over to her closet and exchanges navy cotton- her curious ensemble having confused Sydney upon her return quite visibly- with black satin, and muses that a glass of wine is just the thing she fancies as the sun sets over her small town.

Glancing out of her window and observing a manicured lawn and her prized tree bearing the last of its summer fruit, she smiles, before something catches her attention out of the corner of her eye.

Cocking her head for a better look; full lips fall slowly from their pleasant curve, and dark eyes blacken fearfully.

*The clock.*

*The clock that hasn't moved its iron hands in over eighteen years...*

*It's wrong.*

*It's changed.*

*It's working.*

"No..."

A soft knock on the door, and Cass mewls distrustingly before slinking beneath a quaint little high-backed chair beside the window. Pushing herself up from her rather stiff seat on the soft, floral covers of the room's comfy Queen sized bed, the blonde pads over to the door and peeks out at her guest curiously.

Bright, white teeth bare back at her in a wolfish grin, and a slim hand shoots out amiably.

"Hi! I'm Ruby."
Chapter 17

"Hi! I'm Ruby."

Shaking the brunette's hand warily, Emma steps aside and allows her to come bustling into the room with a murmured introduction. Watching as Ruby takes a seat on the bed, she moves over to the window and leans against the sill with her hands shoved self-consciously into her pockets.

"...You're Granny's granddaughter?"

"Yup; granddaughter, employee, and most humble servant."

The brunette winks, and Emma offers a small smile with an awkward shrug that suggests she has little clue what else to say on the matter. She quickly discovers that she needn't worry about such things as Ruby appears to be bubbly enough for the both of them.

"So, you're gonna help the Mayor with her paperwork, then? How does she know you, anyway? I've never really seen Regina with anyone much, and she's never had an assistant before!"

"Oh... Well, I don't really know. She's, uh, a friend of the family."

"Really? I guess that's cool. So you're not from around here?"

"No... But I like it so far."

"Yeah, it's pretty nice. Not a whole lot to do though, to tell you the truth. Where do you come from? What's it like? Are there places to go out? What do you like to do?"

The brunette grins as she chatters away, and Emma nibbles her lip as she waits for the young woman to offer her a chance to reply.

"I lived in Boston before here. It's... There's lots of places to go out, I guess. Depends what you like doing... I was never really into all that..."

"No? How come?"

"I... I dunno. I guess I just never got into it..."

Emma shrugs, and Ruby offers her a smile.

"Fair enough. Different strokes for different folks."

The blonde chuckles quietly at this, feeling herself relax just a little, and Ruby nods towards the bed...
with an encouraging grin.

"I don't bite, you know."

"Sorry..."

Emma smiles, padding over towards the bed and perching on the edge of the mattress; playing distractedly with a loose thread tufting off of her shorts.

"So was it just you living there? Or were you living with family?"

"Nope. Just me... Well... And Cass."

The blonde glances around the room in search for the tabby and frowns as she spots Caskett hunkered down beneath the chair with her fur bristling defensively.

"Huh...Sorry about that. She's usually pretty friendly. I guess it's been a long day."

"That's ok-"

Ruby offers, giving the cat a dismissive glance with her nose wrinkled in distaste before turning back to Emma with a casual shrug

"-Cats never seem to like me much. The feeling's pretty mutual if I'm totally honest... Dogs though; dogs love me!"

"Do you have any?"

The blonde asks hopefully, before flashing Cass a guilty grin.

"Nah, Granny won't let me get one; says she doesn't want it running around the Diner. Archie has one, though; he has an office across the street from here, you'll get to know him soon enough. He has a big dalmatian called Pongo. You'll probably see them both tomorrow morning; Archie always brings him along when he comes for breakfast.

"Is Archie a regular?"

"Sure. Most people around here are. It's a friendly place!"

"Cool..."

Emma smiles curiously; the idea so foreign to her reality and yet comforting in its literary familiarity.

"Yup... I brought you some clothes to borrow, by the way. They'll be a little big, but Granny said you didn't bring much of anything with you."

The younger woman shakes her head as she itches her nose uneasily, but Ruby says nothing more on the subject other than informing her that she can find hangers for the small bag of clothes she tosses onto the blonde's pillow in the wardrobe.

"If you don't want any of them, don't worry; we can get you something better tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"Sure; we're going shopping."
"We are?"

Emma asks with a faint note of alarm, and Ruby chuckles amiably

"What? You don't want any toothpaste or underwear?"

"I..."

"-Don't worry; you can just owe me out of your wages."

"My what?"

"Your paycheck. Granny's not really one for all give and no take, I'm afraid. You can work for the Mayor in the day, and come help us in the evening and for breakfast... I know it's a little boring, but-"

"-I'd be happy to!... Doesn't she need references or anything, though?"

"It's waiting tables, not brain surgery. I mean... I manage, and that should tell you all you need to know."

The brunette rolls her eyes with humorous self-depreciation and Emma smiles tentatively.

"I dunno... People can get pretty rowdy sometimes, especially if there's liquor... I think it's a perfectly fine job to be doing. Have you worked for your Granny long, then?"

"Oh yeah! It kind of feels like I've been stuck down there forever!... It'll be nice having someone to chat to. The other girls are all a bit... Well, I dunno. I'm different, I guess."

The brunette sighs with a shrug that suggests she's not particularly concerned about this fact, and the blonde adopts a much more genuine smirk in return.

"I like different."

"Then we should get along just fine!"

Ruby smiles, before pointing towards the bathroom door.

"There's towels and everything in there. Some little pots of shampoo and stuff too... I really like your hair!"

She leans over and plays with a soft curl between her fingers, before offering the younger woman an apologetic look when she catches the latter's sharp intake of breath.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable or anything-"

"-It's fine. It could just do with a brush is all..."

Emma mutters; a little overwhelmed by the childish friendliness all but bursting from the young waitress. Continuing shyly, she nods towards the brunette's own long tresses.

"-And I like yours, too. Do you dye it yourself?"

"Nah, it's not dye. Just clip-ins, see?"

Ruby explains, fiddling with one of the scarlet streaks painting rich, dark locks and unfastening it to
show the blonde.

"Maybe one day I'll do it properly, but I'm always changing my mind about how I want to look, you
know?"

"I guess... Well, I like your look, either way..."

Emma smiles; feeling a little less awkward as the girl sat grinning opposite her on the bed seems as
though she might not possess a cruel bone in her body. Ruby laughs in response as she looks down
at her minimal attire in amusement, cocking her head to the side and sighing

"Well, that puts you in the minority. Still, if you've got it; flaunt it."

She winks, and the blonde grins with a light blush.

"Though, I wouldn't wear anything like *this* if you're gonna be working for Regina; she'd have a fit...She's pretty fancy if you know what I mean."

"Kind of... I like her, though."

Emma shrugs, and the brunette raises an eyebrow in surprise.

"Yeah?"

"Sure. She's nice."

"Well... Then it's a good thing for you that you think so, seeing as you're going to be working for her."

"You don't think so?"

"I think... I think I've heard the Mayor be called a whole *bunch* of things... But that's the first time
I've ever heard anyone call her 'nice'."

Ruby frowns, before shaking her head.

"But don't take my word for it; you should figure things out for yourself. Not enough people do that
when you live in such a small town, I guess."

"No?"

"Nope... But you'll get the hang of it soon enough. Everyone's pretty easy to get a handle of around
here. Just mind your manners around the Mayor and you'll be fine. Otherwise, my advice to you
would be to keep out of Mr Gold's way- he's the landlord for most of the places around here- and not
to let Dr Whale talk you into- or out of- anything, because he *will* try to, believe me."

"Got it."

"I think you'll be fine, though. I have no idea what Regina's looking for you to help her with, but
working downstairs is easy as pie. Speaking of, I was *supposed* to be coming up here and taking you
down to show you the kitchens. Sorry, I tend to get carried away a bit! Granny said you might want
dinner, so I came to see if you wanted to come downstairs and eat with me in the back room. I'll
show you around the fridges and stuff so you know what you're doing tomorrow... Don't sweat it, I'll
be there to help you!"

Ruby laughs as green eyes widen nervously. Smiling back, Emma pads over to the window and
assesses the mild slope of the roof hanging over a small trellis adorned with dusky roses. Opening up spotlessly clean glass and propping it in place, she glances down at Cass and addresses her softly.

"I'll be back in a bit, Cassie... Go explore, and you can tell me all about what's going on in the woods out there when I get back... Nicer than a bunch of cars and-" 

Catching a low giggle, she stiffens and turns to the brunette with a defensive shrug

"Sorry... Force of habit..."

"That's ok. Mary Margaret has full blown conversations with the pigeons out in the garden- she's a teacher at the school here, she's a good sort- and says she reckons more people should do the same. Me? I reckon she might be a bit nuts, but if she is, it's the good kind of nuts. I reckon you might be the good kind of nuts, too."

"I guess I'll take that!"

The blonde grins; following Ruby out of the room in search of dinner.

"Are you feeling alright?"

The Sheriff enquires tentatively from his seat on the Mayor's sofa. The brunette stands with her back to him; staring pensively out of the window. Her mannerisms have been uncharacteristically peculiar ever since her return from her trip to Boston, as he is unsure whether to acknowledge this or leave well alone.

"...Madame Mayor?"

"Yes, Sheriff. I'm feeling just fine... A little tired, but nothing to concern yourself over."

She sighs, running her finger pensively over full lips as her mind continues to work itself into overdrive.

"Well, that's-"

"-When did the town clock begin working again? Has Marco been up to take a look at it?"

"Not so far as I am aware... I don't think anyone's looked at it in, well, forever. Maybe something was just stuck..."

Graham offers with a shrug, and Regina frowns thoughtfully.

"Or perhaps something has changed..."

"...Regina?"

The Sheriff's brow furrows in confusion, but then the Mayor turns to face him and adopts a far more familiar sultry smile.

"Then again, perhaps it's nothing..."

She purrs, stalking over towards a fine, wooden cabinet in the corner and opening it up to retrieve a crystal flask, corked, and containing sweet cider.

"I take it you are no longer on the clock, Sheriff...?"
She smirks, and Graham shakes his head as he leans back against plush velvet.

"Never when I come and pay you a visit, Madame Mayor."

"Fortunate for the both of us."

"I'd say so... Did you find what you were looking for?"

"I'm sorry, Sheriff?"

"In Boston? You expressed the need to go and find something out there."

"I did... Yes... I found what it was I was after... As for what to do with my discovery, that is still very much open for question."

"I'm not sure I follow..."

"No matter. I'm sure things will become clear with time... But for tonight, I am weary of questions... I didn't invite you over for the conversation."

She points out, and the Sheriff clears his throat as the brunette hands him a glass with a graceful sweep of her hand.

No. The Mayor has little time for conversation. She is not a woman for whom any pretence of friendship seems worthy of her time.

Still... He can make his peace with that.

Watching as Cass finishes off the last pieces of fish from the small saucer taken up from the kitchen, Emma yawns and climbs into bed; one of Ruby's t-shirts falling just short of covering the black flash of her underwear.

She rolls her eyes at her own stupidity as she feels uncomfortably full, but doesn't begrudge this fact in the slightest; homemade pie and a large dish of ice-cream washed down with a pint glass of root-beer and a hot chocolate to finish off. She had said goodnight to the young brunette with a small shake of her head when asked if she might like to come down to the local bar and meet a couple of the waitress's friends, and had instead sat in the chair by the window, rereading one of the old books brought along with her, while waiting for Caskett to slip back in from the darkness.

A brief moment of panic had crossed her mind as to whether the tabby might return to her at all given their foreign surroundings, but a study of the shadowed lawn rolling out behind the Diner had provided easy relief; Cass curled up on a small bird-table with large, yellow eyes scouring the flower beds.

Now, as she switches off the light to the side of the bed, the blonde shuffles down beneath sweet-smelling sheets and smiles as a soft weight falls down onto her stomach in a way that is comfortingly familiar.

Closing her eyes, she strokes soft fur idly; listening to the soothing trickle of the small fountain outside.

"...Well... I know jack shit about being a secretary or whatever the hell I'm supposed to be doing tomorrow, Cassie, but, I'll do my damned best to please Madame Mayor and make this all worth it... You heard me say it, so there's no fucking up, right? Not this time."
Not when I owe her so much...

Cass yawns in response and watches idly through the darkness as her mistress's lashes close; curling up comfortably upon strange, soft bedding, and purring as they are disturbed by nothing but the peaceful sounds of the forest.
"Come on, girl, come out and let's get a look at you."

Granny calls through the bathroom door, and Emma unlocks the small catch with a sigh and steps out into the empty Diner with an apprehensive look alighting sharp features and her hands held sheepishly behind her back.

"It'll do."

The older woman nods, and Ruby wolf-whistles in approval as she sits perched up on the counter swinging her legs; sending a deep blush creeping across the blonde's cheeks.

"Did you manage to pin the back alright?"

"I think so..."

Emma mutters, turning around with her shirt held up awkwardly as Granny fusses with the back of the white pleated skirt falling midway down her thighs.

"Hmm, you could do with another pin at the side here so that it's not all ruched up at the back. Well, no, what you could do with is putting a little meat on these bones, but a few pins will do for now. You'll just have to wear the shirt a little baggier than I'd like."

"You should just tie it up at the front like mine."

Ruby offers from her perch

"No, you absolutely should not! Pay no attention to her, Emma."

Granny growls, and the blonde hides a grin as the young brunette pulls a face behind her grandmother's back.

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that..."

She sighs with a smirk in Ruby's direction.

"Watch it, you little sauce-pot!"

The waitress snaps back amiably enough; hopping down from the counter and tugging at the pleats of her own- impossibly short- skirt. Pulling a large tray laden with condiments out from the shelf beneath the cash register, she slides it over towards Emma and instructs her to place one of each type on the empty tables.

"I checked them all yesterday so they should be fine for now, but if they ever feel a little low, there's a row of big, refill dispensers out in the back, next to the cutlery... Which leads us onto your next
job..."

She grins; following the younger woman around as she goes about filling up the tables while offering the odd tip here and there. Raising her brow when Emma seems entirely unfazed by her continual list of things to do, she makes an uncannily realistic whipping noise as she walks behind the blonde back towards the kitchen, and chuckles appreciatively at the dark glower offered in response.

"I'm enjoying this!"

She smirks gleefully, and Emma rolls her eyes as she walks back out into the restaurant to lay out the last of the knives and forks.

"No shit, I would never have guessed."

"I feel like a lady of high importance! What with my obedient little minion carrying out my every request! It's great!"

"I take it you haven't read many stories based on that theme?"

"No?"

"It pretty much always works out messily for the one so quick enforce their heart's idle whims in the end."

"... I'll bare that in mind any time you're in charge of the knives."

Ruby shrugs, and the blonde laughs with macabre mirth, before gathering herself and glancing up at the clock nervously.

"Ruby"

"Yup?"

"How busy does it get?... Is it, like, one big rush, or-"

"-Oh, it comes and goes, but we're usually pretty full up... Don't worry, though, you can stay behind the bar today if you want and call through to Granny. I'll bet it's a bit of a scary thought to go up to people you don't know for the first time and all."

"I'm not scared... I'm just-"

"-Scared. Which is totally fine!"

"... What about you?"

"Why would I be scared?"

"No, I mean, when you first started... Were you nervous?"

"Oh... You know, I don't really remember... I probably was."

Ruby shrugs and offers the younger woman a scarlet smile

"But talking to people is kind of my thing."

"... That's where we differ..."
"I'm sure we differ in plenty of ways, one of those being I don't think I've ever used the word 'differ' in a sentence before now, but, you'll be fine. People will come up and introduce themselves to you; you're new around here, and we don't get many strangers in town... I can't even think of the last time we've had anyone come through here! They'll do the talking, don't you worry, so all you need to do is smile and write down anything they order. Easy peasy!"

"Okay, cool... Thanks."

"No problem!"

The brunette beams as she stalks swiftly towards the door on skyscraper heels.

"You ready to open her up?"

"... As I'll ever be."

---

"Hey, Archie, how's it going?"

Ruby smiles as she scratches Pongo behind the ear.

"Very well, thank you, Ruby. I see you've acquired a young helper?"

"That's Emma. She's here to help the Mayor with her paperwork or something, but I figured I'd try her out as a waitress too."

"She's here for Regina?"

"Apparently. Mayor Mills introduced her to me and Granny last night. She's sweet, but I'll bet she'd have plenty to tell you."

"How so?"

"I dunno, I just have a feeling. Spiky on the outside, sweet in the centre. Maybe give her a couple of days, though, before you ask her 'how that makes her feel'."

The brunette winks, and Archie smiles back and thanks her when she promises his omelette will be right out.

Hurrying back towards the bar, Ruby places her hand on the blonde's arm and talks to her softly as Emma nods at something the squat snuffling pharmacist says.

"How are you holding up?"

"Yeah, not bad. I think I'm finally getting the hang of the espresso machine."

"Well, that's quite impressive in itself!"

"Way too many knobs on that thing..."

"Ha! I know! Just ignore them and whack the top if it gives you trouble; works every time."

"God, I hope that's not sex advice."

A rather flustered blonde offers as she takes a seat up on one of the stools; pushing her fringe away from her face.
"Ashley! Ash, this is Emma. Emma; Ashley."

Ruby smiles; leaning over the counter to better join in on any of her friend's current gossip.

"I swear, it's like a hundred degrees out there! Oh, and before you get talking about Billy or anyone else, Mayor Mills just sat down outside."

"Ah ok, I'll go take her order before she can complain about me being slow to Granny again."

"I can do it."

Emma offers with a shrug, and the brunette grins at her and hands over her pad and pen.

"By all means!"

"If she orders an espresso, though, I'm getting you to make it. Mine are still coming out disconcertingly frothy."

"Deal. She won't, anyway; she'll order a cappuccino- no chocolate- and a toasted muffin."

"Oh... Well, shall I just bring that out to her, then?"

"You would think it would be that easy, wouldn't you?"

Ruby grins; shooing the blonde towards the door with a thumbs up gesture.

Stalking quickly past busy tables, Emma trots down the steps that lead into the seated patio area. She has spent most of the morning with her jaw clenched and her heart in her throat- not one to do well with change, nor with so many people wanting to engage in friendly conversation- but Regina is, in a way, a little more familiar, and she strolls over to a small table in the corner with a smile.

"What can I get for you?"

"You know what I want; it is simply courteous that you come out and acknowledge my-... Miss Swan."

The brunette raises a brow as she looks up from her paper and takes in long, blonde hair falling over one of Granny's standard neat, white shirts with the red trim. Dark eyes dropping to skinny legs displayed beneath a flouncy, white skirt, she smirks up at the younger woman with a mild hint of amusement.

"I see you've already been put to work... 'Waitress' suits you."

She offers up airily; pulling fussily at the sharp pleats of the blonde's skirt so that it sits on her hips a little straighter.

"It's not bad, is it?"

Emma grins a little self consciously, as she tucks her hair behind her ear.

"Well, it beats tattered denim and a vest top, dear, but let's not exaggerate."

The brunette muses; although she inwardly muses that she finds the younger woman's current outfit to look rather sweet on her.

"Ruby said you'd want a cappuccino and a muffin?"
"Did she? Well, then why have you come out here empty handed?"

"Well... She also said you might want to, uh, give me your order anyway."

Emma mumbles; sensibly negating to further relay Ruby's exasperation.

"Hmm, it would seem Miss Lucas is rather full of clever little tips."

"I guess..."

"Well, go on then. If I had wanted anything different, I would have expressed this when you came out."

"Oh. Okay..."

The blonde nods sheepishly; turning heel to hurry back inside. Smiling at the younger woman's rather flustered response, Regina heralds her back as though simply addressing an afterthought.

"Oh, and, Miss Swan?"

"Yeah?"

"Yes."

"Huh?"

"Yes, not 'yeah'... How did you sleep?"

"Oh... Very well, thank you!"

Emma grins sunnily, before raising her hand and trotting back towards the stairs.

"I'll go get your breakfast."

"See that you do."

Regina nods, before returning her attention to her paper with a small smile.

"Come."

A smooth purr, and the blonde pushes open the heavy wood of the darker woman's office door timidly.

"Uh... Can I come in?"

"Didn't I express this very desire not a second ago?"

"Well, I didn't know if you knew it was me, and."

"-Who else would I be expecting at the very time I requested you come by? Although, I suppose as you are five minutes late, one might very well wonder."

"Sorry... I didn't know what to wear..."

Emma explains with a wrinkle of her nose, and Regina looks up with a sigh.
"And yet, this is what you went with?"

She sniffs, and the blonde looks down at herself and shrugs.

"I went with what fit."

"So why the delay?"

"It fit... I didn't know if it was suitable."

"Well... As I know for a fact that those are Miss Lucas's clothes- it would be hard to confuse black leather as belonging to anybody else- I suppose you'll do for today. As this arrangement will exceed this period of time however, we will make a small trip this afternoon to find you something a little more suitable. Something where your bra is not visible through cheap fabric."

She finishes with an air of disdain, and Emma crosses her arms self consciously over her chest and pads over towards the Mayor's stately desk before clearing her throat awkwardly.

"I... I didn't know this was going to be an arrangement at all... Me working for you?"

"Is there a problem?"

"No! Not at all!"

The blonde hurries to explain

"I'm happy to help out! I just didn't know is all... I've never really done any secretary stuff before, so I'm just a bit unsure how it all works..."

"Well, it's all relatively simple. You'll take notes, file my papers, see to it that my appointments are entered into a schedule."

"Oh, ok... I can do that."

"I should hope so."

The brunette rolls her eyes, before sitting back in her chair and adopting a slightly kinder tone

"It's not a lot of work, Miss Swan, but it's enough to keep you busy. It serves the purpose of explaining why you might be here, do you understand me?"

"... Why am I here? If it's not actually help you really need?"

"Because... Even menial tasks performed here are preferable to what you had in Boston. It would raise some rather peculiar questions if I were perceived to have brought you here with no discernible reason for doing so... We can discuss the matter further if you wish, but I believe neither of us needs me to come out and lay all of the cards on the table, just as neither of us needs to discuss your requirement for a suitable wardrobe... I will call it a business expense, and you will simply accept this and not make it into something it isn't. Unless you would rather spend your foreseeable future in leather pants and obscene miniskirts?"

"... That's probably not so suitable for the office."

Emma mumbles shyly; not entirely sure she trusts herself to say much more on the matter lest she stumble gracelessly onto the truth.
"Then we agree."

The Mayor states with swift finality.

"Here. Copy these into my diary under the appropriate dates."

She slides a small stack of notes across the table along with a pen. Sensing no movement from the blonde, she speaks up snidely without raising her gaze from the letter in her hand.

"I trust you are capable of pulling up a chair at the very least."

"Yeah... Sorry."

Emma mutters; having been unsure whether this was allowed, or if she’d been expected to take her work elsewhere. Carrying over a high-backed chair from the corner, she places it down opposite the Mayor's quietly and takes a seat; opening up the brunette's thick, leather-bound diary tentatively.

Glancing back up with her pen hovering over the page, she studies Regina with a thoughtful frown.

*I think I've heard the Mayor be called a whole bunch of things... But that's the first time I've ever heard anyone call her 'nice'..."

"... Thank you for letting me work for you, Regina."

"You're welcome-"

The darker woman replies without looking up.

"-Perhaps you could show me your gratitude by getting on with what I've asked you to do?"
Glancing up from her work, Regina smirks in amusement as she watches Emma cross and uncross her legs distractedly; the temperature still rising, and the waitress’s borrowed pants a tight leather and sure to be almost insufferably warm. Still, the blonde says nothing on the matter, and the Mayor finds herself peculiarly appreciative of this fact. It is an odd sort of thing, and she is surprised in herself, but she is slowly coming to understand that she might well quite like the younger woman’s mannerisms and company.

As if on cue, Emma blows up at her forehead as she plucks a few old documents from one of the files laid out in front of her and looks up at the brunette to offer her a small grin.

"This would probably be a lot quicker if I had my glasses, sorry... I’d look much more secretarial, too."

"I’m not sure you’re in any danger of that happening dressed the way that you are... Where are they?"

"I think I left them in my car."

"Well, that was rather foolish."

"Yes, thank you, I hadn’t figured that one out for myself... One of the lenses was cracked so I wasn’t really wearing them as much."

“Well, if you had any sense, you would just have bought some new—... I’ll arrange for your car to be brought down here sometime this week. I imagine they’ll be able to replace the lens at the pharmacy downtown."

"Thanks."

The blonde smiles, before going back to work with a slight frown. Running her tongue thoughtfully along her bottom lip, Regina studies her for a little while longer from beneath thick lashes, before sighing and placing down her pen.

"You’ll get a headache if you keep scowling down at the paper like that."

"I’m fine."

Emma shrugs reflexively and dark eyes roll in bemusement. Catching the Mayor’s exasperation, the younger woman looks up with a small grin and chuckles at her own expense.

"See, I’ve got it all figured out when I read; but I’d feel like an idiot sat here with my nose almost touching the page."

"Well, we wouldn’t want that..."
Regina smirks, and Emma regards her placidly with a wry smile.

"Do you-"

But she is interrupted by a low knock at the door, before heavy wood is pushed open and a stout, middle-aged woman with auburn hair moves into view.

"Yes?"

"Henry's awake but just grizzling to himself, he should be settling down for a nap soon, though; little thing can barely keep his eyes open."

"Thank you, Johanna, I'll be up in a minute."

Regina nods, before speaking up loudly when she catches Emma staring curiously in the older woman's direction. Johanna reciprocates with a similar glance of intrigue, which causes the Mayor to thin her lips.

"Miss Swan, perhaps you would like to take a break from glowering down at my paperwork."

"Oh, I-"

"Take this and go and buy us some lunch. Granny's will do fine. I'll have an omelette- tell them who it's for and they'll prepare it to my liking- and an iced tea. If you're partial, ask for a jug to take away. If not, order whatever takes your fancy, within reason."

She instructs, passing over a crisp bill from her desk drawer with a dismissive nod towards the door.

Folding the money carefully in two and keeping it tightly held in her palm, Emma nods as she slips from her chair and walks past the portly red-head with a small smile.

Watching the curious young blonde disappear down the hall, Johanna turns back to the Mayor and addresses her once more with respectful politeness.

"I would have brought Henry down, but yesterday you advised you no longer wished for me to do so while you're working?"

"... No. I think it might be best if he and my work-life remain separate."

"Of course, Madame Mayor."

"Thank you, Johanna, I'll come up just as soon as I've finished this."

"Of course... Um... Mayor Mills... The girl?"

"What about her?"

"Who...?"

"Miss Swan. Emma. She's here to lend me a hand with my paperwork... Though, in all honesty- between you and I- she is here because she needed a job, more so than I needed help around the office."

Regina confides; knowing enough about Johanna's past to entrust she will be offered the same loyalty as Snow and her mother once had been... And after all, the greying woman smiling back at her knows no better.
"You met her in Boston?"
"Yes. I met her in Boston."

"... May I ask what you were doing out there? Mr Glass seemed reluctant to-"

"-No, Johanna, you may not... If I had wished to discuss it, I would have done so."

The brunette replies, but not unkindly. Apologising swiftly, the older woman turns back for the hallway, with the casual comment

"Well, it'll be nice to have someone to pass time with, I'd imagine. Pretty little thing, too."

"I hadn't really noticed."

The Mayor replies as she returns her attention distractedly back down to the page.

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"So, Miss Swan, Have you dotted all of the Mayor's i's?"

Ruby grins as Emma strolls into the Diner and offers her a wave.

"Uhuh, pretty much the best secretary ever."

She replies airily, and the brunette giggles appreciatively.

"So is today an omelette day or a pasta day?"

"An omelette day."

"Cool, and for you?"

"Do you still have any of those brownies from this morning left?"

"That's not lunch."

"Are you my mother?"

"Nope, just giving you a preview of what Regina will say when you show up with chocolate in place of a meal. You can knock yourself out, for all I care."

"Fine, I'll have a toasted cheese too, and a jug of iced tea."

"Aw, well isn't that just adorable!"

Ruby smirks as she calls through the blonde's order and pulls a large, plastic jug from behind the counter.

"What is?"

"You and Madame Mayor sharing a jug of tea. She must like you!"

"Or she might just like tea?"

Emma grins, and the brunette shrugs indifferently as she scoops in a generous amount of ice.

"Whatever, I still think your little lady-crush on the Mayor is cute."
"My what?"

"She's... She's nice."

Ruby mimics the blonde's words from the night before in an exaggeratedly shy voice and her eyes purposefully wide; a playful grin painting her lips.

"Well, she is!"

Emma growls with roll of her own eyes, and the waitress giggles wickedly.

"Sorry, I've just never seen Regina interact with anyone much apart from to offer them an evil glare. Well, apart from the Sheriff; she's alright to him."

"The Sheriff?"

"Ah, you've not met Graham yet, have you? Unlucky for you..."

The brunette winks, passing across the younger woman's tea and a boxed up brownie.

"How's that."

"Oh, Graham's lovely. And by 'lovely', I do mean to imagine with no pants on."

The blonde chokes on the cup of water she'd been unfortunate enough to pour herself just before this crass comment and offers the waitress a rather traumatised look.

"Ruby!"

"What? Oh, don't look so innocent!... I mean... You have, like... Well, you know... Haven't you?"

The younger woman opens her mouth and blinks in surprise- not at all accustomed to such casual personal conversation- and Ruby smiles apologetically and shrugs.

"Okay, okay, I'll wait 'til I know your favourite colour before asking you about your favourite position."

The blonde remains slightly stunned, and the waitress chuckles as she reaches through into the back and collects Emma's order.

"Here, you better hurry back before that omelette gets cold. Go be a good little secretary."

She smirks, waving cheerfully before turning to Leroy to instigate a new conversation.

Carrying her spoils back from the Diner carefully; Emma muses curiously on the way that everyone she passes offers her a smile and curt greeting. She understands that she is new here, and therefore interesting by default, but as someone who has spent her life hopping from one place to another, it is still a rather peculiar thing to play a part of, to say the least.

Peculiar... But not anywhere near as nerve-wracking as she had worried it might be when finding herself overwhelmed this morning, and, despite the fact that she knows she needs to hurry back to Regina's office, she allows herself just a little more time to take in perfectly maintained grass and prettily filled flower boxes along the way.

Pushing open the brunette's front door with her hip and turning to do the same to enter the darker
woman's office, she slips through heavy wood to find that they are not alone.

"Uh... Hi."

She smiles at a curious little man stood across from the brunette's chair. Walking over to deposit the food she carries in her arms upon the desk, she turns back to the Mayor's guest with a little more grace and holds out her hand.

"Pleased to meet you."

She offers; long hair tumbling down her back, and the waitress's scarlet shirt rolled up to her elbows.

"And you... With whom do I have the pleasure?"

The little man enquires politely, although dark coals seem to look past the blonde and fixate on the Mayor.

"Emma. Emma Swan."

"Emma..."

He repeats with a slow smile, and Regina matches his glittering gaze with wary venom. Sensing a strange weight in the air, the blonde retracts her hand slowly as her smile falters somewhat and she takes an involuntary step backwards. Seeming to snap out of whatever curious spell he had been suffering, the brunette's visitor offers the young woman a wry smile and nods courteously.

"My apologies, I must have been lost in my thoughts. Pleased to meet you, Emma, I'm Mr Gold... You should come and pay me a visit seeing as you're new in town. There are many curious things to see within my shop- I am somewhat of a collector of the obscure- and I do believe I might have a few things you would find most... Interesting."

"I-"

"...Yes, well, the girl has barely had time to breathe, Gold, much less partake in any sightseeing. There is a lot to do."

The brunette growls warningly, and Emma shoots her a curious glance as she crosses her arms a little uneasily. She has little clue as to what she has walked in on, but enough is clear to suggest that the darker woman seems inexplicably threatened by the little man's company.

"Oh, but of course. I will leave you to it, Madame Mayor. Miss Swan, good day to you."

"And you... It was nice to meet you."

"Oh... The pleasure is all mine, I assure you."

"So, how are you finding it so far?"

Regina asks as she walks beside the blonde towards the Diner; Emma swinging a bag of clothes idly at her side.

"Really good!"

The younger woman grins, and the brunette nods pensively.
"You're not homesick at all?"

"Are you kidding?"

Emma laughs, before shrugging and adopting a lower tone

"It wasn't really 'home' anyway."

"No? Well, then what was?"

"I don't know."

"There must be somewhere you found an affinity for?"

"... Not really. Not a positive one, anyway... I guess the bug has its sentimental value... Otherwise...I don't know."

Regina nods but says nothing more on the matter.

"Have you always lived here?"

"Oh, I've lived here for as long as anyone can remember, dear."

"That must be nice."

"It has its ups and downs in the way that anything does..."

"I guess it must do... The people are nice, though."

"Are they?"

The brunette muses, and she offers Emma a measuring look that requests an honest answer. The blonde frowns and continues thoughtfully

"Yes... Everyone seems very friendly... Almost weirdly so."

"You're new around here. People are curious."

"I guess... You know, Ruby told me I'd do well to stay clear of Mr Gold..."

"Did she?"

"Yeah... What about you?"

"What about me?"

"What do you think of him?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Earlier in your office... That was weird."

"Yes?"

"Yeah... And you know it, too... What's wrong with him?"

"...Gold is a man who likes to make everything his business, Miss Swan. I wouldn't be surprised if
he tries to make you his business before all too long, also. As to what you do when that time comes, it is none of my business to say... But I strongly advise you to take that man's words with a pinch of salt."

"Okay..."

"But that's up to you. Now go on; you'll be wanting to get something to eat before changing into your delightful little waitress ensemble, and I have things to be getting on with."

Regina purrs as they come to a stop outside Granny's. Turning to the darker woman with her bag held loosely in her hand, Emma smiles pleasantly.

"Alright... Thanks for today."

"What are you thanking me for? You were simply doing your job."

"Well, for the clothes, and for lunch and-"

"-Business expenses. I already told you."

"Sure... Well... Then thanks for taking such businessly interest, Madame Mayor."

The blonde grins, before catching the Mayor promptly by surprise when she pulls a scrap of paper from her pocket and hands it over.

"This is for you... I wasn't sure what to do when you went upstairs before we went out, so... Well, there you go."

She shrugs awkwardly, before nodding farewell and hurrying up the path towards the bed and breakfast.

Watching the younger woman walk away with her lips thinned pensively, Regina unfolds the paper between her fingers once the door swings softly shut.

She raises a brow as a slow smile creeps across her lips, before carefully folding the little scrap back up and slipping it into her pocket.

A girl in a puffy-sleeved dress with rabbit ears poking out from beneath scribbled curls and an Alice-band, climbing out of a window surrounded by brick, leading to a maze of curious toadstools and spirals, while a rather buxom brunette follows on in heels and a suit.

Sorry

Scrawled at the bottom of the page, over a much smaller, almost illegible line of print.

I'm glad you came back.

"I have yet to decide as to that, dear."

The Mayor murmurs as she walks towards her mansion, but she is unable to hide the small pull to her lips.

"Cass?"

Emma calls with her hands on her hips as she stands in the threshold of her borrowed room.
The bed has been made and her clothes from the Diner have been neatly folded over her chair beneath her book. Frowning, The blonde takes a curious step closer as she spots the tabby perched up on top of the wardrobe with her ears flat and her tail swishing irritably.

"What the hell's gotten into you?"

Emma asks; holding out her hand to allow the cat to sniff her skin.

Caskett lets out an unhappy mewl in response and rubs her face against the young woman's knuckles.

"Hey, Cassie, what's up? What-"

"-Are you coming down, Emma?"

Ruby smiles as she moves into the doorway; working her long hair into a side-plait.

At the sound of the brunette's voice, the cat hisses, before springing from the wardrobe in a streak of muddled fur and darting down the hallway.

"Cass!"
"Ruby. Go and tell Emma to finish up with what she's doing and call it a night."

Granny growls as she moves swiftly behind the bar with the obscure grace of one having spent the majority of their years side-stepping others.

"How come? It's not even nine yet! How come she gets to go?!"

The brunette huffs, her fingers splayed as she balances a selection of heavily laden plates.

"Because she's no use to me here if she's going to keep looking out the ever-loving window all night. Go and tell her to find that damned cat before she gets herself any more worked up about it. It's most likely made its way up some tree or other and can't figure out a way down. Foolish creatures, the lot of them."

"Fine."

Ruby grumbles with an admirably heavy sigh, but she perks up a little as she saunters over towards the blonde; Emma completely oblivious to her arrival as she continues to wipe down a table by the window in much the same way as she's been doing for the past ten minutes.

"You missed a spot."

"Huh?"

"Oh, wait, no, that's just the wood getting ready to show through the lacquer! Seriously, I think you got this one!"

"Oh, yeah, I guess-

"-You guess nothing. Go on, go find Cass and quit moping around down here; you're bringing down the whole vibe of the place."

The waitress jokes; gesturing around the half empty establishment in which no one pays them any notice.

"Sorry, I just-"

"-It's fine. I dunno what got into that thing, but she ran from your room like she'd seen the devil!"

"Guess she didn't stick around long enough to realise it was only you."

The blonde offers with a crooked grin and Ruby rolls her eyes with theatrical irritation.

"You have a fine way of grovelling with gratitude, given as I just gave you the night off!"

"You didn't do shit. Granny told you to come tell me."

"So you were paying attention!"

"What? Nah, I just recognise bullshit when I smell it."

"Gross!"
The brunette giggles, but not without a fair amount of appreciation; the blonde's way of speaking refreshingly obscure to any in their small town, and something she finds highly amusing. She doubts such thoughts are shared by Granny, though... And she can't even begin to fathom what the hell Regina must make of the curious young woman.

Offering Emma a smile, she makes a shooing gesture with her hand after she places her plates down in front of Archie and Marco.

"Go on, get out of here!"

"Are you sure?"

"Weren't you just bitching about how it isn't my decision anyway?"

"Yeah... Alright, thanks!"

The blonde grins; tugging off the apron she wears around her waist and tossing it in the laundry chute on her way out of the Diner.

Traipsing down the narrow hallway that connects the restaurant to the lobby of Granny's Bed and Breakfast, she keeps an eye out for Caskett to no avail. Slipping through the back door, she stands out on the stoop overlooking a modest back yard with her arms crossed tightly over her chest as the night air offers a blissful yet frigid relief to the heat of the ovens.

"Cassie?"

She calls out- eyes flickering about the darkness- but apart from a rather bold raven perched atop the trellis, she is rewarded with no response.

She supposes she shouldn't be quite so worried- the tabby had been a stray after all- but she understands the rotten feeling in her gut well enough to know that such simple logic is meaningless as it won't affect the way she feels.

She needs Cass.

Cass is her security blanket.

Cass is familiar.

Cass is family.

"Caskett?"

Louder now, and she takes a few steps down onto the soft turf in need of mowing, rubbing at the bare flesh of her arms as much with nervousness as she does with cold.

"Come on! It's me!"

She grumbles, although she remembers the extent of the woods viewed when entering the town with the Mayor, and knows there's a large possibility that if the tabby has fled the bedroom at Granny's, she may also have fled the premises in general.

And who knows what tasty morsels there might be around here to hunt.

"Cass!"
A last, defeated yell, before she takes a seat down on the stoop with a sigh; lowering her chin into her palm as she pulls distractedly at her skirt with her other hand.

Still, she doesn't suppose anyone's creeping about in the darkness to warrant concerning herself over flashing her underwear beneath short, white pleats as she sits with her knees pulled up in front of her.

"Come back..."

She no longer calls out, but simply speaks quietly to the shadows, and the pale crescent of a misted moon.

"Is this who you're looking for?"

A soft enquiry from her left, and she jumps in surprise; glancing up to spy a young woman making her way across the lawn from the main path.

Sure enough, in the raven-haired woman's arms; Caskett allows herself to be carried with a lazy, feline smirk of satisfaction.

"Cassie!"

The blonde pushes herself up onto her feet and brushes down her skirt, before holding her hands out in an almost childlike fashion to retrieve the troublesome tabby.

"She's very friendly!"

The newcomer smiles; handing over Caskett carefully, before wrapping her light jersey a little tighter around her chest.

"Apparently she's picking and choosing, then..."

Emma replies with a frown as Cass quite happily sinks her claws into the white cotton of her shirt and rubs her face against the blonde's shoulder.

"Oh?"

A polite smile of intrigue, and Emma shrugs; getting a better grip on scant bones and mottled fur, before addressing her new companion properly.

"She's been super skittish since we got here... She's usually a bit wary anyway, but she definitely seems to like you! Cass wouldn't let me carry her for about a week! And I was feeding her!"

"Then I am very humbled by your gracious acceptance... Cass? Is it?"

"Caskett. And she says 'you're welcome'."

Emma grins as Cass yawns apathetically.

The raven-haired woman smiles pleasantly, before holding out her hand.

"You're new in town, aren't you? I'm Mary Margaret, I teach at the local school."

"You talk to birds."

"Excuse me?"
"Oh, sorry, it's just Ruby said... I... Sorry, I didn't mean... I'm not really sure why I said that..."

The blonde shrugs awkwardly, and Mary Margaret chuckles lightly.

"It's okay. It has been known to happen on occasion. You're staying at Granny's?"

"Yeah, and working there, hence, you know, the look."

Emma wrinkles her nose slightly, although she grins as she looks down at herself; the stark white of her uniform glowing in the darkness in a disconcertingly radioactive fashion.

"I noticed... You're staying around for a bit then?"

And the curiosity in the older woman's voice matches that which the blonde has heard in so many since arriving in Storybrooke.

"Yeah, for a while, I guess. I don't really know. It's up to Regina."

"Regina? The Mayor?... How's that?"

"Well, I came back with her. I'm doing some work for her at the moment, so I guess I'll stick around for as long as it takes for her to get tired of trying to read my writing... And hell knows what she's gonna think if she tries to make me answer the phone... I'm kind of shit at all that."

"... You're working for Regina?"

The schoolteacher muses as she looks the blonde up and down with a hint of confusion. The young woman standing before her- not really even a woman at all, not for a little while yet, anyway- just doesn't seem like she would fit in with anything and everything expected from the severe brunette. She speaks with a crassness woven into dry drawl- inflecting some of her words where she needn't- and her long hair tumbles down messily in need of a trim, while her skinny frame and generally unkempt appearance lend her the look of one who hasn't been particularly well looked after.

"...Just helping with her filing and stuff, nothing fancy."

Emma explains with a hint of brittleness as she catches the way her companion looks at her and understands some of the things that the raven-haired woman is seeing in her general demeanour, however much she might try and mask them.

"I'm not sure Regina's ever had a secretary before. Not that I remember, anyway."

Mary Margaret ponders, and the blonde fights between irritability and her deep amusement at the term.

"Well, I've never been one before either, so I guess she and I are in that rickety, little ship together."

"Well... I'm sure she'll find you plenty to do."

The older woman smiles, with a hint of wry humour at the Mayor's expense, before laughing quietly as Cass paws lazily at the long curls feathering down the front of the blonde's shirt.

"I hope she does."

Emma answers back simply; entirely honest, as she feels it will be a long time before she might find herself in the brunette's company without feeling uncomfortably indebted.
Taking in the curiously defiant tilt to the younger woman's jaw as she stands cradling her cat—several yellowing bruises visible on her bare knees—Mary Margaret cocks her head pensively; feeling a strange sense of unease she can't quite get a handle of. Ordinarily, she would link such a feeling to a negative emotion in regards to a situation or—more rarely—person, but this doesn't quite seem to fit with any sort of 'ordinary' sentiment at all. For one, she feels a strange sort of pull towards the young woman so recently met. For another, her feeling of unease does not linger down in her gut, but rather encircles her heart in a somehow terrible fashion she can't even begin to comprehend.

Realising that she's staring, Mary Margaret clears her throat but is unable to push aside her accompanying ingrained feelings of concern for the blonde that are a simple product of the extreme empathy which plays a facet within her very genetics.

"Did you come here all alone? Where's your family?"

She regrets her question as soon as it leaves her lips, as the blonde stiffens visibly beneath her gaze.

Speaking tonelessly, Emma shrugs, and subconsciously readjusts her hold on Caskett so that the cat acts as a sort of shield between herself and the schoolteacher.

"Just me and Cass. I do better on my own."

The blonde growls with a sudden coldness, and the tabby squirms in her grasp before springing free and clambering up the trellis to disappear through the open window of the younger woman's borrowed bedroom.

Mary Margaret opens her mouth to say something more on the subject—uncomfortable in the knowledge that she has somehow overstepped her boundaries—but Emma addresses her with an air of finality that denies any further discussion.

"Well, thanks for finding my cat."

"... It was no problem... I heard you calling and put two and two together."

"Thanks."

The blonde repeats, before nodding woodenly in farewell. She is unsure why it might be that the schoolteacher's words had hit home in such a way, but she'll be damned if she's about to stand around trying to get to the bottom of the fact. It is simply not how she operates. To muse too deeply upon many things leads only to a decidedly dark place, and so it would seem preferable—sensible, even—to just sweep any such issues neatly aside into the corners of her mind where she takes care not to disturb the cobwebbed remains of their predecessors.

The raven-headed woman's simple question has affected her in a way that she hasn't been affected in a long time, and that simply won't do.

Best to just move on and remove herself from the situation.

Sensing an end to whatever further niceties there might have been, Mary Margaret sighs and raises her hand as she makes her way glumly up the rickety steps to the narrow hallway through which the blonde had entered the garden; murmuring that she had meant to come in to say hi to Ruby, before turning around and enquiring hesitantly

"I never caught your name?"

"Oh... Emma... It's Emma."
"Well... It's nice to meet you, Emma."

The older woman sighs, before slipping out of sight.

Biting her lip as she watches the schoolteacher go, the younger woman lets out a shuddering breath and glances up at the window above, before wrapping her arms about her slim frame and stalking off around the side of the building and down the street.

She is unsure where she means to go- unfamiliar with the town save for the few parts she has been shown- but supposes it doesn't much matter.

She just wants to walk.

She doesn't need anywhere to walk to.

"What might you be doing out at this time?"

Comes a low purr from behind her as she nears the clock tower at the end of the block, and Emma turns around to address the owner of that sultry query with a thankful sense of familiarity.

"Regina."

The brunette offers a curious gesture with her hand as though accepting some form of theatrical address, before pointing accusingly at the younger woman's attire.

"Aren't you supposed to be running around with a dishrag and notepad, Miss Swan?"

"Granny gave me the night off."

Emma explains; commencing to stroll alongside the Mayor as the latter walks slowly onwards after her initial greeting.

"Why is that?"

"Cass got out... Well... No... Cass kind of sprinted from the room in pure horror when Ruby came to get me, and I was worried she might not come back."

"When Ruby came in, you say?"

Regina asks with a small smile, but when the blonde enquires as to what causes such a display of mirth, she simply shakes her head with a secretive smirk.

"Anyway... She told me to go and find the cat rather than stand around worrying about it... Ordinarily, I wouldn't have worried... But... I dunno."

"And... Did you find her? Or are we now on some sort of rescue mission?"

"I found her... Or, rather, she was found. Mary Margaret- the school teacher, you know?- she came over when I was calling for Cass with the little idiot happily cradled in her arms like a damned lapdog."

"Mary Margaret found her?"

The brunette repeats, a dark glimmer finding her eyes as she ruminates over this fact silently.

"Yeah."
"... Did you two get to chatting?"

"Kind of."

Emma shrugs, and the Mayor raises a brow as she gets a distinct feeling that the younger woman has been rubbed up the wrong way.

And by Snow Goddamned White, no less!

... Most curious...

"You seem troubled?"

"Do I?"

A baited response- challenging- and Regina smiles to herself as she can't help but appreciate the blonde's defiant brand of fire.

That self-destroying burn of one unwilling to yield to another's perceptions.

"Indeed you do."

She replies simply.

"Yeah... Well, how come you're walking around on your own at this time of night? Seems pretty troubled to me."

Discarding her initial reaction to snap at the younger woman for such an insinuation, Regina just laughs softly, before shaking her head and assuring

"Not at all, dear. No more troubled than yourself by the sounds of it, which is to say, if I am to respect your words, that neither of us is troubled in the slightest. No, I am out here because I had a desire for some fresh air while Johanna remains at mine to do some ironing... And what better place for fresh air than the docks?"

"The docks?"

"You'll see."
"Hot shit..."

The blonde breathes as they round the corner to find themselves faced with a small marina.

"Language."

The Mayor sighs, but there is no real annoyance in her tone. In fact, she adopts a small smile as she takes in the younger woman's awed expression and leads them out onto wooden decking with a small murmur for Emma to watch her footing.

"It's beautiful."

The blonde remarks as she looks up at several of the sleeping vessels that bob gently upon the water.

"It's peaceful out here, and I enjoy the sound of the water hitting the wood beneath us."

"Me too... And the smell."

The younger woman shrugs sheepishly as she imagines that must sound rather strange, but Regina simply nods in agreement and points towards a small ladder to their side.

"This is the part I like most, however."

Leading the way, she takes care as she descends creaking wood, before stepping neatly down onto a narrow strip of paving and waiting for Emma to follow suit.

"A beach?"

The younger woman exclaims in surprise, and the brunette smiles as the blonde takes a seat at the top of the steps and pulls her sneakers off before landing lightly in the sand.

"You really do have everything here, don't you, Madame Mayor?"

"Not everything... But enough to make the day go by quite nicely."

Regina agrees; her heels sounding out a steady beat down the concrete strip as Emma walks beside her in the sand.

"This is awesome though. I always liked the beach."

"Then I don't imagine your area of Boston had much to offer you."

"... That had little to do with the lack of sand and sea."

"Then why choose such a place?"

"Huh?"

"Well, I imagine the choice was yours? You were in Phoenix before... Why move to Boston of all places when you could have gone anywhere you wanted?"

The brunette asks with genuine intrigue, and the younger woman sighs but permits the question for the simple reason that the woman walking beside her has earned this much at least.
"It wasn't the plan originally... I drove east, but I had meant to wind up in Tallahassee. I got a fair bit of the way there, and I just... I guess I changed my mind... So I went north instead."

Emma shrugs; leaving out the sudden panic that had struck her like a fist, causing her to swerve off the road and sit panting in a small lay-by with her cheeks wet and her nails digging into the weathered leather of the steering wheel. Just as she negates to mention her subsequent journey to Boston had been an attempt to travel as far away from Florida as possible at that moment in time; north seeming the most viable option. She had thought briefly of travelling back to Oregon- by far her favourite of the places she'd been- but that had seemed just as unsavoury as Tallahassee, as that was where it had all begun to unravel.

She says none of this.

Simply shrugging and finishing with

"I lived in Boston as a kid for a while. I figured I knew the area and would go from there."

"I see. Why Tallahassee though?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well... That's rather specific."

"So's Boston."

"But for that, you had a reason."

"I-"

"-But, then, perhaps you have one for Tallahassee also, but are unwilling to share."

"... Maybe."

The younger woman agrees; kicking at the sand as she walks.

"That is your prerogative."

Regina replies simply as she pulls her summer jacket closer to her to shield her chest from the sea air.

"You aren't cold?"

She asks; studying crisp white cotton and short, girlish pleats out of the corner of her eye.

"Nah, I'm okay."

"One should never lie, Miss Swan."

"... Okay, I'm a bit cold-

Emma chuckles

"-But it's actually quite refreshing after the summer we've had. It gets so hot in the city."

"I imagine it does."

The brunette muses, before raising a brow when the younger woman asks lightly
"Can we walk down to the shore?"

"You can. I'm wearing heels."

"So take them off?"

But Emma laughs at the look this suggestion garners her.

"There's a small pier a little way ahead, you can walk towards the sea there."

"And your outfit can manage it alright?"

"Watch yourself, dear."

The darker woman smirks, and they continue on in silence until they reach a wooden walkway that leads them down the beach.

Leaving the Mayor stood at the edge of the small, wooden pier, Emma walks down the wet sand until she stands with the water washing past her ankles, her shoes dangling loosely at her side. The water is fairly frigid with no sun playing across its surface, but it is a pleasant feeling nonetheless, and she turns to look up at the brunette pensively as the latter stands with her gaze cast out at the waves.

Dark tresses ripple prettily in the breeze, and the moonlight catches and enhances impeccable features in a way that is frighteningly beautiful. The blonde swallows, a little thrown, as a peculiar array of emotions come to a fray within her mind as she continues to study the Mayor.

Curiosity.

Wariness.

A pleasant sense of liking.

A slightly more disconcerting sense of attachment.

And, most troubling yet abstract of all... A small amount of infatuation.

"Are you married, Regina?"

She asks; bending down to collect a series of pebbles to toss out into the waves.

The brunette frowns and looks down in surprise; entirely baffled by the question.

"No. Why do you ask?"

"I was just wondering. I mean, with your son and-"

"-What about my son?"

Regina hisses with tangible venom; deeming the idea of the blonde insinuating any negativity towards her having a child while unwed ludicrously hypocritical. She almost says as much but is fortunate that Emma picks up on her anger swiftly, and so doesn't suffer the consequence of divulging anything she might later regret.

"Oh, I didn't mean anything by it! Not like that! Shit, no. I just... I dunno... You seem like the sort is all."
"And what 'sort' is that, Miss Swan?"

The brunette enquires dangerously, and the younger woman turns to face her, nibbling her lip thoughtfully before continuing with sensible caution.

"Like, you have it all figured out. You speak well and dress nicely. You're attractive and smart. You're like one of the women in books or on the TV whose husbands would actually like them."

Regina's caged reaction dissipates into soft laughter as this last phrase amuses her greatly.

"Whose husbands might 'actually like them'?"

"Well... Sure."

Emma shrugs a little self-consciously; aware that the Mayor laughs at her, but not quite sure if she cares or not.

"Well, I suppose I am flattered, regardless of your most graceless way of going about giving a compliment. At least... I presume that was a compliment. It's a little hard to tell..."

She scoffs, but the blonde catches a small smirk tugging lightly at full lips and rolls her eyes theatrically, muttering irritably that she won't bother next time.

Shaking her head as she casts her gaze back over the ocean, Regina continues on genially enough

"No, Miss Swan, I'm not married. Although I assure you it is not through a lack of interest here in town."

"Yeah, and don't forget that endearingly humble attitude-"

"-I simply have no interest in such things."

"Yeah, I can buy that. I never saw the appeal either."

The younger woman wrinkles her nose with childish disgust, and the brunette muses lightly

"Well, you're young... Only just old enough to have any sort of amorous relationship in the first place."

"Well, sure, by law or whatever."

Emma scoffs, and Regina raises an eyebrow as she continues to pry with casual caution

"That law is put in place for a reason..."

"So are plenty of others that get broken every day."

"True... I take it you were with someone, then?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, you're being incredibly defensive for one not invested in the topic of discussion."

"... I'm not completely naive if that's what you mean."

The blonde growls; not wishing to discuss her only real relationship, but not entirely sure what to say now, as this leaves an open question hanging in the air between them that reminds her with a sense
of embarrassment of Ruby's earlier enquiry as to her virtue.

Or lack thereof.

And she can't exactly entertain the idea of discussing her sexual exploits with the goddamned Mayor. 

*And it's not like the woman hasn't walked in on you half naked and drunk and... Well, yes...*

Catching the light blush colouring high cheekbones, Regina smirks to herself but carries on breezily

"I trust from your evasive approach to the matter, it wasn't a relationship you cherished."

"I never said I-... It was complicated."

"Life often is."

"Yeah... Well..."

"What became of it?"

"Huh?"

"The relationship in question... What became of it?"

The brunette asks, deeply curious as to how Emma might see fit to answer her question as so far, any opportunity that has arisen between the two of them for the younger woman to mention her recent 'accident' has been left strictly unaddressed.

"... Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing good, anyway."

"I see..."

The Mayor murmurs as she glances down at the blonde while the latter studies the water skimming her pale ankles moodily.

She expects to feel that familiar surge of distaste and anger towards the younger woman's abandonment of her child, but instead, all she feels is a dull sense of gloom.

"Come on; it's getting late and you're wearing next to nothing."

She sighs with an air of indifference, and turns back for the narrow path leading up to the harbour. Trudging up the beach, Emma falls into step beside her, and they stroll on in a silence that isn't entirely unpleasant.

The Mayor's thoughts complicated and causing her silent distress.

The blonde's much the same, but for an entirely different reason.

She had sworn to herself after the incident with Neal that she would never allow anyone else in. Never trust anyone else. Never like anyone else save for to shoot the shit with in that most basic and indifferent of ways.

... She likes Regina.
She likes her a lot.

And she is deeply curious as to why she seems to be *alone* in this if the odd comments she has picked up on around town hold any weight.

"...Ruby says you've never had anyone help you out before, the way I am now, I mean."

"Yes, well, as I told you earlier, it's not that I couldn't *manage* the workload myself, it's just-"

"-You're helping me out."

"I suppose so."

"Why?"

"I believe I asked you to *desist* with that question, as I have no answer to offer you."

"Yeah... But why *me*? How come you're being so nice to me?"

"Yet *another* question I can't answer. Why does it matter? Do you *need* a reason? You can't just be appreciative of the fact?"

"I *am!* I really am... I was just curious."

"Yes... Well, something tells me that this is a rather reckless personality flaw within yourself. I would hazard a guess that it has landed you in a fair bit of trouble in the past."

It's not a question- merely a statement- and Emma lets it go without comment and recommences her silence.

As they mount the steps back up onto the weathered decking of the marina, the younger woman slips on the wooden rungs, and Regina catches her hand easily and pulls her up without a second thought.

The blonde is a little less indifferent and she studies the Mayor warily as she gives a small murmur of thanks and follows on behind.

*Careful, Swan...*

She scolds herself, but it has little to do with any further potential hazards posed by the slippery planks on which they walk.

"I trust you can find your way back from here?"

Regina turns around to enquire, and the younger woman composes her face swiftly to adopt an air of casual disinterest.

"Yeah. I'm new, not stupid."

The brunette smirks at the adolescent note of aggravation lacing the blonde's words and nods her farewell.

Starting off towards her mansion, she turns on her heel and calls the younger woman back.

"Emma... What did Mary Margaret say to you?"

"What do you mean?"
"She said something you didn't much care for. That much was obvious."

"Oh... She asked me where my family was."

"I see... I imagine she's not the first to have ever broached this subject?"

"No... But... I dunno... I guess it just hit me or something. It's not a big deal... I just... It's been a long day."

"... Yes. I imagine it has."

Regina muses quietly. Clearing her throat and smiling at the young blonde, she offers her a farewell once more.

"Well, good evening, dear. I will see you tomorrow."

"Yeah... Thanks."

"For?"

"I dunno... Just... I don't know. Good night, Regina."

"Sleep well, Miss Swan."

"You too..."

Emma answers quietly as she watches the brunette make her way in the other direction. She frowns.

Not sure what to make of the feelings circling slowly in her chest.
"That's really good..."

Comes a voice from behind the blonde as she sits out on the sun drenched pavement with her legs splayed out in front of her and a series of chalk sticks feathered out to her sides. Glancing up and looking around, she smiles and shrugs slim shoulders shyly.

"Thanks."

"Didn't know Granny's offered any drinks that were green, though..."

Her companion grins as he leans in to better study the blackboard placard resting across skinny thighs.

"Well, there wasn't any brown chalk, so..."

Emma explains as she takes a sip of the large beaker of iced coffee to her side.

"It's all good; I reckon we might be able to whip up some sort of milkshake made from the mint ice-cream in the deep freeze if anyone asks."

Ruby chuckles as she saunters out to stand in the gateway of the picket fence that encircles the Diner.

"A plan! I like it."

The young man laughs back, and he tips a little salute to the brunette who smirks kittenishly.

Watching on, the blonde looks from the newcomer to Ruby curiously, before spotting a flash of gold at the man's hip and grinning to herself as she identifies her artistic admirer as the Sheriff. Holding out a hand from her childishly splayed position on the ground, she smiles and introduces herself as Graham reciprocates.

Giving the younger woman's artwork one, last approving nod, the Sheriff makes quick work of the steps and disappears inside.

Glancing up at Ruby, Emma grins in amusement with her glass caught between her teeth impishly.

"...What?"

"Oh, nothing..."

"Bull! What's got you all tickled?"

But the blonde shakes her head with a knowing smirk and goes back to her work on the sign, with a low melody of

"You like him..."

Sung out beneath her breath.

The brunette rolls her eyes as she leans against the fence and plays idly with her hair.

"Well, can you blame me? The man is gorgeous!"
"Why not ask him out, then?"

"Because, um, hello! It doesn't work that way!"

Ruby sighs, and Emma shrugs as she sticks green chalk behind her ear and selects a red piece from beside her right knee.

"No?"

"Nope... But, come on... You have to admit... He's pretty hot, right?"

"I guess."

"You don't think so?"

"I dunno... He seemed nice enough."

"I wasn't asking if you thought he was nice, I was asking if you'd take him for a ride?"

"For a ride?"

"Want me to spell it out?"

"No, no, I'm good, thanks. Isn't that all kind of the same thing, though?"

"What?"

"Well... I mean... You're not gonna like someone that's a dick in person."

"Actually, I think the dick part is pretty important, doll."

Ruby winks, and the blonde narrows her eyes and fishes a piece of ice out of her glass and crunches it thoughtfully between her teeth.

"He seemed nice. I'd have to know a little more about him before deciding if I wanted to bed him."

"Well, then, there's something really, really wrong with you."

The brunette informs her pleasantly.

Walking around to stand behind the younger woman, she watches as Emma adds a few finishing touches to the placard and raises a brow.

"He wasn't wrong, though; you're pretty good at drawing."

"Thanks."

The blonde shrugs once again, before pushing the blackboard up so that it stands beside the gate and accepting Ruby's offer of a hand to help her to her feet.

"You want to go see if Granny needs any more help before you get dolled up for the Mayor?"

The brunette smirks, and the younger woman sighs dramatically as she throws a piece of chalk at the waitress and stalks off inside.

As it turns out, Granny has all bases covered, and shoos her off upstairs with the strict order than she grab herself a piece of fruit when she comes back down; not interested in the slightest when Emma
assures her she's already had plenty at breakfast.

"A little more to eat isn't going to do you any harm, girl. An apple a day keeps the doctor away."

She calls out, before throwing a pointed look at Whale who sits up at the bar, regarding the young woman with a rather appreciative gaze.

"Okay! I'll get something on my way down!"

Emma calls back as she disappears from view with a low chuckle at the militant approach Granny seems to have taken to her maternal touch.

Slipping into her room to find Cass curled up lazily on her pillow, she offers the tabby a quick scratch, before opening up the wardrobe and assessing the small collection of garments hanging inside.

A business expense.

"My ass."

She murmurs, before pushing such thoughts firmly aside as she is struck once again with her curious conflict of emotions when it comes to the Mayor.

Pulling down a pair of dark, navy slacks and a pretty, plain white shirt, she strips out of her uniform and pulls on crisp new clothes swiftly. Padding into the bathroom, she assesses the result in the mirror with casual intrigue.

The slacks fit her well; actually bought to suit her frame rather than simply picked up with the notion that they might fit her better than anything else on offer as is usually the case, and the shirt is sleeveless and refreshing in the summer heat. Tucking neat, white cotton into her slacks and pulling her hair back into a messy ponytail, Emma studies herself in the mirror and offers her reflection a small smile.

"Admiring yourself?"

Ruby drawls from the doorway, and the blonde flips her the bird without looking around.

Taking crass offence merrily in her stride, the brunette saunters into the bedroom with a small roll of her eyes as Caskett makes swiftly for the window.

"You look very pretty like that."

She smiles amiably, and the blonde lowers her eyes awkwardly with a shrug as though to brush off such comments. Undeterred, the waitress reclines back on soft covers and muses nonchalantly

"My god, you have a nice ass!"

"It was kind of a package deal."

Emma replies primly as she walks over and collects her shoes from beneath the bed.

Ruby chuckles appreciatively at this and sticks out her foot to give the younger woman a soft nudge as she remains bent over.

"So, what do you actually do for Regina anyway?"
"Well, yesterday I mainly just sorted through notes she'd made and copied them into her diary... I
dunno... I guess I just do whatever she tells me to."

Catching the impish smirk this comment garners as she straightens up, the blonde rolls her eyes, but
is unable to stop a light blush from touching her cheeks.

"Professionally."

She growls; ignoring the curious flip of her stomach at the notion.

"Sure, sure."

Ruby grins, and the younger woman grabs one of the pillows from the bed and smacks her with it
deftly.

"Why are you such a letch?!"

"Hey! You're new in town! I'm just playing matchmaker!"

The waitress giggles, as Emma crosses her arms with a huff of irritation.

"Oh, come on, don't be a grouch. Of course, I know you're not interested in the Mayor. I'm just
playing!"

"Well... Don't."

The younger woman offers back lamely.

"Do I need to break something up, girls?"

Granny growls from the doorway; peering over her glasses at the two younger women with a look
that suggests their very youth must mean that they are up to no good.

"Nope, just trying to find Emma a man."

Ruby explains with a flash of teeth, and the greying woman shakes her head despairingly as she
turns for the stairs

"You could take a leaf out of young Emma's book, and spend more time working and less time
moonring over boys!"

"Oh, come on! I work plenty!"

The brunette grumbles as she pushes herself from the blonde's bed and pads out into the hallway to
follow Granny back down.

Watching her go, Emma shakes her head with a small grin as she fixes her hair and checks the latch
on the window to make sure Cass can get in and out.

"I don't think Ruby ever got round to properly introducing us."

A friendly voice greets from behind, and Emma turns to find the Sheriff strolling in her wake.

Slowing down to fall into step beside him, she frowns, while subsequently telling herself that she
isn't actually checking Graham out after being led on by the troublesome brunette.
"You're the Sheriff..."

"And you're Emma."

He smiles

"-But I haven't seen a new face around here in a long while, and I'm curious. What brings you to town?"

"Oh. Well, Regina, I guess. I'm doing some work for her... I actually better get a move on; I'm headed that way now, and I was late yesterday."

"Not a good way to start off with Regina, no."

Graham nods in agreement, before pointing over to a rather worse-for-wear cruiser parked across the street.

"I'm headed that way myself, actually. I can give you a ride if you like?"

Looking from the car to the Sheriff thoughtfully, Emma shrugs and takes him up on the offer, slipping into the passenger seat and looking around curiously.

"Huh... I was kind of expecting more gadgets and stuff."

Graham grins as he slots his keys into the ignition and cruises down the street.

"Nothing fancy in a small town, I'm afraid."

"I gotta admit, this place seems pretty perfect compared to anywhere I've been before... Is there actually any 'policing' to be done?"

"Not a whole lot. Sometimes we get a little trouble out at the Rabbit Hole- have you been? No? Well, it's not much, but it's alright for what it is- but other than that, it's more just town upkeep than anything else. It's a good job, and I guess I feel like I've been doing it forever; it's second nature."

"It's funny. Everyone seems so, like, settled here. Like they've got this routine going or something... It's nothing like Boston."

"No?"

"No... But I can live with that."

She smiles, and the Sheriff nods in presumptive understanding; glancing sideways at the blonde as she peers out the window with casual intrigue.

"Regina didn't say she'd hired any help..."

He muses; eyes flickering between the road and partially restrained curls.

"Oh... Well... I guess it was pretty off the cuff..."

Emma shrugs; not entirely sure what their party line is, and making a mental note to perhaps run this by Regina when she gets a chance. Recalling Ruby's comment as to the Mayor's favourable approach towards the Sheriff, she turns to face him curiously, playing her fingers over the soft material of her pants and feeling rather peculiar and dressed up.
"Graham... What do you think of her?"

"Who?"

"Regina. The Mayor."

"Oh... Well..."

The Sheriff's brow creases as he strives to find an appropriate response to the blonde's rather obscure question.

"...She's very good at her job."

He answers finally, and Emma raises an eyebrow as she catches a definite note of evasiveness in his reply, though she can't quite put her finger on why that might be. Clearing his throat a little awkwardly, the Sheriff adopts a nonchalant tone as he deploys the turn signal and rolls around into the brunette's sweeping driveway.

"Why do you ask?"

"Oh... Just wondering, I guess."

The blonde shrugs, before climbing out of the car and waiting for Graham to do the same. She follows him up the grand set of steps that lead to Regina's front door and slips into the stately hallway behind him.

Entering the brunette's office at his heels, she offers the darker woman a sunny smile which doesn't go reciprocated. Instead, Regina frowns, looking from the Sheriff to Emma, before lowering her attention back down to the document before her; enquiring silily

"...You two came together?"
Chapter 23

"... You two came together?"

Danger laces the brunette's sultry purr, and Graham clenches his jaw nervously as he understands swiftly that his casual offer of a lift to the curious young woman behind him is anything but okay with Madame Mayor. Emma, however, seems a little less on the ball- or, rather, simply unconcerned- and misses the darker woman's venom entirely; not knowing of any reason why it should exist and therefore overlooking it completely.

"Yeah, he gave me a lift... But not because I got into trouble or anything!"

She assures the brunette, and- even through her anger- Regina finds herself marginally amused, as she can't quite make out if Emma tells her this in jest, or with a genuine belief that she might have presumed police business to be Graham's reason for accompanying her.

"... Not yet, Miss Swan."

She sniffs curtly, and the blonde nips at her bottom lip sheepishly as she finally notes the darkness in the Mayor's gaze.

"I just didn't want to be late..."

The younger woman explains, and the Sheriff nods as if to back up this muttered claim as Emma slips past him and makes her way hesitantly over to her chair.

Regina studies her critically, taking in the clean lines of the new clothes hugging the blonde's slim frame; slender arms bare but for a light tan and several purple marks yet to fade. Glancing up at the younger woman's face as they sit beneath the bright light of her overheads, she notes that the lingering bruise she had spotted beneath Emma's eye when they first met has all but disappeared; her attention drawn instead to high cheekbones and a few, sporadic freckles framed by a couple of loose curls while the majority of the younger woman's hair has been tied back to cascade between her shoulder blades.

Raising a brow when wide eyes flicker up to meet her own- the blonde looking suddenly nervous- she offers no reprieve until dusky lashes lower back down to the documents fanned out across the desk and Emma picks up a pen and opens her diary with an anxious bouncing of her knee.

Looking back up at Graham, the brunette enquires icily

"And what are you doing here, Sheriff?"

"I... You requested I come and see you, Madame Mayor. About the clock?"

"Oh."

She offers in surprise; having forgotten entirely that she had made this very request only yesterday.

Snapping at Emma, she addresses the younger woman irritably

"Why wasn't that put in my schedule?"

"I... Well, I didn't know?"
"Well, why not? Isn't knowing such things your job?"

"But I-

"-Miss Swan. I have asked you to perform only the simplest tasks. I will have no 'buts' falling from your lips in this office, do you understand me?"

"But-

"-I will ask you again! Do you understand me? If not, then this arrangement isn't going to work out at all."

"... Yes..."

"Good. Don't let it happen again."

She growls; eyes glittering as she drinks in equal parts defiance and discomfort.

Pushing herself from her seat, she points to a sheet of paper littered with neat, blue cursive.

"That's a draft for a proposal to be discussed at the next town meeting. Read it, and write it up properly for me. I will be back shortly."

Her tone is dismissive, and she catches a flicker of irritation directed up at her before Emma lowers her attention back down to the proffered page and places her pen between her teeth as she reads.

Stalking over to the door, the brunette instructs the Sheriff to follow her out into the kitchen, where she pours herself a glass of water from a chilled bottle in the fridge and regards the rim pensively as though trying to decide where to begin.

"So, you've met our new arrival... And so courteously rushed to spring to her aid..."

"She was going the same way I was, Regina..."

"Oh? How did you know?"

"I asked her."

"Why?"

Dark coals flicker up to study the Sheriff intently, and he furrows his brow as the tension sits thick in the air between them.

"...I spoke to her outside Granny's while she was making up a sign for the Diner... She left just before I did, and I felt it would be rude to walk a couple of steps behind her and not say anything."

"Sheriff, you could have blanked her completely or even hurled her some verbal abuse, and I doubt the girl would have been in the least bit fazed. Boston is a ghastly place, and I imagine she's brought some of that hardness back with her."

The brunette muses, before adopting a much more direct approach to her interrogation; sipping from her glass and enquiring bluntly

"What do you make of her?"

"Madame Mayor?"
"Emma. What do you make of her?"

"...It's a little soon to say. I think she knows her way around a pack of chalk, and she's either shy, distrusting, or both."

"... Distrusting?"

"She's young, yet she was remarkably polite when introducing herself... Much more reserved than girls her age usually are."

"By girls her age- or at least thereabouts- I imagine you mean Miss Lucas and the rabble that young harlot surrounds herself with... I imagine it was rather a shock to your system not having some ridiculous, doe-eyed young girl swooning over you... Disillusioning, even!"

The Mayor sniffs coquettishly, but the Sheriff knows Regina better than to meet such cruel remarks with debate. Instead, he simply carries on as though she has said nothing snide on the matter.

"...That said, she didn't have a whole lot more to say once she had introduced herself... Plenty of questions, though. But very little eye contact."

"Is that so?"

"Well, I mean, I'm supposed to pick up on these things... I'm the Sheriff, aren't I?"

"You have been for so long as anyone can remember... Now, tell me what you think of her?"

"I think... I think you want me to tell you that I think she's attractive and that I like her."

"Why would I want you to do so? I asked you for your opinion, not-"

"-And I know why... I do think she seems perfectly nice, and, yes, she's attractive- if a little on the skinny side- which is something I'm sure almost anyone else asked would agree with. She seems fine, Regina, but why would you assume the worst from the situation?"

The Sheriff inquires calmly, and the brunette sighs as she leans against the counter behind her.

"Emma is not the only one distrusting of new situations..."

"No. I know that... Why would you assume you had anything to worry about, though?"

He regards her pointedly, and she finally offers a small smirk, before looking down into the depths of her glass with amusement.

"Yes, I suppose that was rather foolish, given what you have on offer."

She speaks silkily, with a note of arrogance that would taint those self-assured words were they spoken by anybody else, but somehow it simply lends her voice a want to desire.

Adopting a small smile himself as he senses that any possible fire has been extinguished, the Sheriff brushes a strand of stray hair from the Mayor's cheek and asks with a note of amusement

"Did you actually need me to come and see you about the clock?"

"What do you mean? Of course, I did. Why else would I have asked you to come here?"

She snaps with practised irritability, and Graham sighs; raising an eyebrow in the silent request that
"I want you to go and have a look at it with Marco."

"Well... I can do... But it seems to be working fine now. I-"

"-Precisely. I want you to stop it. Whatever mechanism or battery, or whatever it is that makes it tick; I want you to remove it."

"... Madame Mayor?"

"There was something wrong with it, Sheriff. That clock hasn't moved its hands in... In a long time... I trust I don't need to point out that the tower is one of this town's most prolific buildings, nor the hazard posed by the iron arms that have suddenly begun their jerky rotations, seemingly without any cause to do so."

"Maybe something was just stuck-"

"-Maybe. But, will you favour that same, blasé approach should a mechanism fall, and perhaps crush an idle wanderer below?"

"Regina, the chances of that happening are-"

"-Slim to none. But, I would hardly be doing my job should I take any chance at all towards the people of this town's safety, and neither would you."

"Well, okay. But, I mean-"

"-Enough. I don't want words, Sheriff, I want actions. Take Marco with you and see to it that the clock stands still as it always has."

"...Yes, Madame Mayor."

"Good. Now, I better go and see what Miss Swan is getting up to. Evasive and rather peculiar she might be, but she is also terribly inquisitive, and I would prefer that my drawers not be pilfered through in her boredom."

"I will leave you to it... And she is only as inquisitive as her employer."

Graham smiles, and the brunette frowns in confusion

"How do you mean?"

"She asked me much the same as you did."

"As I did?"

"She asked me what I thought of you."

"...Did she now?"

"I kept it pleasant, but professional."

He assures her swiftly.

"I'm sure... Why was she asking?"
"I don't know. I think she was just genuinely curious."

"Perhaps... Miss Swan strikes me as a 'genuinely curious' type of girl... But curiosity can be dangerous when not practised with caution. I imagine Miss Swan might have learnt this lesson several times over, and yet... I also imagine that it has yet to stick."

Regina muses darkly, and Graham shrugs; not altogether that interested in whether or not the blonde's inquisitiveness has gotten her into trouble in the past. She had seemed like a sweet enough girl, and, to tell the truth- although he wouldn't be so bold as to relay this particular truth back to the Mayor- she had seemed like the sort of girl who might have a fair amount of fun while on her way into trouble.

There had been a definite sense of mischief beneath carefully applied manners.

"Well, I presume you'll set her straight. Teach her a lesson or two."

He grins, and Regina raises an eyebrow with a small smirk as she places her glass beside the sink.

"Oh, I presume I shall teach her many lessons."

Swallowing at the rich timbre of her voice, Graham offers the brunette a curt nod in farewell; knowing full well he will be stopping by later in the evening, hopefully, to be welcomed with a less chilly reception.

"I'll take Marco to go and see to the clock. I will leave you to see to your... Whatever it is she is."

"Good day, Sheriff."

*Whatever it is she is... Oh, but isn't that such a hatefully fitting description...*

*I wish I knew, myself...*

*Time will tell.*

*Time always tells.*

*And then I will see to her.*

*I will see to it that I don't live to regret the decisions I have made.*

*Not again...*

Stalking out of the kitchen in the Sheriff's wake, Regina slips back into her office in a graceful swish of burgundy silk. Standing in the doorway and regarding the blonde with a pensive frown as the latter sits with her back towards her, she fusses with her hair, before stalking briskly over to the table and taking a seat.

"Have you finished?"

"Yeah, I think so. I'm not sure if it's what you meant, though... I added some bits to make it flow more, but I can do it again if it's wrong."

"Well, then, let's see. Move your chair around here next to mine and let's have a look what you have to offer."
"Well, then, let's see. Move your chair around here next to mine and let's have a look what you have to offer."

Emma does as she's told; lifting her chair and taking care not to scrape it across the floor as she is intuitive enough to presume that this is unlikely to better her current situation with the Mayor. Placing down heavy wood beside the brunette's high-backed chair, she takes a seat and lays out the piece of paper bearing her messy scrawl between them.

Regina watches all this out of the corner of her eye; feeling an odd sense of relief after having spoken to Graham.

No... Not relief... Intrigue.

Yes, intrigue. The fact that Emma had been- in Graham's words- fairly short with him comes as a surprise, as she has watched many an idiot in this town fawn over the young Sheriff, and has simply come to consider such a thing to be almost parr for course.

She is unconvinced that Graham spares the younger woman no interest at all, however, as, studying her now, bathed in the bright sunlight that streams through the large bay window, she doesn't imagine many men would fail to see the blonde's appeal, regardless of her age.

"Did you understand the proposal?"

"Yeah, I think so..."

Emma shrugs, and her tone is laced with brittle discomfort as she is unsure what in the hell just happened before the others walked out to chat in the kitchen. Sensing wary confusion, Regina smiles but says nothing more on the matter, instead simply scanning over the blonde's long-hand transcript derived from her notes with the occasional nod of approval.

"...You write much more eloquently than you speak."

She muses, and the younger woman shrugs once more and mutters that she doubts she is alone in this.

"No, I wouldn't imagine so either, but I hope it won't be considered rude if I exclaim my surprise at the amount of difference..."

"Exclaim away."

Emma smiles, and dark coals glitter as the brunette marks out a few sections that need tweaking and looking into.

"Here, have a look at these bits, please. You can't just leave that subsection stating a plan of action
'on the agreed upon date'; have a look in my diary and schedule in the appropriate meetings.

"But, what if that's not okay with... Uh... Gold? I think most of this is for the attention of Mr Gold? How's that?"

"It will be fine."

The brunette shrugs simply, and Emma recognises an air of finality in her tone.

"Okay..."

She fidgets in her seat awkwardly; feeling a little claustrophobic with the darker woman's knee an inch away from her own, and the subtle notes of Chanel no.5 infiltrating her personal space.

She attempts to block out such distractions; her mind still muddled with the peculiar conflict of feelings Regina seems to bring up in her.

*Well, the fact she makes you feel anything much at all is disconcerting in itself...*

Right. A little sad perhaps, when worded quite so bluntly, but she understands it to be both the truth, and a personality defect that has probably sheltered her more so than it has hindered her.

Not in this case, though... Other than a peculiar sense of awe that she understands derives from what the Mayor has done for her, she feels unusually timid sat beside the brunette, and it has nothing to do with being introverted or new at her job. It is a curious sensation that affects both her chest and her stomach, and she supposes she recognises elements of its grip from the past, however vehemently she might try and tell herself- *wish!*- that it were otherwise.

But no. There is a distinct similarity between the fluttering in her abdomen when faced with Regina and the foreign sensation of much the same back in the days of 'Neal and the Car'.

Back then, she had thought- actually *believed*- that she was getting sick; having no understanding of the way her body seemed to react to her new companion.

The one *companion* whose *company* she could actually tolerate.

She had told him in the end, after about a week of worrying silently that whatever was ailing her might be serious, and, after a long and arduous discussion of her symptoms, her car-mate's expression of concern had fractured into husky laughter as he had sat behind the wheel, shaking with amusement.

*I think your 'problem' might be my ruggedly handsome appeal...*

She had snapped at him to quit messing with her and take the situation seriously- admittedly a little scared by that point- which had garnered yet more laughter, before he had leaned over in his chair and kissed her.

*I tell me whether you feel worse or better...*

*I... What the hell are you-*

*I-worse or better?*

*I... Both...*

*I Oh, boy... You have it bad!*
And, as it had turned out, she did. They both had.

That was what that feeling had been.

Glancing up at the Mayor as the brunette makes an elegant alteration to one of her notes, the blonde's cheeks flush darkly with confusion.

She can't very well kiss Regina and see whether the fluttering in her gut intensifies or lessens.

Or both...

Oh, come on!

Catching an irritable sigh escape the younger woman's lips as she goes back to her work, the Mayor looks up at her curiously; dark eyes drinking in soft, honey gold pulled messily away from sharp features. The white of the blonde's shirt offsets what remains of her Arizona tan prettily, and is tucked neatly into the fitted waistband of dark, navy slacks. She considers telling Emma how lovely she looks, but she hasn't quite forgiven the blonde for taking Graham up on his offer for a ride, and so keeps such things to herself. Instead, she brushes a finger against one of the bruises that colour the younger woman's bicep and receives a startled expression in return.

"I suppose Boston will fade from you with time. Once these disappear and you put on a couple of pounds, you'll have no trace of the place on you."

"What... I'll be a proper Storybrooke citizen?"

Emma smirks, and the brunette shakes her head with an amiable enough sigh of superiority

"No, dear. You are- and perhaps always will be- a stranger... But you won't be marked by your past before coming here."

Her words are light, and she speaks as though simply stating a fact- which, for her, is all that it is- but something flashes in the younger woman's eyes that doesn't quite speak of a genial sharing of opinions.

She frowns- confused- as she doesn't understand what it is that she has said that would warrant such a change in Emma's demeanour; the blonde keeping her smile in place, but her eyes glittering coldly.

Why would that be?

After all, she's merely stated the truth; she has done Emma a great service by bringing her to this town, and surely the notion of giving up the ghosts haunting her from before should fill her with a great amount of joy...

"Did I say something wrong?"

She enquires airily; adopting a bored expression that suggests she would be unaffected by such a thing.

"No... I just... This is a clean slate, kind of... It's not a new life... To say I won't be marked by it, as if other people won't have to see anything ugly like that here in your perfect little town, is-"

"-That's not what I said."

Regina frowns, picking up not just irritation, but a small note of hurt in the younger woman's tone, and she shakes her head and elaborates carefully.
"That is not what I said, Miss Swan, and it is most certainly not what I meant. All I meant is... This town could be good for you..."

"I know that!"

"Well... Then we agree. If you want to bare your scars- physical or emotional- that's your choice-"

"-I don't want to bare my fucking scars! I-"

"-Language!"

"Look! I... I think we might be on different pages here, so let's just leave it... Please?"

Emma mutters, and the Mayor opens her mouth to tell her that they most certainly can not just 'leave it' when the younger woman shows her such insolence, before thinking better of it.

"... All I meant is that you won't get yourself into situations like whatever happened in order to get those marks on your arm here in my town. I wouldn't allow it, and nobody here would treat you in such a way. It is not how I run things."

"That's fine... I just... I don't need to talk about it or have people acknowledge it or whatever, but all of the things that happened to me before coming here- good and bad- make up who I am. Whether I like it or not. I can't just forget everything that's happened just because I live here now. You have a lovely town, Madame Mayor, but it's not magic."

"No... It's not."

Regina nods, before reverting her attention back down to the pages in front of her with a small smile on her lips as they work on in silence.

When it comes around to lunchtime, she sends Emma off to find them some food once again but makes no move to send the blonde back around to her side of the table once she returns.

Instead, she speaks to her quietly as she picks apart a large salad nicoise; the younger woman listening politely as she sips at a cup of coffee.

There is a slight sense of tension in the air between them which neither woman acknowledges, but the brunette muses silently that she has yet to figure out the multitude of land mines that exist within the subjects broached when speaking to the blonde.

She imagines she has touched lightly upon one with her thoughts as to the bruises speckling slim arms.

As if on cue, she catches the faint sound of footsteps above them as Johanna paces around Henry's nursery; presumably trying to rock in young boy back to sleep.

The young boy who will be ten weeks old on Sunday.

Whether a wound or a relief... I imagine its taste must still be fresh beneath that carefully applied mask of 'I'm fine'...

Pushing away her plate after carefully placing her cutlery in the middle, she regards the blonde thoughtfully; Emma blushing delicately when she notices she has an audience and sipping at her cup awkwardly.

"You did a fine job with that proposal, Miss Swan."
Regina offers lightly, and the younger woman shrugs bashfully before sighing

"Can't you just call me Emma?"

"... I thought you appreciated the title?"

"I did for a bit... But it's a bit weird."

"Well, you yourself are a 'bit weird', my dear... But that has little to do with me appropriating a formal term of address. That is simply a form of courtesy. I refer to most of the young women in town in the same manner."

"I know... But..."

"You believe you are special?"

"Nope... But, I always thought formalities were for people you had to do some sort of social dance with. Not something you used for your friends."

"I see... You believe the two of us to be friends?"

"I... I dunno... I mean... I kind of thought we... I dunno."

The blonde blushes as she suddenly seems inexplicably enthralled by the dregs of her coffee cup.

Regina smirks; relishing the scarlet flush that colours high cheekbones.

"...Do you like me, Emma?"

"... W-what?"

The younger woman stammers as she looks up; startled.

The brunette frowns, a little confused by her companion's skittish behaviour, but she puts it down to Emma being, well, Emma- a little bit weird- and smiles kittenishly.

"Well?"

"I... Uh... Yes? I mean... Is that not... Is that not alright?"

"Oh, I believe I might be able to suffer through your affection, dear, though I warn you; you might find yourself in a rather solitary sector with that opinion."

She sniffs, and Emma raises an eyebrow before continuing with extreme delicacy

"... Why do you say that?"

"Excuse me?"

"Regina... How come you seem to have this, like... I dunno... Wall... With the other people in town?"

"... A little rich coming from yourself."

"Oh, I know I suck at being friendly, but you don't... But, it's still like-"

"-It is what it is."
The brunette cuts her off curtly, before casting her eyes to the ceiling as she catches low murmuring from upstairs and turning back to Emma.

"You may as well go if you like. The day's chores get completed so much sooner when undertaken by two of us. I can finish off the last bits and pieces."

"...Are you sure?"

The blonde asks; sensing that she is being asked to leave rather than simply dismissed.

"I'm sure."

"Well... Okay... Thanks."

"Thank you."

Regina smiles, watching as the younger woman pulls her chair back around to its rightful place and fusses a loose curl behind her ear distractedly.

"You did a good job, dear... And you scrub up surprisingly well."

"Oh... Thanks."

Emma blushes, and the brunette nods pointedly towards the door. Watching the young blonde hurry away, she adopts a small frown; having sensed something a little peculiar about Emma's mannerisms this afternoon that she can't quite pin down.

She sighs; pushing such concerns out of her mind.

She has a little less success pushing away the memory of the swift flash of ice that had greeted any discussion of the younger woman's past, and she wonders briefly if she should have called her on it, rather than sending her off with such brittleness fresh in mind.

"She's a big girl; she can deal with such things as she sees fit."

She murmurs to herself, before pushing herself from her chair and carrying her plate into the kitchen.

Making her way lightly up the stairs, she lets herself into the bright little nursery at the end of the hallway with a smile.

"Hi, Henry..."

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!"

The blonde yells as she stalks towards the door of her borrowed room; effectively backing the young waitress out into the hallway and clear of her personal space.

"What the hell is wrong with you!? Get out of my face!"

"Then fuck off!"

Emma shouts, and the brunette shoots a glance towards Billy with wide eyes as she hurries a couple of steps down the hall and out of the younger woman's range. The unsuspecting mechanic looks just as shocked as Ruby does, and he grimaces as the door slams shut, leaving them stood in stunned silence.
"What was that?!"

The waitress breathes with a disgusted look, before turning around at the sound of Granny making her way up the stairs.

"What in the world are you lot doing?! What's with all the noise?!!"

She demands angrily; having had to excuse herself from serving Gold in order to investigate the godawful racket coming from upstairs.

"I... I don't know..."

Ruby offers, and Granny opens her mouth to shoot down this rather inadequate answer, before noting the pallor to her granddaughter's cheeks and Billy's frown of concern.

"Was that Emma yelling just now?"

She asks as she makes her way towards the blonde's bedroom door.

"Yeah... I... I don't think she wants visitors, though..."

The brunette stammers; any initial rage she had might have felt towards the younger woman slowly dissipating into numb confusion.

"Well, that may be, but I'm not having her mouthing off in earshot of paying clients!"

Granny growls before Ruby places a hand on her arm and shakes her head as she appeals quietly

"Please don't."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Well, she's probably upset, and-"

"-She's old enough to know better-"

"Granny!... Just... Maybe talk to her about it later?"

"... Fine... But if she can't behave herself, she'll need to find somewhere else to stay. I didn't sign up for this, and, whether she's the Mayor's girl or not, I'm not putting up with any funny business."

Granny mutters, but she retracts her hand from the door and turns back for the stairs with Ruby and Billy following in her wake.

On the other side of painted wood, Emma grits her teeth as she listens to the muffled conversation taking place in the hallway as a consequence of her actions. Slamming her fists hard into the soft flesh of her thighs, she bites down to elicit a sharp pain in her jaw and closes her eyes. Walking over to the bed, she tosses the pillows the other two had been using onto the floor before perching on the edge of the mattress with her palms pressed against watering eyes.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

Punching down into the forgivingly soft mattress, she pushes herself back up and stalks over to the mirror that stands in the corner of the room; paying no attention to Cass as the tabby slinks in through the window with a wary glance as her mistress becomes unravelled.
She strips herself of the expensive clothes bought for her by the Mayor with a sense of desperation; almost ruining the fabric in her haste to rip it from her body, before standing in her underwear with her breath coming in short, exhausted pants, as she studies herself shrewdly.

Lashes wet and teeth bared.

She remains that way for quite some time; long past the point where she should be getting herself ready to go downstairs and help lay the tables.

Only moving when darkness sets in, and the light thud of footsteps crescendos slowly from down the hall.
"Emma, can I come in?"

Granny calls through the door, but she allows the blonde no time to respond and simply lets herself into the room; frowning at the peculiar scene that greets her. Emma makes a small noise of surprise as she blinks against the light that filters in from the hallway; having been stood in the dark as the sun is now nothing but a red tinge staining the militant line of trees in the distance.

"...What on earth are you doing?"

The old woman growls with a fair note of concern; having expected an irritable- perhaps adolescent- response to the blonde's eventual telling off for her earlier behaviour, but nothing like this.

Not the girl stood all but naked and holding herself as though she were some sort of caged animal expecting a beating.

Pursing her lips, Granny takes control of the situation; closing the bedroom door before flicking on the lights and stalking over to the window to draw the curtains with a brief hiss at Caskett as the cat streaks through the open window with a frightened yowl.

"Miss Swan..."

She muses quietly as the blonde grimaces against the brightness of the light, and she spots the small heap of clothes on the floor, but doesn't proceed to hand them back to the young woman as she presumes there must be a reason Emma no longer wears the expensive material. Instead, she pulls off the light, flowing shirt she wears over her summer dress, and settles it over skinny shoulders, pulling it briskly into place when she is met with little response; the girl casting her eyes down to the floor and clenching her jaw.

"What in god's name happened, child?"

Granny asks as she ushers the blonde over to the chair by the window and waits for her to take a seat. Once Emma complies- keeping her attention carefully lowered to the worn rug on the floor- the grey-haired woman takes up her own seat on the bed; frowning thoughtfully at the girl's remarkably skinny frame.

"Oh, sweetheart, you really do need to put on some weight, you're-"

"-Why won't people just quit fucking saying that?!!"

Emma growls, and the older woman opens her mouth scold the blonde for her use of language, but decides to overlook that disgusting word just this once.

"Because, dear, we see-"

"-I don't want to put on weight."

The younger woman hisses angrily, and Granny raises a brow as the blonde crosses her arms over her ribs and digs her fingers cruelly into the taut flesh of her stomach.

"... I see."

She nods, although she imagines she doesn't actually 'see' at all. She has had similar conversations
with Ruby- and she suspects that it might be something to do with her age whereby she is of the strong belief that most of the younger girls in town could do with adopting a more wholesome figure- when the young brunette makes her almost monthly declaration that she plans to go on a diet. With Ruby, such fanciful adamancy might last for a day or two- eating ridiculous concoctions of celery, greek yoghurt and who knows what else- before all normality is restored and she finds herself in frequent trouble for pilfering from the pantry. It seems simply to be something that young girls say these days...

But she doesn't think things are quite so straightforward when it comes to the young woman the Mayor brought to town.

Not at all.

"Don't do that, girl, you'll hurt yourself."

She warns quietly as she watches the blonde pinch at the flesh of her stomach beneath the shield of her arms.

Emma does as she's told, sniffing, and lowering her hands down into her lap; angry, red marks littering pale skin and the older woman sighs.

"What happened with you and Ruby? I need you to tell me, as I hope you're grown up enough to appreciate that I can't allow the kind of language and behaviour exhibited earlier... And, I imagine you are grown up enough, my dear; I imagine you might have quite a lead on Ruby when it comes to such things... But I still need an explanation, Emma, or I'm going to have to have words with the Mayor."

"Please don't..."

"I don't want to... But you need to give me a reason not to, little one."

"I... I don't know."

Emma growls angrily; fully aware that this isn't a sufficient answer, and yet having no clue what else she can offer on the subject. To be honest, she doesn't really know what happened herself... Things had just all... Gotten out of hand...

"Well, I think you should come along, it will be cool."

Billy offers as he sits on the blonde's bed beside the waitress and smiles up at the young newcomer who perches in the chair by the window.

"What kind of event is it, though? I didn't know you guys even had Miners, let alone a Day for them."

"Oh, it's more just a fair, and some stalls and stuff. It's nothing much, but it can be a laugh. Storybrooke's kind of lame when it comes to things to do, but, it's okay I guess."

"I really like it, it's... I dunno... Quaint."

"Exactly! That's the problem!"

Ruby interjects with a theatrical sigh.

"Well, why don't you guys go down to Bangor or something? It's not that far, and there's loads to do in the city."
"I don't know... I guess we just... Never get round to it."

The brunette frowns, and Billy nods in agreement.

"Anyway, Granny probably wouldn't let me... She never lets me do anything!"

Ruby grumbles, and the blonde smiles as she pulls her legs up in front of her with a yawn.

"She just doesn't want you getting into trouble."

"Well, how am I going to learn any important life lessons if I can't make any mistakes?"

The waitress argues with a small smirk.

"That is an excellent point; I think you should open your argument with that. 'Granny, I want to go and make a shitload of mistakes to better myself as a human being'... It's a flawless proposal!"

Emma grins, and Billy chuckles appreciatively as he tells the brunette he wishes to be present when this conversation takes place.

Rolling her eyes, Ruby sticks her tongue out at the younger woman before enquiring curiously

"You must have made some though if you were allowed to live on your own?"

"Gee, thanks..."

"Come on; what's the worst thing you ever did?"

"I... I don't know..."

The blonde shrugs uncomfortably, and Ruby groans theatrically before taking up centre stage with her own stories on the subject with the occasional flirtatious giggle directed at the smiling young man beside her, causing the younger woman to smirk in amusement.

... And it had all been fine...

Until the conversation had taken a turn back to what Storybrooke might have to offer in the long term.

"Anyway, it's boring as hell, but I guess people are nice and stuff. It's a nice place to live and, like, raise a family."

"Woah, there!"

Billy chuckles at the brunette as she gets rather alarmingly ahead of herself. Pushing him gently with a salacious smile, Ruby turns to the blonde and asks for her opinion on the matter.

"You know what I mean! Or, at least you do, right, Emma? I mean, there's a nice school, and a nice park and everyone looks out for everyone else. It's nice!"

"... I guess."

"Exactly! I dunno; I can't wait to have kids, and have them all running around downstairs driving Granny nuts."

She smirks at the notion, before addressing the younger woman amiably.
“What about you? How many do you want?”

“... I've never thought about it.”

“Oh, come on, of course, you have!”

“No.”

“Well think about it now then!”

The brunette giggles; mistaking the dark look Emma throws her for embarrassment at being questioned in front of Billy and enjoying the ease with which the blonde can be wound up.

“No. This conversation is boring... Let's talk about something else...”

Emma growls, and the waitress frowns; not appreciating being spoken to in such a way, nor the bossy dismissal in the younger woman's tone.

“No, we're talking about this. Don't be a bitch about it.”

She snaps irritably; not used to losing her position as top dog in social settings, particularly to a girl both younger than herself and who comes from out of town and should just be damn glad she’s being included...

After all... I've gone out of my way to be nothing but super nice to her...

Turning to Billy with a roll of her eyes, she relays the same question pointedly to the young man, who opens his mouth to answer but adopts a wary silence when the blonde pushes herself from her chair and barks angrily

“I thought I told you to shut up about that! It's a stupid conversation, and none of us are having kids, so why the fuck do we need to talk about it!?”

“Calm the hell down! Geez! What is your problem!?”

Ruby cries with a scowl, although she feels a small sense of disquiet as the younger woman’s stance is just a little threatening, and, rather than the bitchiness she’d called Emma out on, she catches a dark breed of fury in pretty, green eyes that confuses her.

Still, she is only young herself, and her eventual response is to refuse the blonde the satisfaction of showing her up in front of Billy.

“My problem is that you aren't fucking listening! I don't want to talk about it! It's that simple!”

“Well, sorry, princess, but it isn't all about you! Chill out! You're acting like a total psychopath! I mean, shit! It was just a fun question! You don't have to freak out about it!”

“It wasn't fun! I just told you it wasn't fun! I told you to shut up!”

“And what gives you the right to do that?! God, I thought you were alright, but you're fucking nuts! I mean, what the hell!? People with proper, mental issues act the way you’re acting! Do you realise how crazy you sound? You're acting like you lost a damn kid or something.”

”-Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!”

“We... We had an argument.”
Emma mutters down at her knees as Granny waits impatiently for an explanation.

"Well, that much was obvious!"

The grey-haired woman sighs, before adopting a kinder tone.

"I know Ruby can be a little much sometimes. You two girls seemed to really hit it off, but she is about as extroverted as you seem introverted. Sometimes you just need to take her with a pinch of salt, dear, and hold your breath and count to five."

"I... I should have..."

The blonde sniffs, and Granny nods as she pulls the pillows that litter the floor back onto the bed.

"Yes, you should have... But she shouldn't have pushed you."

"She didn't push me."

"With her words, Miss Swan. She should have left well enough alone if things were getting out of hand... She means well-"

"I know that, and I didn't mean to-"

"-hush, let me finish. She means well, but I don't see any excuse for what happened... Whatever it was that happened. In all of my years, I haven't walked into the aftermath of a childish falling out to find one of the culprits stood fretting in their underwear in the godforsaken dark!... I won't ask you again, girl, as to why you might be in the state you're in- you're proud, and that's an admirable quality for someone your age- but I will ask you to at least show me some sort of sign that you understand that- stranger or not- you can come and talk to me if you need to."

"... I understand."

"But you're not going to."

"... I can't."

"Well... I hope you change your mind, Emma. If not to me, then to someone else here in town. We may do things a little slower than they like back in Boston, but most people here are a decent sort. We look after our own... And, as long as you're living under this roof, that includes you, too."

"... I can stay?"

"Yes, dear, you can stay."

Granny sighs with an exasperated rolling of her eyes; never having truly meant it when threatening to send the younger woman off on her way.

"... I'm sorry I didn't help out tonight, Ms Lucas."

"Granny to you, dear, as I said when we met... And you are forgiven, but I do expect you to come down tomorrow morning, regardless of your situation with Ruby."

"I will."

"Good... Now, get yourself dressed; I believe these might be the last few days of this hellishly hot summer, but it's still not quite warm enough to be sitting around in your underwear. The Mayor
bought you some clothes, didn't she?"
"Yeah."
"They looked very nice on you. Are you going to have a problem with wearing them?"
"No, it's fine. I like them."
"Good, then show it by covering yourself up; I'm getting cold just looking at you."
"I will."
"Are you going to come down for some dinner?"
"... I don't... I don't know."
"Well... I'll do a round of the tables and check everything's in order, and then I'll bring you up something."
"... Thank you."
"You're welcome. It's never easy settling in, dear. I only hope you and Ruby patch things up. I know she likes having you around for company."
"I like helping out with her, too."
"Then I hope you two can put this silliness behind you, but you are both adults- just- and I will keep my nose out of such business providing you keep it at a tolerable volume."
"Promise."
"Good... Now get up and come here. No, don't give me that look. You might not want a hug, but you're getting one, and I have no more patience to argue."

Granny growls, and the blonde sniffs and offers a weak smile as the grey-haired woman embraces her tightly and pats a soothing hand on her arm. She stands stiffly- not really sure what to do or how much of herself to give- before closing her eyes and offering the older woman a tentative squeeze in return.
"There, see now, that wasn't so bad, was it?"
"No."

Emma grins, and Granny gives her a stern look over the top of her glasses and a business-like nod.
"No, indeed. Now cheer up. What was it you were reading earlier?"
"Paradise Lost."
"That sounds rather gloomy."
"It's not. Well, not really."
"Well, I'll take your word for it. Is it good?"
"Yeah, I've read it twice now."
"That must ruin the ending."

"But not the story."

"No, I suppose not. Well, get dressed and read some more and I'll be up later with whatever leftovers there are on offer."

"Thanks, Granny... I might go for a walk, actually."

"Well, then definitely get dressed."

The older woman orders as she turns for the door; smiling as she catches a watery chuckle from behind her.

"I will."

"Oh, it's those big, blue eyes that get you, isn't it?"

Johanna coos as she puts away Henry's clothes with a smile at the Mayor who sits in the chair by the window with the baby in her arms.

"It's everything."

Regina replies as she beams down at the boy.

"I wonder if they'll stay that colour, or darken in the next few weeks."

"Darken?"

"Oh, yes, they do that, Madame Mayor. Babies almost all have them big, blue eyes at first, but then they darken if they're going to be like your own are. The little one has the colouring for fair features, but his hair is already going dark, so I suppose we will see in time."

"Hmmm... I don't think they'll change all that much."

Regina muses thoughtfully, and the older woman shrugs and leans against the crib.

"Depends on the parents, I suppose... The birth parents, I mean, Madame Mayor."

She explains swiftly, and the brunette nods without looking up.

"I gathered that... I just... Have a feeling Henry's will stay lighter like this."

"Well, then he's sure to be quite the little heart breaker."

Johanna smiles, and the Mayor nods once more as Henry closes a small fist around her finger.

"Yes... I imagine he will."

And she almost gets so far as dismissing the older woman for the night- content to sit with the boy a while longer before he doses off- when Johanna offers a rather unwanted opinion.

"You know, Regina- not that I don't enjoy my time with him- but if you were wanting to find jobs for your girl, she might be able to lend a hand at babysitting. She's the right sort of age, and-"

"-No."
"Oh, well I just-"

"-Johanna, I wish to make something very clear. Miss Swan is not to come up here, and she is not to have anything to do with the boy... Do you understand me?"

"Yes, of course! I apologise, I merely meant-"

"-It's fine, Johanna... But my rule is quite clear."

"Yes. Of course, Madame Mayor... On reflection, I would imagine she is perhaps not the best choice for the job anyway, what with that temper. Lord!"

"Temper?"

"Oh, yes! When I went to collect the quarts of juice from the Diner earlier, it sounded as though all hell was breaking loose! Widow Lucas ended up having to excuse herself midway through an order to go and see what on earth was going on! Then her girl and that boy from the garage came trotting down with their tails between their legs and got quickly to business. I can quite understand young Ruby's shock; I've never heard such a commotion!"

"... Is that so?"

"Quite so... I imagine there are two sides to whatever story there might be, but it is always such a shame to hear such foul language leave such young lips. I expect things are a little different in the city, but that waif of a girl you brought here has a surprising bite to her, that's for sure."

"... She does."

"Not that I meant anything as far as your judgement or anything, Regina, I-"

"No, no, that's quite alright... In fact... That's all rather interesting."

"It is?"

Johanna asks uncertainly, and the brunette nods, before offering an airy form of dismissal.

"I would say so, yes. I will ask her about it tomorrow... But for now, I can put Henry down for the night. Please take one of those quarts home with you, Johanna, to enjoy tomorrow morning."

"Thank you."

"Not at all... Goodnight, dear."

She murmurs, studying Henry thoughtfully as the door closes gently when Johanna takes her leave.

You stoked the fire, and people are getting burned...

"... I believe we might have yet to see just how much 'bite' young Emma possesses, don't you? She confides in the young boy warily.

You best be careful, dear... Your taking a liking to the girl is sure to be dangerous...

Looking up, she casts her dark gaze to the pale face of the clock tower; the iron hands standing still once more.
It's not enough.

Perhaps not...

She supposes she will see with time, just as she will see what colour her son's eyes turn out to be.

She supposes that they will all see with time.

"It would be a shame if I had to get rid of her, Henry... I'm beginning to believe it really would... I will do so should the necessity arise... But... I don't imagine I will enjoy it. Whether with a blade or my hands or a bullet... I don't think I would sleep soundly that evening... Nor the next."

She muses with a frown, and the boy bares his naked gums as he begins to cry.
With the silver glow of moonlight streaming in through the open window, the Mayor stands on the ledge and looks out over her town; the clock tower directly in front of her, with its looming face casting her own with an eerie light.

The hands spin maddeningly.

The wind blows her hair back and sends ripples through her clothes.

A feather-trimmed corset and a sleek velvet cloak the colour of midnight.

The colour of darkness.

She turns to find herself faced with a dilapidated apartment; cracks in the wall and large patches of mould.

The place literally rots before her eyes.

Casting her attention down to an old mattress pushed up against one of the peeling walls, she studies the young woman that lies upon it with her eyes closed and her features bathed in starlight.

Long, blonde hair tumbles over a pillow patched with mildew, but the girl's clothes are crisp, clean, and new.

Dark slacks and a pretty white shirt that displays pale arms dappled with reality.

A low cough from the corner and she becomes slowly aware that she is being watched.

A man without a face sits in the armchair beneath a jagged crack in the paint, above which a discoloured photograph hangs at an angle, and she is sure she recognises the tired, drawn faces trapped behind the frame.

Sure she recognises raven-black locks and the strong arm holding the sword.

But that doesn't matter right now.

Looking back down at the man in the chair, she hisses at him that he needs to leave.

Needs to remove himself from this scene.

Needs to put some goddamn pants on, and he is in some ways familiar- a resident of a liquid point in time called Boston- but he is also shadowed, and it is not his face she fears, but his DNA.

Through the walls, a baby starts screaming, and it is a terrible sound, and she just wants the shit-
eating brat to roll, roll, roll over onto his pillow because this painful, hateful reminder happens every fucking night, and she doesn't think these thoughts are strictly her own...

"Get out!"

Louder now, and the man vanishes as sooty eyelashes flutter, but she spares little care for the fact that she has set the blonde on the path to waking as she won't ever get so far as to make use of the fact.

And oh hell, oh geez, won't that fucking kid shut the hell up?!

Green eyes shoot open, and that wasn't part of the plan. She doesn't want the girl to see her.

Doesn't want her to know.

But it's too late for that, and the crying is making it hard to concentrate.

Slipping down from the windowsill, she takes a couple of steps towards the woman on the bed, before looking down at her hand to find a knife held loosely in her palm.

Understanding flashes across the blonde's face, but then it's gone; replaced by a slow smile, both sunny and somehow terribly puzzling.

And oh, god, she's so young.

Pale fingers find their way up to the small buttons that line crisp cotton, and suddenly she is able to see a little deeper into the girl's curious smile.

One by one, each clasp comes undone, until the fabric parts to reveal ivory flesh; so dangerously close to revealing what should be kept hidden.

On a knife's-edge.

She considers asking the girl what she's doing, but she supposes she already knows, and she finds such things don't matter here in this crumbling room, anyway.

Instead, she simply smiles in return, lowering herself down once the toes of her shoes meet the mattress.

"Do you like me, Emma?"

A voice that sounds like it comes from far away, and the younger woman lowers her eyes coyly but keeps that telling smile in place, and that's all just fine, and just the way she'd planned it.

Wait... Is it?

Oh, if the baby would quieten down, she is sure she would know, but for now, she lowers herself further until she looms over pale features like a nightmare moon.

The blade in her hand catches the light and it glistens.

"So, you're going to do it, then?"

The younger woman asks, and she finds herself nodding; at a loss for words as white cotton falls open.
"I thought you might."

"Why won't that thing be quiet?"

"It's never quiet. You think it will be- that you might learn to live with that noise- but you never stop hearing that sound. Not here."

"Then perhaps sleeping would come as a relief?"

"Sleep? You didn't come here to put me to sleep. I've been asleep all along. Sometimes here, sometimes elsewhere, but it's so hard to stay awake."

"Is it?"

She asks curiously, and she understands that the girl speaks in her own secret language that only sounds like English, but she likes the soft whisper of pink velvet lashing against sharp white teeth, and there is time enough for questions yet.

"It's much nicer to sleep."

The blonde muses, more to herself than to her guest, but her audience is perceptive and nods along as though this soliloquy has been voiced for her alone.

"Nicer that the waking view, yes, dear..."

"Nicer than listening to that sound. That terrible, awful sound."

"Why not leave this place?"

"I can't."

"No? But you have..."

And a frown crosses fine features as she is somehow sure that she speaks the truth.

"It follows you. That noise. I did a bad thing. A very bad thing. And now I'm stuck with it."

The girl sighs, before yawning widely and closing her eyes.

"You might as well get on with it. It's not going to get any easier."

And there is a terrible sense of knowledge in her voice that is made so much worse by the apathy in which it's cloaked.

"... Will it hurt you?"

She breathes, and she finds herself torn, as she hadn't realised that she had such a question in her.

"Of course it will. It's a knife."

Comes the eventual, bored reply- the younger woman speaking as though she finds herself in the company of a fool- and She frowns, as this does not correlate with her wishes at all.

"But things are different here... That man vanished... Who's to say what will happen when I use the blade?"

"Are you going to find out? Or just keep on talking at me?"
“Well, I-”

“-Shh. If you don’t get on with it, he’ll hear you.”

“Who will?”

“You know who.”

“...But that’s not possible...”

“Anything is possible... I gave you a present, all unwrapped and new. Did you like it?”

“Henry can’t hear me... Not here.”

“I hope you liked it. I liked it. But I couldn’t have it.”

“Yes, you could. If you had really wanted it.”

“...I did a bad thing.”

“Yes.”

She nods, before glancing up as the shrill shrieking that haunts the walls intensifies as she raises the blade in her hand.

“He knows.”

The blonde informs her sleepily, and she shakes her head as she knows this to be a lie. Surely.

“He doesn’t.”

“He will.”

“...How?”

“You did a good thing. You gave me a present, too. But now you’re taking it away... He’ll know.”

“No... He’s not here. He won’t. You’re lying to me.”

“Am I?”

“Shut up.”

“Fine... Well, go on then. Do it. You might as well.”

And she supposes that the girl is right; after all, she's in position, and she has no wish to stay here any longer.

No wish to listen to that awful sound...

She readies the knife and the wailing intensifies, painting the very air with its horror.

“Oh, god! Make it stop!”

She shouts, but her voice gets lost in the echoes of the infant's bawling.
Unable to take it any longer- her teeth bared and her heart hammering painfully in her chest- she brings the knife down in a series of quick, short stabbing motions with little concern for aim; instead, just wishing to put an end to the madness before it swallows her whole.

She blinks as something warm and terrible splashes across her face; her hands wet with it down below.

Looks down upon cruel, scarlet gashes painting ivory flesh; holding within them none of the beauty she’d been expecting.

Only pain.

And the blonde screams- at least, she tries to- but bubbling crimson falls from her lips as she flails fitfully on the bed; eyes wide and throat slashed, as a muted noise of accusation weaves through gagging nonsense.

But that terrible wailing doesn’t stop- harrowing shrieks setting her very skin alight- and she realises with dazed confusion that it is no longer the baby screaming into the night, but herself.

"Ah!"

Dark coals fly open as the Mayor takes in a shuddering gasp; her throat dry and voice hoarse, and, if the bawling from down the hall is anything to go by, she imagines she must have yelled out in her sleep.

She pushes herself up and sits surveying her shadowed surroundings as she tries to catch her breath; her negligé sticking to her uncomfortably as cold sweat trickles down her spine.

"Why?"

She whispers; her voice childlike with disquiet.

Why would her mind go and conjure something so obscene?

Why would it show her such a thing?

"It means nothing... If I have to do it... It won't... It won't be like that. I won't let it be like that."

She murmurs as she tries to reassure herself; slipping from her bed and padding over to the door to go and see to Henry.

He'll know.

"Impossible."

No one will.

No. If she has to do it, it will be a secret she shares only with the blonde herself.

The boy will be none the wiser.

And... After all... Why should he care?

"She didn't care..."

Regina mutters as she lets herself into the small nursery and reaches down into the crib.
"She didn't care at all, Henry..."

She sniffs, but somehow she knows that this isn't true.

Even her subconscious had known it.

"Well... That changes nothing..."

She murmurs.

But it does.

It changes how she views the situation.

It adds to the confusion she has suffered ever since actually meeting the blonde.

And the taste it leaves in her mouth is a bitter one.

---

"Muffin?"

Emma asks as she saunters up to the table with a smile.

A tired smile, and the brunette imagines her own is much the same.

"Just some coffee, dear. I have apple pastries waiting at home, thanks to Johanna."

"Oh, cool."

"You'll have to tell her what you think of them, as I imagine you might think rather badly of me if I didn't let you try one."

"You'd imagine right."

The blonde grins, before lowering her eyes as Ruby comes trotting outside with Archie's pancakes.

"... I hear there was a bit of a commotion here last night?"

"Granny told you?"

Emma enquires, and there is a note of steel in her tone that speaks of one just waiting to be sold out and fucked over.

"She did not. From what I hear, you two were screaming at one another so loudly that half the town was unwillingly subjected to the fact."

"... It wasn't that loud... But I talked to Granny. I told her I was sorry."

"Hmm... And what about my apology? After all, you're here under my good name, Miss Swan, and yet you show no qualms with sullying it."

"I... I really don't think-"

The younger woman starts with an irritable growl, before snapping her words back between her teeth and taking a slow breath in through her nose.

"-I'm sorry."
"Noted. What happened?"

"It was just an argument."

Emma mumbles as the waitress walks past her with a wary glance.

"What about?"

"I... I dunno... Just stuff."

"Well... You must have felt rather strongly about this 'stuff'... Meek and mild you are not, but I imagine you would be just about as inclined to cause a scene within earshot of strangers as you might be to spend the rest of your shift buck-naked."

The blonde blushes at this and the Mayor frowns as she is reminded of the curiously sensual twist her dream had taken.

Why not leave this place?

I can't...

...It follows you...

She shakes her head before the less palatable visions that had visited her during the night can replay themselves; dark eyes flickering to the slender column of the younger woman's throat before dropping pensively to the soft swell of her chest.

"What did you argue about, Emma?"

"... I dunno."

The blonde shrugs, and the brunette sighs as she can almost see the wall the former raises at the intrusion.

"Well, you must have a rather poor memory in that case."

She sniffs dismissively; sensing she will get no more information out of Emma, and baring no wish to antagonise the situation further.

Not before she finds out a little more about what happened.

"Well, go on then, I believe it has been a good three minutes since I made my order known... You will have the pleasure of my company later if you're finding yourself wishing to bask in it. In the meantime, I'd like to prepare myself for such things with a good dose of caffeine."

Sharp teeth form a snarl in response, but the blonde catches the small smirk that flirts at the sides of scarlet lips and ends up simply rolling her eyes as she heads back up the steps to fetch the brunette her coffee.

Watching her go and waiting for the door to slam shut, Regina runs a finger over a small groove in the table as she waits for Archie's request of maple syrup to be met.

Signalling Ruby over once she's had a chance to wipe down the empty table behind the psychiatrist's, she meets the younger woman's wary gaze with a cool stare.

"Miss Lucas, I would like a word."
"Oh... Uh... Okay... I'm kind of in the middle of-

"I can see that you're busy, dear... When does your shift end?"

"I get off in about half an hour."

"Good... Go and tell Miss Swan I wish to have my coffee to go. Then you will walk with me."

"Um, okay... Why?"

"For the same reason as you pulled that face when asked to go and relay a piece of very simple information to a fellow member of staff. You had a falling out with the girl as I understand it?"

"... Something like that."

"I have a couple of questions."

"But I thought you were Emma's... Why not just ask her?"

"You thought I was Emma's what?"

"I dunno... I just figured if you were seeing her anyway later, then-"

"-Are you so busy that you can't do what I have requested of you?"

"No. It's not that, it's just... Emma's already mad at me. I don't want to make it any worse."

"Why not?"

"Well... Because she's my friend."

Ruby frowns in confusion, and the Mayor raises an eyebrow curiously.

"Yes?"

"I thought so, anyway... But I guess I don't really know..."

"From what I heard, she had quite a go at you."

"Well... Yeah... She did."

"Did you deserve it, Miss Lucas?"

"I... I don't know. I don't really know what happened!"

"Well, then surely such things would be better figured out."

"But I-"

"-Ten thirty, Miss Lucas."

"... Okay."

The waitress mumbles uncomfortably, and Regina conspires softly as the waitress turns to take her leave

"I won't tell her if you don't."
Chapter 27

Offering a small shrug at Granny as the old woman studies her shrewdly over the top of her glasses, Ruby heads up to the bar and addresses the blonde quietly.

"Can you go and check the bottles in the back? I'm not sure if we have any more apple juice."

"I'm pretty sure we do... I saw some earlier."

Emma mumbles awkwardly, but when the brunette sighs at this response she simply drops her order-pad on the counter and walks off to do as she is told. Throwing Granny a meaningful look, Ruby places her own pad on top of the blonde's and hurries off to do as she is told. Leaving the old woman manning the fort with a theatrical rolling of her eyes that belies the relief she feels.

Clearing her throat as she walks up behind the blonde- the younger woman bent over to assess the contents of the drinks fridge beneath a series of toasters- the brunette licks her lips nervously before advising

"We have plenty of juice, actually. There was a delivery yesterday evening."

"Oh. Then..."

"I just figured we should probably talk..."

"Umm... Yeah... Okay..."

"Okay? You'll hear me out?"

"Don't really need to. You didn't do anything... Not really... I just... I dunno..."

"Went a little insane..."

"Something like that."

Emma nods with her eyes lowered to the linoleum tiles, and Ruby sighs with a small smile.

"Well, yeah, but I told you before that I kind of like your nutty side... Perhaps not when you're screaming in my face... But..."

"I wouldn't have... But-"

"-But you made it quite clear you didn't want to have the conversation we were having, and I got annoyed with you for putting your two cents in... I shouldn't have... I'm just... I'm not used to people telling me I'm boring... They call me lots of other things! But... Not boring... And we were with Billy, and, I dunno..."

"I don't think you're boring at all... I just suck at approaching things in the right way. Always have done."

"No shit! I thought you were actually gonna take a swing at me!"

The brunette laughs, before sighing when this is met with a small shrug that suggests she might not be too far off.
"...I'm sorry I got you all upset, though. It wasn't fair. I don't know enough about you to start getting at you and telling you what you should and shouldn't be comfortable with."

"Well... I could have done a better job of asking you to shut up... Possibly by not telling you to 'shut up'..."

Emma grins sheepishly, and the waitress nods, before dishing up a sunny smile.

"Someone has to, and why should Granny have all the fun?... Friends?"

"I guess so..."

The younger woman grins, and the tentative look she does her best to hide suggests she is more surprised at the offer than holding on to her grudge.

Not about to stand for such a lacklustre response, Ruby takes a step forward and hugs the rather alarmed looking blonde tightly; smacking her lips smartly against a pale cheek and giggling at the small squeak of 'um' this garners her.

Untangling herself from the waitress, Emma gives her a bemused smile that doesn't quite disguise her glee.

"Hey, man, come on, I demand a drink at least before you go groping for second base!"

"I let you borrow my underwear, I think we're there!"

"Well... Then, now this is awkward..."

The blonde growls, before raising her a brow when Ruby responds with a resounding 'nah!' and pokes her unceremoniously in the boob.

"What have I told you two about making such a racket?!"

Comes a disgruntled voice from the doorway, as maniacal laughter echoes from the back area.

"Sorry, Granny!"

"Yeah, sorry, Granny..."

"I should think so, too! Ruby, you have a hot chocolate sitting on the counter that has no notes to say who it's for! Emma, weren't you supposed to be seeing to the Mayor's coffee?"

"Oh shit!"

"Indeed! And why are you all red?"

"Am I?"

The blonde mutters as she hurries out after the brunette, who whispers salaciously

"Scarlet, harlot..."

"Oh, shut up..."

"Hey! What did we just talk about?!"

"My being insane... What with hanging out with you and all-"
"-You know, Regina made an alteration to her order, but I'm starting to wonder if I actually feel like telling you what it is-

"-What was it?

"I dunno... My mind's a little foggy, what with the steamy escapades back there in the-

"-Ruby!... Come on! Don't let me mess up with Regina, you know I can't afford to do that."

"Oh, I know... And if you say 'please' and act a little nicer, I'm sure I'll remember."

"Oh, go fuck yourself..."

"Miss Swan!"

An irritable bark, and the blonde freezes in her tracks before turning around slowly with a sensibly apologetic smile.

"Regina... I was just, uh, getting your coffee, and-

"-Well it's about time. I was beginning to think you might have died!"

"Oh... Well... Ruby was just coming to get me to let me know you'd changed your mind about... Something?"

"I see."

The Mayor sighs as she glowers from Emma to the young waitress irritably.

"I'm taking my coffee to go, Miss Swan, and I will not be needing you in my office until lunchtime. Bring something to eat with you for the two of us."

She hands over a couple of crisp, green notes, and the blonde frowns cautiously.

"Uh... Okay... Did I do something-"

"-No. I merely have other appointments that don't concern... that don't require your presence. Go up and get changed and have a look around as the weather remains on our side. You might appreciate my town a little more if seen in the daylight. You are dismissed."

"Well, now, hang on a minute! You can't just tell the girl-"

Granny growls, but the look the brunette throws her way silences any further complaint, and she merely mutters at Ruby to make the Mayor her damned coffee.

"Thank you for understanding, Window Lucas."

The brunette purrs; throwing a glance towards the young waitress before stalking off outside.

"You need to tell Emma how you do this..."

Regina muses as she sips from her cup with Ruby walking warily at her side.

"I've tried... She kind of stopped listening after the second attempt. The machine's a bit of a bi-... A bit tricky, but I'm not so sure Emma's all that cut out for waitressing, anyway."
"It's a skilled job?"

The Mayor enquires snidely, and the younger woman throws her an irritable look before sighing and shaking her head.

"Nah, not so much... I think Emma makes it harder than it is... She doesn't want to talk to people so she treats the job more like a mission than wiping down tables and carrying plates, which is all it really is. I dunno... I think she much prefers working for you, is all."

"What makes you say that?"

"She likes you."

Ruby offers indifferently, although her tone suggests that this is a rather serious fault in judgement on the blonde's behalf.

"... She does?"

"Yeah, I think so. More than anyone else here, anyway... I mean as in she likes you more than she likes anyone else, not that she likes you more than any of us do."

"-Yes, thank you... I understood perfectly well what you meant."

The Mayor snaps irritably, but she finds herself taking note of the waitress's small fact and saving it to think upon later.

"Sorry..."

"Forgiven."

"So, uh... You said you wanted to know about last night?"

"Yes. Though it appears all problems have been resolved during the time I spent waiting for my coffee...?"

"I went to talk to her."

"I had a feeling it might be that way around."

"... I told her I was sorry for upsetting her, and she said she was sorry for getting upset... That's more or less all there was to it."

_Well, apart from a bit of friendly groping, but I think Emma might skin me alive if I bring that up with yourself, Madame Mayor..._

"What did you argue about?"

"Just... I don't know..."

"Miss Swan seemed to be under the impression that you argued about 'stuff'."

"Well, yeah."

"Not good enough, I'm afraid."

"Look, I don't-"
"-Don't tell me to look. I want to listen, not look. I'm not trying to stir the pot between the two of you, Miss Lucas- lord knows, I shudder to think what might become of my food orders should I get involved in any of the resultant mess, what with your combined immature mentality- I simply wish to know what was said that caused the girl to fly off the handle the way she did... I'm sure you can understand why- as her benefactor- I would need to know such things."

"Her benefactor?"

"... Well, I didn't exactly bring her here due to a desperate need for help with my filing... But that is not information to be shared, do you understand me?"

Regina growls, but she supposes it does little harm to let Ruby in on the fact she isn't using Emma as a slave-driven secretary.

It might even help matters, as she doesn't wish to add any further smoke to the fire when it comes to what others in this town have to say about her. She doesn't think Ruby will share such information if asked not to do so- more out of loyalty to the blonde than to herself- but it doesn't hurt to know that she won't be spreading unflattering rumours, either.

"That's why she's so hot on you..."

"Hot on me?"

"Well, like, she's all... She only has good things to say about you... Not that that's not true of all of us, Madame Mayor, but-"

"-Oh, save it."

"... I shouldn't have asked about her past, should I?"

"Is that what you did?"

"Kind of... Was it bad?"

"... I know very little, and would not share such things if I did know more... I know only what I saw, which was less than pleasant. It was no way for a girl her age to be living, so I brought her here. We will see whether or not this was a wise choice. If she continues to behave as she did yesterday then perhaps Boston is a better place for her-"

"-No! Please don't send her away... She's nice..."

"You told me only an hour ago that she had a go at you... So much so that you were unsure whether you might even be friends at all... That doesn't sound very nice, if you don't mind me saying."

"That's... It wasn't... It was mostly my fault..."

Ruby assures her swiftly, and the Mayor smiles to herself before continuing lightly.

"Why? What did you say to her?"

"I don't know! I honestly don't! Like... Okay, so we were talking about Stroybrooke and how it's kind of shi- Umm... Not the best place to go out, and then, I don't know... We were talking about growing up and starting families and stuff. I asked her some dumb question about kids and how many she wanted and all that, and she just... Flipped."

"...She did?"
"Totally!"

"She said she didn't want any?"

"I... I dunno... I think she said she'd never thought about it... But, whatever..."

Ruby frowns as she tries to comprehend what the difference might be.

"Well... That doesn't sound like a terrible argument... I-

"-Nah, it's because I told her to think about it then- as I'd asked her, you know?- and she got all bitch-... Moody, and basically told me that we weren't gonna have that conversation... I got mad because it didn't seem fair that she was suddenly in charge, especially when she'd been sat all quiet in the corner for half the time, but I dunno... I think I should have known not to push it. She was really upset, you know?... Like... Really, really angry... But also sad. I felt bad for most of the night. I think I really hurt her feelings, but I dunno what it was... I mean, she's clearly not got a kid or anything... But..."

"... Clearly."

Regina nods, pursing her lips.

She doesn't really know what to do with the information gleaned from talking to the waitress. Her heart beats a little uneasily with the knowledge that the blonde has discussed anything relating to children at all, but, rather than the venom she has felt these last few weeks at the very idea of Henry's birth mother having any right to such leniency, she finds little victory in knowing the young woman is hurting.

Quite the opposite.

She recalls bony fingers digging into her shoulders as the blonde had screamed in her ear to get up whilst lying fallen at the mercy of the unforgiving headlights of the car...

Recalls musing upon the fading bruise colouring the younger woman's eye; the marks on her arms ambiguous as to their cause, but supposing that there's only really one way one ends up with what must have been a black eye a week or so before her trip to Boston.

_Welcome to a life free of the bars?... Some welcome..._

Recalls the complete lack of emotion the blonde had shown when found slouched on her bed with her elderly neighbour sat in the armchair and- she still believes- biding his time.

"-Though I think Granny was actually really worried."

"Pardon?"

She growls; snapping from her thoughts at the sound of the young waitress's voice.

"... I said I think Granny was really worried."

"About you two falling out?"

"Nah, not really. She thinks that kind of thing is kids' stuff... No, about Emma. She... She went to go and speak to her, and I was feeling bad because I knew she was gonna go up there and tell her off, and Granny's pretty damn scary when she does that... But, I don't think she did! She came back down and suddenly she wasn't in a mood with me anymore... She came down and she said, "good
lord, someone's been at that girl, and they've been at her good"... I asked her what she meant, but she just told me to get back to work...

... Later though, after we closed up, she told me a bit more. And you can't tell Emma I know this, or then everyone will be mad at me! You swear?"

"Never. But, I will give you my word."

"...She said she couldn't attempt to maturely discipline a terrified, naked child."

"Excuse me?"

"She said she went up there, and Emma was, like, in her underwear, in the dark. Like... Really weird... That's a really weird way to react, right? And I think she's got Granny worried, even after telling her it was all okay... Hell, she's got me worried! She told Granny she didn't want to put on weight and was pinching the skin on her stomach and stuff, and Granny asked me about it, and I said I'd never heard her mention anything about anything like that! And I haven't! I mean, she's skinny as all hell, you know? But, I dunno... I think Granny's worried she's got one of those problems with eating and stuff, but I don't think so... I know she'd probably not tell anyone if she did, but... I just don't think she does..."

Ruby finishes uncomfortably; glancing nervously at the Mayor as the older woman has remained silent throughout all of this. Clearing her throat awkwardly, she shrugs when dark coals flash back at her, and the darker woman sighs with a frown.

"No, I don't believe so either... But that is rather obscure behaviour..."

"Right?!... You're not gonna ask her about it though, are you? Because I don't think-"

"-No. I'm not going to ask her about it. Not in so many words."

"Okay, thanks."

The younger woman nods with an obvious sense of relief, before regarding Regina curiously.

"Are you going to try and help her?"

"I'm not sure Miss Swan believes she needs help."

"I know, but she's an idiot."

"Yes."

"So?"

"-Miss Lucas, thank you for your time. I trust I will be shown the same discretion about all of this as you have requested of me?"

"Uh... Yeah, sure."

"Good."

"But what about Emma? You-"

"-Emma had best make sure she's on time and makes a suitable lunch selection. Other than that, I have little interest in the girl. I merely needed to clear up any unresolved issues as it is I who brought
"Hey!"

"Hey..."

Emma offers curiously as the schoolteacher quickens her pace to fall into step at her side.

"I was walking behind you, and I just... I guess I just wanted to say I was sorry for the other day. I'm not sure what happened, but it certainly wasn't my intention to annoy you or anything!"

"Oh... Oh, that's cool... I didn't mean to be rude..."

The blonde shrugs awkwardly, and Mary Margaret flashes her a smile.

"Of course not, but, at the risk of crossing the line once again... You look like you need to talk?"

"Then that must be a problem with my face... I'm fine."

The younger woman growls coldly, and she supposes it might be a long time coming before she breaks this little habit.

Still... She doesn't want a shoulder to cry on, least of all, some dopey school teacher in a pastel-coloured sun-dress.

_Come on, Swan, don't be a dick..._

"Sorry. I meant I'm fine... Really."

"Oh... Well... I'm glad."

The school teacher smiles; taking little offence to her swift rebuttal and adopting a new approach in the same breath

"Well, I could use someone to talk to. It's not a _long_ walk to work, but it's always nice to have some company."

"Oh... I guess that'd be okay... I thought the school was the other way, though?"

"Observant. It is, but I don't have class until eleven as the kids are in gym class."

"Then..."

"I volunteer at the hospital."

Mary Margaret explains with a smile, and the blonde finds herself entirely unsurprised by this fact
but resists the urge to voice this in the sarcastic way she might like to in her head.

"Oh. Cool?"

"It has its plus sides... You know- I mean, if you wanted- you could come and help me out if you're not headed to the Mayor's yet?"

"Oh... Well, I...

But Emma finds herself lacking in any form of excuse, and ends up simply offering up a shrug and accepting the invite; telling herself she might do well to take a leaf out of the raven-haired woman's book and try being a little *nicer* for a change.

"Great!"

"Yeah... Awesome..."
"You're a natural."

Mary Margaret smiles as they make their way down the hall, away from the visitor's lounge of the hospital. Emma makes a face in return to suggest she believes otherwise, and the schoolteacher chuckles.

"No?"

"I just... Well, you'll probably think I'm a terrible person, but I really hate sick people..."

She mutters quietly; expecting a look of disgust and perhaps a light scolding for this admission. Instead, her curious companion laughs; and at an increased volume when she notes the blonde's surprise.

"Oh, I don't think you're a terrible person. Refreshingly honest, maybe, but not a terrible person."

This assurance is met by a small shrug and a confused frown, and the older woman cocks her head thoughtfully to the side as she regards the blonde with intrigue.

"... Do you want me to think you're a terrible person?"

"Why would I want that?"

An irritable reply, but Mary Margaret pays the gravel to the younger woman's tone no mind.

"I would ask you the same question... I have no idea why you'd want me to think that... And yet, I kind of think you do..."

"Bull."

"I'm just vocalising how I'm reading the situation."

"Well don't. Don't do that."

"Do what? Vocalise-"

"-Psychoanalyse me. Don't do that."

"... I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to."

The school teacher sighs uncomfortably, before offering the blonde a well-meaning smile.

"Look, the only reason I said that is because I think the very opposite."

"How do you mean?"
"I think you're a very sweet, young girl."

"... Bull. Again."

Mary Margaret chuckles at this, and feels a wave of relief when Emma joins her after a brief pause.

"Not at all, you didn't have to agree to come along with me at all."

"That was more social awkwardness than niceness, I'm afraid... I don't want you psychoanalysing me, but I'll give you this one for free; I am definitely not a 'nice, young, girl'."

"No?"

"No."

"Well, then. I guess I'll see what I think about that with time... Will you accept that I'm glad you came, even if you're not?"

"Sure... And I never said I wish I hadn't come with you, just that I suck at dealing with sick people. I'm not exactly the most sympathetic person."

"That part I think I figured out for free, also... And don't worry. This next one, you won't even have to pretend."

"How's that?"

Emma asks curiously as they take a right into a small room at the end of the hallway.

"He won't know."

Mary Margaret explains with a small smile as she points to the man that lies motionless beneath crisp, white sheets.

"Oh... What's wrong with him?"

The blonde asks as she takes a couple of steps closer to the bed and watches the schoolteacher change the flowers that stand on a small nightstand in the corner.

"No one really knows. He's been in a coma ever since I can remember. It's not clear what caused it and whether he'll ever wake up. He just... Keeps on sleeping."

The older woman explains, and Emma watches with quiet curiosity as she brushes away a lock of hair from the man's forehead in a caring fashion.

"Have his family asked the hospital to keep him going? I thought they usually just pulled the plug on this kind of thing?"

She muses; poking at the man's arm experimentally.

"What?! No! No... I mean... Maybe in a big, city hospital, but not here. No, I would never let them do that. Dr Whale would never do that... As for family, there are none that I know of, and I've been coming here for... Well, it feels like forever."

"That's kind of sad."

Emma sighs thoughtfully, and Mary Margaret nods in agreement.
"It is. So I make sure I come here as often as I can... No one should be alone."

"I guess not... And it seems like no one is. Not here, anyway."

The blonde replies, and there is something stony in her voice that catches the schoolteacher's attention, but she decides to learn from previous mistakes and negate to mention anything.

Well... Almost.

"Look, I don't mean to intrude, and I didn't mean to say anything to upset you the other day, but... You're what? Sixteen? Seventeen?"

"Eighteen."

"Even so... I just... I have this... this 'feeling' that you're like him..."

She points to the bed, and Emma shrugs, before replying coldly

"Except not brain dead."

"Hey!... I... Ok, what I meant was... Do you... Do you have anyone? Parents?"

The blonde opens her mouth to spit back poison at the hatefully inquisitive woman staring at her, but then she looks to the man in the bed and the fresh daisies in the corner and sighs, replying placidly

"I don't have any. Not that I know about, anyway... But it's fine."

"That's not fine..."

Mary Margaret shakes her head, and the younger woman notes with equal parts amusement and alarm that the raven-headed woman looks as though she might start tearing up right here in a goddamn coma patient's room.

"It's life."

She replies gruffly, before adding thoughtfully.

"And I kind of do have someone, anyway... Regina brought me here. I kind of have her... Sort of."

The schoolteacher raises an eyebrow in surprise- the thought of looking to the Mayor for comfort one she just can't get her head around- but she offers a smile nonetheless.

"That's good then... And, you know, if you wanted, Ruby mentioned you liked drawing... I have a lot of art supplies at home because of my job... I... If you ever wanted to come over for a drink or chat or just to borrow anything, you'd be very welcome."

"Oh... Well... I..."

Emma frowns down at her feet awkwardly, and the older woman laughs softly

"I'm not offering for any other reason than that I would enjoy the company, Emma."

"I guess that might be nice some evening."

The blonde shrugs, and the schoolteacher sighs as she doesn't catch a whole lot of enthusiasm in the younger woman's voice.
Oh well, you can only offer...

True. She just wishes she could shake whatever it is that bothers her so about the younger woman.

No. Not 'bothers' you... That would imply it was a negative thing...

Yes, and that's not right at all. She likes the blonde. Doesn't entirely understand why she might do so, but she does. She likes her a lot, but she also wants to know a lot more about her.

"Well... If you ever decide to do so, it's the big red-brick down the road from Granny's. My name's on the buzzer. Any time at all."

She smiles, and Emma nods, before gathering herself under control and giving herself a firm mental shake.

She is aware she is perhaps being rather rude, but she can't quite help it.

This is the sort of thing that she has read about but has little clue how to address when faced with the reality of such a notion.

A casual invitation.

A hand extended in friendship.

And with nothing asked for in return.

With Regina is had felt different... Electric. She can't think of any other way to describe it than that. This though... This is safe, and, while she can't even begin to comprehend the reasoning behind such a thing, she understands that the two are very different.

What Mary Margaret offers her is warmth.

What Regina has to offer is something more like fire; flickering and dangerous.

But she has a sinking feeling that she will carry on looking to the darker woman until she gets burnt. Perhaps until she is nothing more than a charred husk beyond repair.

...Would that be so much worse than now?

"... Emma?"

The schoolteacher murmurs uncertainly as the blonde stands staring into the distance, and the younger woman jumps with a start and grins at her sheepishly.

"Sorry."

"Woolgathering?"

Mary Margaret grins, and the blonde smiles and offers up the thoughtful reply

"More like fire dancing."

"Oh...?"

"Yeah... But on very hot coals."
"...Okay?"

"Whatever... And you can't psychoanalyse that."

She finishes with a warning glance as she realises she's making very little sense- one of the many negatives of socialising with those other than oneself- but a small smile touches the corner of her lips which Mary Margaret returns.

"Wouldn't dare."

The schoolteacher replies, before nodding towards the clock above the door.

"The two of us had better get a move on, I have a lesson planned that should be quite fun, but I've never done it before so need to prepare, and you have... Well... Regina."

"What's your lesson?"

"Oh, I found this old instruction booklet in Gold's shop that shows how to make a little birdhouse. I made one for my windowsill, and it seemed like a great way to teach the children about birds... And wood-shop."

"Awesome. I always liked wood-shop."

"I always liked birds."

Mary Margaret chuckles.

"And I still have some materials at home if you did want to come and try your hand at it."

"You know what?... Maybe I will."

"I'm sure Granny wouldn't mind something a little more attractive than that old, cracked bird table around the back."

"Maybe not, but Cass has kind of taken a liking to it."

"As her bed?"

"Hmmm... More like her throne. Caskett is terribly regal."

Emma winks, and the schoolteacher shakes her head in amusement.

"I imagine she's quite a little madam."

"You'd imagine right. I have no idea how we make it work, but... We do... Probably because I know my place."

The blonde jokes, and Mary Margaret nods as they leave the hospital and make their way across the sun-drenched tarmac towards Main Street.

"That must be it. Well, let me know when you want to come over and I'll make sure I have something to drink. What kind of stuff do you like? Squash? Kool-aid?"

"Beer... Wine..."

"You can't! You... Okay, you know what? Never mind. That's fine. I like wine too."
She sighs, and Emma smiles gratefully.

"You know...I'm not really such a bad kid... Not really... I just... I feel like I'm a lot older than eighteen is all. Kind of feel like after all the rules that have been broken so far, to adhere to the legal age for drink would be laughable."

"... I don't think you're a bad kid. I don't think that for a second... I only hope you won't mind if I happen to ask you a few questions now and again... I don't mean to pry, it's just because I'm curious."

"Well, how about we make a deal; I certainly don't mind you asking, if you don't mind me not telling."

"Deal."

The schoolteacher agrees, and the blonde grins, before catching a glimpse of her companion's watch with mild alarm.

"Okay, I'm gonna run if you don't mind. I still need to get Regina and I some lunch, but it was nice meeting you properly."

"Sick people and all?"

"Even with the sick people!"

The younger woman laughs, raising her hand before jogging down the street towards the Diner to fulfil the Mayor's lunch request.

"Was your meeting okay?"

"Hmm?"

Regina raises an eyebrow in question as she spears a piece of shrimp with her fork.

"I thought you said you had some kind of meeting this morning or something?"

Emma elaborates; battling with her pasta while inwardly deeming it to have been a rather idiotic choice to eat while faced with company.

_Especially the Mayor._

Smirking as she watches the younger woman's best efforts fail rather amusingly, the brunette pauses as she strives to find a suitable answer to the former's question.

"My meeting was... Informative."

"That's good, right?"

"In a way... Sometimes knowledge is not quite what we wish it to be."

"Da Vinci said that all of our knowledge finds its origins in our perceptions."

"...Did he really?"

"Yup... He also said that simplicity is the ultimate sophistication..."
Emma grins as she glances around the rather ostentatious office pointedly, and the Mayor sighs with a shake of her head; amusement playing at the corners of her lips.

"I would call you out on being rude, dear, but I don't believe I am in a position to question Da Vinci. Nor do I believe I should be victorious if I were to try and argue with yourself when you have the Greats all memorised in your head... You would make a good politician."

"Sure... 'fuck you all, and have a nice day'... I can see people wearing t-shirts with my political slogan all rainbowed and glittery across them."

"... I would scold you for your language, but that was rather amusing."

"I'm an amusing kind of girl. Ever wanted to borrow that tagline, Madame Mayor?"

"Certainly not!"

"Mmhmm..."

Emma smirks impishly, and the brunette rolls her eyes, before she is revisited by some of the less humorous topics covered only an hour ago with the young waitress, and finds any mirth she might have found in the situation vanishing rapidly.

Looking over the plastic lid of her coffee cup, she studies the blonde thoughtfully as the latter seems to have given up courting her spaghetti with any grace in favour of simply playing with it.

"...I think Granny's worried she's got one of those problems with eating and stuff, but I don't think so... I know she'd probably not tell anyone if she did, but... I just don't think she does...

No... I don't think so either.

I think it may all be a little simpler than that.

"...I must say, I am a little disappointed in the brevity of your seemingly insatiable appetite."

"Huh?"

"You've only eaten half of your food the last two times we've dined together."

"Are you keeping tabs?"

Emma asks waspishly, and Regina plays carefully around any emotive response and simply snaps back

"I'm paying the bill."

"Well... Then don't bother next time."

The blonde mutters irritably, but her cheeks flush with embarrassment, and the brunette raises a brow when she surmises the reasoning to be that Emma feels she has been called out for being rude. This is not actually the case, and the Mayor hesitates as she tries to decide whether telling the younger woman so will help or hinder the situation. In the end, she simply goes for the truth; not in the mood to sugarcoat things.

She is worried about the girl, and she does not like to be worried.

"I will bother, because I want you to eat. It was a struggle finding you clothes that fit, and I can't
imagine that says a lot of positive things about your health. Oh, I'm sure you feel just fine, leaping out onto rooftops and all, but I myself am beginning to wonder... I had assumed I knew the reason for you being the size you are after witnessing how things were back in Boston— and, no, I will say no more on the matter unless I have to— but if that is not the case, and you are finding yourself lacking in appetite, perhaps I should ask Whale to have a look at you."

"The doctor? What the hell?! Because I don't want to eat a whole fucking portion of pasta?!"

"...Don't use that language when you're speaking to me, I have warned you enough times, Miss Swan."

"Then don't get all... Don't get on my case!"

"I believe it is because I am on your case that you are here at all..."

"That's... I..."

"Emma. Unless you plan on saying something informative, please desist from answering back. It's quite rude."

Regina snaps irritably, but she senses that the majority of her annoyance stems from the fact that this conversation is veering off into simple hostility which is not at all where she had meant for it to go.

Still, she has little clue how to steer it towards asking the younger woman about her most peculiar reaction to her falling out with Ruby without mentioning her conversation with the waitress earlier today. She has little interest in whether or not this might cause a second wave of war between the two women, but she doesn't wish for Emma to feel that she has gone behind her back. It is an odd thing for her to fear, as it is not the sort of behaviour she would ordinarily concern herself over— seeing it as a worthy tactic if it will get her what she wants— but she finds she simply doesn't want the blonde to feel that she has been betrayed.

After all, she is intuitive enough to imagine that such a thing might bring an end to the rather candid manner Emma has begun taking to their conversations thus far.

Sighing as she the blonde glares down at her remaining pasta moodily, she sits back in her chair and drums her fingers lightly on the table.

"If you don't want the rest of it, go and put it in the kitchen, Miss Swan. You can take my plate also."

The younger woman sniffs but doesn't move, and Regina watches her thoughtfully.

"... I didn't mention my paying for the meal as a form of blackmail, dear. If you really don't want it, then I am hardly going to sit here and force you to eat the rest of it. I am quite sure that all hell isn't about to break loose due to a couple of strands of uneaten spaghetti. What I will point out, though, is that I resent you telling me that I am on your 'case'. I am trying to do a good thing for you, Miss Swan—"

You did a good thing. You gave me a present, too. But now you're taking it away...

Oh hush! Please! Please desist with the torment of such nightmares!

"-And I am only mentioning the things that I do out of... Well... I won't call it concern. I am not sure that it is, and I imagine you might resent the term... But with you being here, I have taken on a responsibility... Anyone looking at you is also looking at me, do you understand me? And right now, I am unhappy with what they're seeing."
She finishes with a nod towards skinny limbs, before frowning as a complex expression finds pale features in response to this statement.

The younger woman appears both hurt and confused, before fixing her face with a carefully neutral expression and simply nodding in understanding.

"I get it."

Emma assures her, though she wonders if she actually does.

She supposes she can see where Regina is coming from, but the problem is... Regina has no idea what she's fucking *talking* about.

None one does.

They never seem to.

They just seem to speak and speak and speak and expect that to mean that they possess a sense of *intelligence* on the matter.

On *any* matter.

And she's tired.

Tired of people telling her what they *think*, when they know fuck all about the goddamn specifics.

It's all about the *specifics*.

*Yes, well how do you expect anyone to ever fulfil what you want of them if you refuse to tell them anything?*

...*You told before. Told Neal. And look where that got you.*

*But, maybe-*

-No! Maybe nothing! *To hell with maybe! This is the way things work, so shut up, suck it up, and deal with it!*

*You don't need anyone!*

*Don't want anyone!*

*It'll just come crumbling down in the end!*

*Why on earth would you want to go through that again?*

*Why would you want to do that again?*

...*I don't...*

*Then what the fuck do you want?!*

She doesn't know.

All she knows is that her head hurts, and she feels rotten about causing such a pointless argument.

That... And she feels a vague sense of hurt at Regina's remark that she doesn't like what she sees.
That's not what she meant and you know it.

Do I?

Okay, well, so maybe she doesn't like what she sees... How would you know?

And, more importantly; why would you care?!

But she does.

And she lowers her eyes swiftly as she comes to this rather disconcerting realisation.

Before, it had kind of been a flippant sense of attraction; the brunette being inarguably attractive, and she'd found it amusing to comment on this in a rather salacious manner due to the flustered reaction obtained in response.

It wasn't supposed to actually mean anything.

But it does...

She frowns; confused by the thoughts racing around in her mind, and struggling to grasp at the smoke of their tails as they dance maddeningly.

"Miss Swan? Are you alright?"

A low purr from her side and she glances up with a puzzled expression to find dark coals glittering back at her.

"Yeah... I'm fine."

She replies; her tone rather unsure for such an affirmative answer. Frowning, Regina studies her a moment longer before pointing to the food sat between them.

"Well... You know where the kitchen is..."

"I... Yeah. Of course."

Emma shakes her head distractedly and piles their lunch things up in her arms, blinking as if to blink away the confusing cloak of her thoughts.

Once in the kitchen, she disposes of the necessary items and stacks their cutlery in the sink, before splashing some cold water on her cheeks and running a harried hand through her hair.

"Enough of this. Whatever you're thinking, you best stop right now."

Easier said than done when she has no clue what it is she's thinking in the first place.

That is... Until she pads back into the office and glances up to see Regina has moved her chair back around the table to sit next to her own.

"Miss Swan, do you know how to write short-hand?"

"Not really... I've seen it before, but it's all just symbols to me..."

"Well, it's not so hard once you get the hang of it. I want you to come with me to the next meeting in the Town Hall and I will be looking to you to take the minutes. As we have time on our hands now,
I will use it to teach you. Come and take a seat, dear."

She points to the chair beside her own, before pulling a small compact mirror from her drawer and reapplying her lipstick carefully.

The blonde watches, thinning her own lips.

The brunette's dark locks glow warmly in the summer sun streaming in through the large windows, and she has unbuttoned the top two pearl snaps of her shirt to ward off the heat.

"As it's just the two of us."

... Swallowing with slow, sure realisation, Emma stalks over to take a seat with a light blush colouring her cheeks, which only darkens when soft silk brushes against her arm as the Mayor leans in to begin her teaching on the sheet of paper between them.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

A/N: Oh, I wish this fic would behave itself and fall into place! Please enjoy my confused ramblings until this happens :)

"No, no, no! What are you doing?! You're just making things up now!"

Regina snaps irritably as Emma creates a series of nonsensical lines on the page in front of them.

Tossing her pen down with a sigh, the blonde scowls at the implement accusingly.

As if the reason behind her rather shocking lack of concentration is down to anything other that the brunette herself.

Her teacher.

"It's hard!"

"It's not hard. You're just not trying."

The Mayor snaps, and she purses her lips when Emma leans back in her chair with a theatrical groan.

"Don't be childish."

"Well I feel like a child! This is worse than school! And you're not even pulling my hair or pushing me into a locker!"

"Don't give me ideas!"

The brunette purrs warningly, and the younger woman closes her eyes in her rocked back position as this small remark elicits several mental images she could do without.

"I just can't do it."

She sighs; shrugging in acceptance of defeat.

"So that's it? You made a mistake and now you're giving up?"

"I'm not the one that started yelling!"

"I didn't yell. You're just incredibly frustrating!"

"... I've been told."

Dark eyes roll, and the older woman picks up the blonde's pen and scratches out the marks lining the top of the page, before holding it out expectantly.

"Try again."
"Regina, no..."

"Come on, I'm waiting."

"But-

"-Emma!... What if this really was school? You wouldn't speak in such a way to one of your teachers, so-

"-Oh, yes I would."

The younger woman mutters irritably as she accepts the pen held out to her with a sigh.

"Really?"

"Sure."

"But... Why?"

"Shit, I don't know! Because I'm a fuck up? What do you want me to say?!"

"Enough with that language! Why must you continue to be so disobedient!"

"Proving my point."

"Miss Swan!"

Green eyes flicker back at her moodily, and the brunette sighs as she crosses her arms with a sense of finality.

"I'm not going to dignify this childish back and forth with another response... You can behave perfectly nicely when you wish to, and I fail to see what I have done to deserve this sudden deterioration into teenage moodiness."

Well, Madame Mayor, I can't really answer you on that one... Can't exactly share with you what's going on in my mind, because I don't really understand it myself, and it definitely isn't anything you'd want to hear.

I'm not getting this because you're distracting me.

Being sat here next to you is distracting me.

I don't want to be difficult, I really don't!

...I don't think I ever do, but it's just something I'm very talented at.

You're right, though. I know how to behave. If I really try, I can be good, at least for a little while... It's just...

I especially don't want to be difficult for you.

Because you've done everything for me.

And this fact, coupled with the way you speak, the way you look, hell, the way you fucking smell, is just... I don't know!

I don't have a goddamn clue!
I like you...

...And I-

"The silent treatment? Really, dear?"

"Huh?... Oh, no... I was just... No, come on, give me some credit."

She growls as she itches her nose and forces herself to look back down at the paper between them.

"Are you going to try again?"

Regina sighs, and Emma nods with her jaw clenched, before muttering quietly beneath her breath.

"...Sorry, dear?"

"Never mind."

"No, go on, it's rude to whisper to oneself... A sign of madness, also, I might add."

"... I said I don't like being crap at stuff."

"Well, that's why we're practicing. If you were to give up whenever you were unable to grasp something right away, where on earth would that leave you?"

"... I dunno..."

"I think you do."

The brunette muses, studying the younger woman pensively as the latter goes about writing out the short transcript devised by the Mayor in a series of dashes and symbols as she has been shown.

"...Have you ever tried, Emma?"

"Tried?"

"Yes. Tried. Have you ever tried at anything, or do you simply give up after the first hurdle?"

"I'm trying right now."

"-Well, yes, I-

"-Trying super hard not to answer that question with a bunch of words you might not wish to soil your ears with..."

She grumbles warningly, and the Mayor smirks but is undeterred.

"But we both know that you are going to refrain from doing so, don't we, dear?"

"Well, you seem pretty sure at least..."

"Go on. Humour me... It's a genuine question, and it's just the two of us."

Yeah, that's what you said when you undid your damn blouse, too, and now look where we are.

"I... don't know."
"That's not an answer."

"Sure it is."

"Well, it's not an answer that I will accept. You owe me enough to at least satisfy my curiosity."

The darker woman reasons and the blonde frowns uncomfortably.

"I... I told you. I hate being crap at things... If I can't do something, then I accept that it's not for me and move on. I have enough things that make me shit without adding to that list by not being able to play the damn harp or juggle or whatever."

"What makes you 'shit'?"

The brunette enquires with a curious furrowing of her brow, and the blonde sighs as she gives her companion a pointed look that suggests she is growing weary of the conversation.

"You saw how it was. How I was. You don't need me to answer that."

"... I saw a lot of things, Miss Swan, but not one of those things had me sitting down and musing to myself as to your excrementory way of living life."

Emma snorts at this appreciatively and shakes her head as she continues on with lightened flippancy.

"There's just not a whole lot of things I've done well. I tend to screw things up... I mean, come on. I was in jail, I drink too much, I've never had a proper job, I gave up... On things. My own damn parents didn't even want me, so-"

"-That has nothing to do with you... None of those things do. From what I understand of the matter, you shouldn't have been the one taking the fall for stealing those watches in the first place. Your parents were idiots... They never made that decision based off what they might have made of you... They- well, I suppose I wouldn't really know... I am slightly concerned that you think you might drink too much; It is not an admission people tend to make at eighteen, but-"

"-Well... I dunno... I was just going off the fact it's winded me up in hospital or whatever, but, I mean, it's not a big deal. I was just giving you a list."

"Hmm... I would have to disagree... I see that as a rather big deal, indeed."

"Whatever..."

The blonde shrugs awkwardly; not having meant for an actual conversation to come out of what little she has shared.

"No. Not whatever. That concerns me! And, should the necessity arise, you can count yourself certain that we will be having a rather blunt discussion about such things...

As for what you have given up... I'm sure there were reasons."

She finishes; surprising herself.

"Well, I-"

"-But come. Enough of talking about such things. I believe you secretly possess quite an admirable amount of talent. True, some of it is tied up in being profoundly irritating, but you're intelligent alongside such annoyances... I told you that you could do this, and you just wrote out the transcript
"perfectly while growling away at me... Perhaps we should find ourselves at odds more often; it seems to bring out a rather interesting side of you."

"Oh, I'm sure it'll happen often enough... Though those are some pretty big words from a woman that warned me I would do well not to cross her!"

"I did say that, didn't I?... Yes, well, that was good advice, dear... A little heated debate I can abide... But if you were to cross me... Well... I wouldn't like to say..."

Regina warns with a small smirk, before her face falls as she is accosted with the image of the younger woman lying on her back with her throat cut open in a series of ragged, scarlet ribbons.

Emma misses this curious change in emotion however, as she looks away swiftly when met with the salacious smirk that had previously touched full lips; blushing delicately.

Clearing her throat in a suddenly business-like manner, Regina gathers herself and turns to the blonde dismissively.

"Well, I think that might do for one day..."

"Thank god..."

The younger woman sighs, and the brunette chuckles lightly as she tosses the paper littered with the blonde's scribbles in the trash.

"I guess you want to spend some time with Henry, anyway."

Emma muses with a smile as she pulls her chair back to the other side of the table, and Regina glances up sharply before offering a stiff nod.

"I usually go up around now, yes."

"Is it like after nap time, or-"

"-it is how I like to do things. I don't see why it should be of any interest to you."

The darker woman snaps- suddenly ice cold- and Emma blinks as though she has been slapped.

"Oh... I..."

Understanding she has reacted in a rather peculiar manner as far as the blonde is concerned, Regina reigns in her aggression with a deep breath and an uncomfortable study of startled features.

"Sorry... That was rude of me. I didn't mean to speak to you like that... I think I'm getting a headache..."

"It's fine..."

Emma offers uncertainly, before returning Regina's pretty smile with a relieved grin of her own.

The brunette sighs, fussing her hair back behind her ear.

"...Perhaps you're rubbing off on me."

"I... Uh..."
Arched brows shoot up in flustered surprise before the Mayor elaborates

"Your rather gruff manner must be catching... I can only hope it might work both ways and that you might have learnt a little grace."

"Oh... I doubt it."

The younger woman smirks, and Regina nods as she follows the blonde out into the hallway.

"As do I, sadly. Well, dear, have a good evening. Stay out of trouble."

"Thanks. You too, Madame Mayor... Be good."

She grins, and dark eyes roll in return as the brunette lets her out.

Shoving her hands into the pockets of her slacks, Emma walks down the path towards town with her lip held between her teeth as she ponders restlessly on the peculiar way things seem to be going with the Mayor and herself.

She is disconcerted to find that she is unable to merely shake off any obscure notions of attraction now left to her own thoughts, but, rather, is hounded by them.

"Oh, but you do enjoy fucking yourself over..."

She mutters with a sigh, which is accompanied with a small smirk as her mind crassly chimes in

*Why yes, I do enjoy fucking myself! Over and over and over.*

"Behave."

She whispers as she takes in the passing scenery appreciatively.

Turning onto Main Street, she stops as a car cruises in her direction; taking a step back onto the pavement to let them pass.

Raising her hand in return to the Sheriff’s small wave, she continues on with a frown; shooting a glance over her shoulder at the receding tail lights.

"Must be paying the Mayor a visit again..."

She muses aloud, and she supposes she might need to work at breaking this particular habit as she now finds so little time to herself.

*Yes... Paying the Mayor a visit.*

Glancing up at the clock tower, she sighs as the hands appear to have become stuck at some point over the last couple of days and remain uselessly pointed to quarter past eight. Still, she can hazard a guess as to the hour, and, while her shift at the Diner tends to start at whatever time she is able to make it in, she would imagine Ruby might already be setting out the tables.

The early part of a long night at the Diner, but after hours for anybody working nine ’til five.

A rather strange time for the Sheriff to be calling on the Mayor, in other words.

*Well, not if it's not a business call.*
Recalling the irritable venom shot her way when she had agreed to a lift from the young man in question, her mouth falls open with sudden understanding, and she raises a brow.

"Oh..."

A small smile finds her lips as she slips in through the back door of the Diner with this new titbit of information, while her stomach flutters in a curious manner.

Letting herself into her bedroom and casting a glance over at Caskett who lies splayed out on the windowsill, she shucks her shirt swiftly with a low hiss of

"Oh please. **Tell** me you're not fucking **jealous**..."

Yellow eyes regard her lazily in response to her mumbled musing, and she sighs as she slips out of navy cotton and approaches the tabby in her underwear.

"So... I'm gonna tell you something... And you're probably gonna think it's pretty damn nuts, but hear me out... "
"So... I'm gonna tell you something... And you're probably gonna think it's pretty damn nuts, but hear me out... "

Cass blinks and the blonde takes this as her cue to continue.

"You know I've been working for Regina; doing all her Mayor-y crap with her and everything? Well... I think I'm beginning to realise something... Like... I dunno... Okay, look, here's the thing; you remember I told you about Neal? The car guy?"

Pin-needle teeth flash in a yawn, and Emma nods as she pulls her work shirt down from the wardrobe.

"Yeah, I know. Well, like... I kind of think the stuff I felt for Neal... Well, the stuff my body felt for him anyway, if that makes sense, is a bit like what I'm feeling now... But about Regina. I thought for a while that maybe it was just that I wasn't really sure what to do with what she's done for us, and I guess I still don't, but... She's nice, you know?

More than nice.

Actually... Sometimes she's not very nice at all... But you know what I mean."

Caskett flicks her tail in a way that suggests she really doesn't, but the blonde muses that the good thing about talking to a cat is that they can't sigh at her in-eloquence the way a person might.

A person like the Mayor, you mean?

No! Just anybody! So shut up!

"No... Sometimes she's a bit mean... But, like, in a weird way. In a... I dunno... It's kind of... It's kind of fun when she's like that. I guess I quite like it- Oh, shut up!"

She grumbles as the tabby purrs her disdain.

"...You eat out of the trash."

She points out, as though this puts them on even ground, and Cass rolls over onto her back to expose her belly in reply. Taking up the invitation, Emma perches on the bed with her shirt hanging open and her underwear trailing a loose thread on one side.

"I'm not really sure what to do, Cassie... I'm kind of... I dunno. I want to give her something, you know? To say thanks and stuff... But I don't really have anything like that... And I don't think she'd want you, you dumb fleabag, so that's out. I just... Want to make her happy I think..."

And, that's really where she supposes her confusion stems from.

It is a curious thing for her to want, not so much due to being particularly uncaring, but more because she has tried her hardest for the majority of her life to refrain from landing herself in such a position.

In a position of having more than a casual affiliation with anybody for fear that it might all end in tears.

The way it had with Neal in the end.
Still, when she had been with him, she had wanted to make him happy. Had wanted to show her affection for him so that he might know the things she could never find a way of putting across into words.

And, of course, there had been one very simple way of doing that.

A very simple way she had discovered a couple of years before that almost always worked to make other people happy.

Sure, with Neal it had been different. He hadn't asked her to do it- to do anything- and she had liked him a lot. She hadn't wanted to please him in order to get anything, which had usually been the case, but more... He'd made her happy and she had wanted to return the favour in the only way she knew how.

And he had appreciated it greatly.

She smirks a little sadly and sighs.

"...Regina's kind of like that."

She murmurs to Cass, negating to explain her inner monologue, but that's just fine. Caskett gets it. She always does.

"I want to make what she's done worth her while... But in a... I kind of really want to do it, too... She makes me feel funny... Kind of like that girl I told you about that worked at the Chinese place down the block, or the dude that handed out parking tickets sometimes... Except I don't also want to punch her in the face..."

"Don't want to punch who now?"

Comes a chuckle from the other side of the door, and she jumps in surprise, garnering herself an irritable glower from Cass.

"Well, I'm clearly not talking about you!"

She calls back with a grin, and Ruby giggles.

"Unless you have someone in there with you, I'm kind of concerned you're talking at all! Can I come in? Or do you actually have some hot playmate in there?"

"Two. At least."

"I am so sure!"

"Okay, I lied. But I am half naked, so- Oh, well that's cool, just barge in."

She sighs irritably as the brunette pokes her head around the door and returns Cass's low hiss with one of her own.

"Thanks. Anyway, much as I hate to break up this little... Whatever it is you're doing with your pussy while half-naked, could you maybe come down and get to work?"

"You ruin all my fun."

Emma grumbles with a wink, and the young waitress leaves in a flash of chocolate tresses and the melodic response of
"So don't wanna know!"

Chuckling as she takes her skirt from the chair, the blonde pushes her hair away from her face before frowning as she catches herself in the mirror.

...Right now, I am unhappy with what they're seeing...

Scowling back at herself, she pulls aside the open wings of her shirt and assesses herself critically; running her finger over a sharply peaked hipbone, before digging her nails in as they skim over the faint groove of one of the new, hateful stretch marks a little higher up.

Turning sideways, she runs her palm down the flat of her stomach with a frown, before sighing and swiftly buttoning up her shirt.

Pulling on her skirt and grabbing her sneakers from under the bed, she ties her hair back and hurries down the stairs two at a time; dodging smartly out of the way as Granny comes bustling through with a stack of plates.

"Go see what Whale wants, girl, and under no circumstances do you let that man fool you by brushing his napkin 'accidentally' to the floor. He's yet to try that one on you, and I'm sure it's only a matter of time."

"Do I just leave it if he does?"

"No, do your job, just don't bend over."

The old woman growls, and the blonde chuckles and offers her a small salute before entering the Diner and plucking up her order pad.

"Could you stare any more?"

Ruby whispers with a grin as she comes up behind the blonde and nudges her in the side.

"Huh?"

"Stop mooning over the Sheriff!"

The brunette scolds with a giggle; looking from the man in question as he sits sipping at a beer, and back to the younger woman who stands with her elbows resting on the counter and her attention rapt in his direction.

"I'm not."

"Oh, please! You've been stood there with your little ass out, biting the end of a pencil for the best part of five minutes! You've decided he's nice enough to bed, then?"

The waitress smirks, and Emma rolls her eyes as she turns to face her with a long-suffering sigh.

"So not."

"Then why are you standing there mentally undressing him?"

"I was looking out the window!"

The blonde argues lamely, lowering her voice as Leroy walks past from the restroom and takes up a
seat at the bar. With the hour getting on for ten, the Diner is almost empty, and with last orders made, the girls simply wait to close up and wipe down the tables ready for tomorrow morning.

"Uhuh, uhuh... Then why are you all red now?"

"People seeing us together? Questioning my sanity?"

"Oh, bite me."

Ruby grumbles, before giggling softly as she watches Emma's attention flash back to the Sheriff as he gets up to take his leave. Leaning forward, she whispers hotly into the blonde's ear

"Oh, Graham, fuck me, bend me over your- Ow!"

The brunette hisses as the younger woman elbows her sharply in the chest.

"You deserved it... And why the hell am I fucking Irish all of a sudden?"

"That wasn't Irish! That was... I dunno... I can do you, hang on-"

"-I'd rather you not do me, actually."

"That's not what you'd say to Gra-hamOW!"

"Girls..."

A warning bark from behind them, and Emma swiftly lets go of the waitress's wrist; the latter massaging the crescent moon nail-marks littering her flesh.

"You little bitch."

Ruby murmurs, but not without a good helping of amusement, and the blonde casts a quick glance backwards before flipping her the bird behind the counter.

Smirking in response, the brunette raises her hand as Leroy gets up and walks out, before hurrying over to lock up the door and take off her apron.

"Look, his glass is still there. You can keep it if you-"

"-I will murder you."

"No, you won't."

"Try me. I will sneak into your room when you're asleep, and hold you down, and-"

"-Wait, are you murdering me or raping me-"

"-Ruby Lucas!"

Granny shouts as she walks back into the Diner with a mop; wagging her finger at the young brunette and telling her to go and wash her mouth and mind out.

"Now you've done it..."

Ruby grumbles as she accepts the mop and bucket moodily, and Emma flashes her an angelic smile as she collects up the last glasses and plates from the tables.
Finishing off cleaning the floor, the brunette sidles over to the blonde who stands lent against the counter with a dishrag in her hands and grins.

"So, come on. Don't be so stuck up... You like him."

"I don't."

"Oh, bull. You're blushing, and you've gone all awkward. You definitely have a crush..."

Sighing, Emma tosses the rag at Ruby who ducks it easily.

"I don't like the Sheriff, not like that."

"... But you like someone?"

The brunette asks with a raised brow.

"... Maybe."

Comes the eventual growled response, and bright eyes widen in surprise as a large grin finds painted lips.

"Ooooh!"

"Shut up."

"Nope."

Ruby, I mean it."

Emma huffs as she picks up the dishrag and chucks it in the sink, before walking moodily towards the door.

Watching her go, the waitress gives a small shake of her head as she smiles affectionately.

Grabbing down two mugs from the large crockery cabinet in the back, she pours a healthy slosh of milk into a saucepan and puts it on the stove while she hunts in the fridge for some cream.

"Hey, open up."

"No. Go away."

"Aw, come on, Emma, I have my hands full!"

"... Of what?"

Emma asks curiously as she climbs out of bed and opens the door.

"Hot chocolate."

Ruby smiles; handing the younger woman a cream-topped mug and letting herself in.

"Um... Thanks? But why?"

"You didn't honestly think you could just leave me hanging like that, did you?"
"I was really hoping so."

The blonde sighs, but she struggles to hide a small grin as she follows Ruby back to her bed.

"So go on. Spill."

"I... I dunno what to say."

"That's easy. Who is it, and what do you wanna do to them?"

White teeth flash in a wolfish grin, before Ruby adopts a kinder smile and regards the younger woman amiably over the top of her mug; Emma sitting cross-legged opposite her in a pair of cotton shorts and a flimsy tank top.

"... I'm not really sure."

The blonde answers truthfully, and the waitress licks a smear of cream from her fingers as she shakes her head and pulls the covers over herself without invitation.

"Start from the beginning. That's the best way."

"Well..."
"Well..."

Emma offers hesitantly, sticking out her tongue and dragging the sharp point through the cream of her hot chocolate.

"It's someone in town, anyway..."

Ruby prompts as she manoeuvres herself—careful not to spill her drink—to sit against the headboard beside the blonde.

"Yeah..."

"And you haven't really spoken to many people... If it's not Graham, then I can't even think of anyone worth bothering with... Unless... Hey, you don't like Billy, do you? I mean, I wouldn't mind, but—"

"-No... I mean, he's nice and all, but not really my type."

"Really? Why?"

"I dunno... He's too... I guess he's just a really nice guy."

Emma finishes, and the brunette chuckles darkly.

"Yes, that's such a terrible quality in a guy; being nice and all."

The younger woman shrugs and the waitress cocks her head as she continues.

"So... Hmm... Well, I dunno... Are we really gonna do this as a guessing game, or..."

Sighing, the blonde shakes her head. She feels a little overwhelmed at having Ruby sat cuddled up in bed with her and asking her to spill her secrets, but she is fond of the young waitress, and... Well, there simply comes a limit as to how much advice one can get from a cat.

"Look... I'll tell you... But here's the thing. I'm not... I don't like... this. I don't do this... If I tell you, you have to swear not to tell anyone... And you can't make fun of me, either."

"I agree to all but the last one."

Ruby grins, before smiling and tipping back the warm remains of her hot chocolate.

"Relax. I'm not going to be mean or anything, and I'd kind of picked up on your whole devilishly awkward deal without you needing to warn me about it."

"It's all part of my charm."

Emma nods as she finishes her own drink and places the empty cup carefully on the nightstand. Leaning back against the headboard, she raises a brow as the brunette wriggles down beneath the sheets to lie beside her.

"Hey, I dunno, some guys like that in a girl."
Ruby grins, and the younger woman sighs as she runs her finger over a crease in the covers. "Right... See... About that..."

The waitress waits as the blonde trails off uncertainly. 

"... Generally, when people say that, they then continue speaking, doll..."

"Yeah, okay... Hang on..."

Emma grumbles as she climbs out from under the sheets and pads over to the light-switch; promptly plunging them into darkness and the hazy glow of the moon. 

"Uh... Are you in love with a ghost or something? Is this supposed to be setting the mood-"

"-Shut up. I just don't want... I don't want you looking at me while we have this stupid conversation!"

The blonde mutters irritably as she slips back beneath the covers, and Ruby giggles amiably. 

"Okay, wow... You really are bad at this..."

"I already told you that!"

"I know... Hmm... Wait, is it me? Because this now definitely feels a little rapey, once again, and-"

"-It's not you, dipshit."

"No? Are you sure?"

"Positive. And you're the one that crawled into bed with me, so..."

"Hey, I never said it was rapey in a bad way!"

"Nice. Ruby."

"Oh, hush."

The brunette scolds, but she lets the subject drop as she catches the dangerous note to the younger woman's tone that she has come to recognise and understand a need to avoid. 

"Well, if it's not me- and, I'm a little offended, I'm not gonna lie- then...?"

"You know, we don't actually have to talk about this, we could-"

"-you turned the lights off and everything, we so do!"

"But, I-"

"-Okay, I'll give you a choice. You tell me what you were gonna tell me, or, you explain your reason for your lack of insatiable lust and attraction to me."

Ruby smirks in the darkness, and Emma rolls her eyes as she shuffles down beneath the covers and lies on her back with a small smile. 

"Reason? I can only give you one?"
"Oh, come on!"

"Fine... I just... So... You know how you were kind of making fun of me..."

"You'll have to be more specific."

"About... Well, about me and Regina, and how I'm-"

"-Totally in love with her, yes."

"... Uh, well maybe not quite that, but..."

"Wait... Seriously?... You're not just messing with me right now?"

"Would I feel the simultaneous urge to vomit and smother you with a pillow if I was?"

"Probably not... But, I mean... Woah."

Ruby offers with a small touch of awe; turning over onto her back to study the ceiling alongside the blonde. Opening her mouth to continue, she frowns; starting and stopping uncertainly

"Okay, I... Well... I... Um... How's that?"

"She's just... She's nice... And don't you dare fucking say anything back to that-"

"-No, no, it's cool... It's just... Ummm... Not quite what I was expecting."

"If you knew her like I do... How I do..."

"Oh, I'm sure you have your reasons for thinking she's nice, and it seems to be a mutual tolerance, so-"

"-Really? What makes you say that?"

"Oh... I just... I dunno, I'm just guessing... I meant more though, like... Well, Regina's a woman. You know?"

Toying between irritation and amusement, Emma opts for the latter and chuckles in the darkness

"Well, I mean, we don't have conclusive proof of that fact, but..."

"Well, not yet, anyway..."

"Ruby!"

"Hey! I'm being supportive!"

"Well, I... Okay..."

The younger woman frowns, and the brunette rolls over onto her side to assess the blonde through the shadows.

"You like girls?"

"... Some of them."

"Huh... I've never really met a girl who likes other girls..."
"You probably have. They don't tend to wear t-shirts promoting the fact."

"Well, that's a shame. And no... You're new here. I just don't think... I just don't think it's something that happens here... I'm not judging you, okay? I'm just... Storybrooke is pretty traditional. Kind of annoyingly so."

"Then you definitely have..."

Emma grins, and the brunette raises a brow as she muses on this suggestion curiously. Licking her lips as a blanket of silence falls between them, she pushes herself up to rest on her elbows and looks down at the younger woman inquisitively; sensing that Emma is ready to drop the subject, but not quite willing to let her do so without at least asking a few more questions. After all, she suddenly has about a million of them.

"So... Umm... I mean... Have you like... Have you had a girlfriend before?"

"No... But I've not really had a boyfriend, either... I don't really... I don't do that."

"That."

Ruby repeats with a smirk at the tangible disgust in the blonde's voice.

"No."

Emma agrees, shuddering theatrically to earn herself a low giggle.

"Right, so no dating. But have you... Well... You know... With a girl?"

Sighing as she looks up at Ruby- the waitress's face illuminated by the moon and looming over her, glowing with childlike curiosity- the younger woman wrinkles her nose as she decides she may as well go along with this disturbingly overly-friendly conversation, as it might hopefully be her last.

"...Twice."

"Yeah?"

"Well... Kind of. I'm not so sure they really... Maybe they count as once if you added them together."

"Second base?"

"Well, no... Just... I mean you're asking me if I've... You know... And I haven't... You know... But..."

"Wait, I'm confused. Do I know what 'you know' is, or are we talking about different 'you knows'?"

"...What?"

"What happened!? Go on, you have to share now!"

"Alright, shit, keep your panties on and untwisted! It's just sex... But not really sex in this case... But-

"-Which is why I want to know!"

"Fine... Shit... Whatever... The first time, it was this girl I met out west, and it was... I dunno... I don't
think we'd ever even really spoken before, she just used to hang out with some of the people I knew, and she had cool hair. Lots of colours. All I did was kiss her... I'm not sure she expected it, but I don't think she really minded, either. It wasn't anything, like, life-defining. Just... Too many beers and literally walking into her when coming out the alley-

"-Wait, why were you in an alley?"

"Peeing."

"Gross!"

"Better than not doing it in the alley."

"... Fair point."

"And... Yeah... It just... I was curious. And she was there."

"... I will give the restrooms downstairs a wide berth... No more going together."

"Yeah. That's kind of what I said I wished you'd adhere to in the first place."

"We're girls! It's natural!"

"There's nothing natural about attempting to block out a story about lasagne while trying to go!"

"It was a pasta bake... And duly noted."

Ruby growls with a low giggle, before biting her lip and going back to their original subject.

"Okay, so, that was the first time... And no, it doesn't really count... What did you do the second time?"

"I didn't do anything... I was out by the basketball courts around the back of the gym-"

"-Ugh, how predictable, this is how all romantic stories start-"

"-Oh, I never promised you romance! No... I just... One minute this girl's coming up to talk to me- it was dark and late, so we were the only ones there- I figured she wanted the time or something... She had a bottle of whisky... Might have been rum... Don't really remember, and it's not important-"

"-Wait, how old were you? Aren't you too young to be standing around in vacant basketball courts accepting liquor from strangers-"

"... Do you want me to tell you this story or not? Because we can totally talk about something else."

"No, no, go on. Sorry, I was just trying to visualise it-"

"-Oh good, well now I'm definitely glad we're having this conversation!"

"I know, right! So, you guys got drinking and got to talking... And?"

"Not really. I got to drinking, she got to talking... And, I don't know... There wasn't much left of whatever it was in that bottle, and it was pretty obvious where the rest of it had gone... I just... She was telling me something about my hair or whatever, and I was pretending to pay attention, but her English wasn't great so I was more just blocking her out and thinking about Oscar-"
"-Oscar?"

"Oh, this dog that used to come and sit with me back there- this was in Washington- and give me sad eyes 'til I tossed him some of my food, and I figured he might be wondering where I'd got to. I mean, he might not have even been called Oscar at all, but-"

"...So not interested in the dog... Well, apart from what you were doing that he would come to sit and eat with you, but that's not what I care about right now. What happened with the girl?"

"Oh... Well, to this day, I'm still not totally sure myself. I know I was getting a little tipsy, and she was well on her way to being flat out horizontal, and suddenly the fence mesh is pushing into my back and she's got her face kind of up against my neck. I was sort of trying to come to terms with this strange new progression in our rather fleeting relationship, when she shoved her hand, you know... Down there."

"Holy hell!... What did you do?"

"...Parted my legs a little more... I mean, I was pretty shocked, but I figured it was already happening, and... I dunno... I was cold, and a little drunk, and it felt kind of nice, and... It was pretty-well- I guess I just went with it... And, by 'went with it', I mean I kind of stood there awkwardly, wondering what in the hell to do... In the end, I just tried to save what was left in the bottle from ending up on the tarmac."

Emma shrugs with a hot blush colouring her cheeks; thankful for her self-inflicted darkness.

"That's crazy!"

Ruby informs her, sounding thoroughly impressed.

"I guess a little... So, yeah... That's that..."

"Did you... I mean, did you like it, though?"

"Well... As much as I think I was gonna like being roughly fucked in the dark by a complete stranger in a public place..."

The blonde laughs quietly, and the waitress's eyes widen in the dark.

"Emma!"

"Oh, come on! Like you've never done anything like that!"

"Well..."

The brunette offers with a suddenly shy expression, and Emma rolls onto her stomach and studies her intently in the dark; her nose an inch from Ruby's.

"What?"

"I mean... It's not that I haven't... Done anything... But... I... Uh, not anything really like that. At all."

"Well, great. Now I feel like a wonderful person."

The blonde grumbles, and the waitress giggles gleefully beside her.

"You are! And so sinfully depraved at that!"
"... Shut up."

Emma growls as she pulls the covers up over her head.

"Aw, come on, I'm just teasing."

Ruby smiles, before clearing her throat and addressing the younger woman lightly.

"I'm honestly more intrigued than anything else... I think people think I'm this kind of... I dunno... That I get up to all sorts... I really don't... It's just, this town is so boring, you know? Sometimes it's just fun to play pretend... But to hear proper stories, and about something like that... It's, uh... Interesting."

"Yeah? You're not gonna go all small-town on me and shudder with disgust."

"Oh, maybe at some point, but not about this. I mean... I do question your taste, but that's more because Regina's... Well... She's difficult. Let's leave it at that... But not because she's a woman."

Sighing, the younger woman lowers the covers from her face and offers the brunette a small smile.

"No?"

"Nah... T-to be honest... This conversation, uh... Kind of... Your story was pretty crazy, but... Also kind of... Um..."

"Yes?"

Emma prompts with a cocked brow and a smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth.

"I guess I kind of dug it..."

Ruby finishes, clearing her throat pointedly and shrieking at the younger woman to shut up when the latter laughs wickedly.

"Oh yeah? Are you a little flustered, Ruby?"

"Well, I don't know about flustered, but something's happening down there, anyway!"

The brunette giggles sheepishly; taking her own turn in pulling the covers up over her head as the bed shakes with their laughter.

"Ruby Lucas!"

Emma hisses; doing her best to mimic Granny's tone and keep her voice down to a whisper as the hallway lights are switched off.

Kicking out at the younger woman with her own small chuckle- feeling a little giddy, but taking it easily in her stride- the brunette finally calms down and rests her cheek on the crook of her elbow as she regards the blonde amiably.

Okay, okay, I think I'm over it."

"You better be, or you can go sleep in your own bed."

"Oh, relax, I know your heart belongs to another."
"I will full on kill you if you don't shut up with that."

"Aw, no you won't... So... What are you gonna do?"

"With your body? Or?"

"No, with Regina."

"I don't... I don't really know..."

"Do you think she likes you, too?"

"... I not so sure she's really thought about it, I guess."

...I'm not happy with what they're seeing...

Frowning, the younger woman sighs.

"And, anyway, I don't think I'm her type."

She shrugs; telling herself to let go of the vague feeling of ill-will she silently wishes upon the Sheriff.

"Hmm... Maybe not."

Ruby agrees, before raising her brow when Emma responds matter-of-factly

"I guess I'll just have to make her think about it."

"... Yeah?"

"I think so."

"... Well... Then best of luck to you with that!"

"I just want to make her happy..."

The blonde confides, and, later- much later- the two of them will look back and wonder if things might have turned out a little differently if, rather than shrieking with laughter at this obscure little statement, the waitress had asked her what she might mean by that.

Had asked her if she really thought it to be how things worked. How they were supposed to work. What was expected.

But, she doesn't ask. She simply giggles giddily while relishing the younger woman's glower.

"Oh, Emma Swan, you might just be the craziest person I think I've ever met..."

She grins with a shake of her head.

"Shut up."

"No, no, seriously, you're planning to seduce the Mayor- Regina goddamn Mills- and I-"

"I'm not planning to seduce her, you fucktard, I'm... Maybe just gonna give her a nudge in that direction... What harm can it do?"
"Well..."

"Yeah, okay, don't answer that."

"I mean... I dunno... In all honesty, I really don't. Regina likes being the centre of attention, and pretty much lives for compliments, so... I'm actually not sure how you could go wrong telling her everything she wants to hear. I mean, she might not realise you want to bed her, but you'll definitely be high up on her Christmas card list... I would maybe not take it down the screwing her up against a basketball post road, but-"

"-Aw, damn it!-

"-I think... Well, shit... I think go for it if it's what you want to do!"

"... Yeah?"

Emma asks, and suddenly all the laughter is gone from her voice; her expression curiously innocent as she regards the brunette earnestly.

"Sure! If it makes you happy... Not to mention the fact I will demand daily updates for my own amusement, but... Yeah. I mean... I think you're nuts, but I also don't see any harm in it. You're not doing anything mean or wrong or anything... If she gives you a funny feeling down in your panties, then I say go for it. She gives me a funny feeling down in my panties, too, but that's more a nervous thing, I think..."

"You're an idiot."

The blonde muses quietly; a little surprised by the way she feels now that she's opened up.

She had been expecting to feel regret. Annoyance. Anger at herself.

But she feels none of those things.

Instead... She just feels a peculiar sense of warmth for the woman grinning beside her.

Noting Emma's more serious tone, Ruby sits up and looks down at the younger woman coolly.

"You actually do like her though, don't you? Not just to look at."

"... Yeah."

"Well... I don't see any reason why she shouldn't like you back. I mean... Apart from, you know, some of the obvious ones... Your general ass-ishness, the way you smell, your having boobs, I could go on... But... Nah. In all seriousness, I don't see any reason why not."

"... I guess that remains to be seen."

"I guess so."

"...And I don't much care that you think I'm crazy."

"No, I didn't think you would be all that broken up about it. Not even when I can happily conclude I think you're totally beyond saving and should maybe be locked up!"

A small thinning of the blonde's lips which Ruby doesn't see as she thins her own, before leaning down and pressing her mouth firmly against Emma's with a tight-lipped smile.
"And for that, I think I love you, Emma Swan!"

"What the hell!"

The younger woman gasps, brushing at her mouth with the back of her hand.

But she grins, despite herself, watching as the brunette jumps down from her bed and pushes back her hair.

"I'm glad you came to town, Emma. You're weird."

"Charming!... But... I'm glad, too... And thanks for... You know... This was actually... It was actually alright."

"Such flattery and emotion, I'm not sure I can stand it!"

"Bite me."

"Be careful what you wish for."

"Noted. Now, are you gonna fuck off to your own damn bed?"

"Well, as you've asked so nicely..."

Emma grins and raises her hand in farewell, before offering up a deft flick of her wrist and lowering all but her middle finger.

"Sleep well!"

The waitress smiles back impishly and flutters her own fingers.

"You too, pumpkin... Wet dreams."

"... Please leave!"

Smiling serenely as she looks up at the moon, the Mayor cradles Henry close to her chest as he murmurs quietly up at her.

The night is balmy, but she has a feeling that the first frost isn't all that far off, and, after the long summer they've had, she's ready for the change.

Still, it would be a shame to wish away the beauty of a summer's eve, and so she remains sat in the old rocker by the nursery window and takes it all in.

The way the stars shimmer and the air is filled with the low buzz of insects.

The way the moon plays light off of the leaves; flickering and evolving with steady chaos.

The way-

Her train of thought disintegrates as her brow furrows; watching silently as a visitor approaches.

"... And, what might you be doing here?"
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

A/N: I have a few nights on my own this week, so hopefully this is the first of several chapters :) Let me know what you think and if you want to see anything specific etc :) Enjoy!

"... And what might you be doing here?"

Curling her finger as Henry clenches it tightly in his small fist, she watches curiously as mottled fur shimmers in the moonlight; big, yellow eyes flickering up to spy her from her vantage point.

Keeping her gaze turned up towards the high window streaming light out into the darkness, Caskett settles herself rigidly in the soft, freshly-mown grass; nostrils twitching as she takes in the chaos of aromas that surround her and recognising the light spice of The Dark Woman that had come to find The Girl in The Concrete Place.

The Dark Woman doesn't appear to be alone, and while the accompanying soft scent that taints the air seems almost indistinguishable from that subtle blend of cinnamon and opulence, there is another smell that underlies The Dark Woman's.

The Girl's.

The Dark Woman's hairless kitten carries The Girl's scent.

Fire, salt and iron.

Tail twitching thoughtfully through the shadowed blades of grass, the tabby lets out a low purr as she feels the Dark Woman's eyes upon her.

The Dark Woman that came and took them away.

That brought them to this strange place where the other women that she lives with smell- BAD(!)-strange, but the forest smells good, and The Girl no longer carries the ominous stench of sickness, but only a faint memory of the fact.

For this, she is in favour of The Dark Woman, as it had been distressing coming to the slow speculation that The Girl might decide to die on her as her Master had before.

She likes The Girl.

The Girl is kind, and doesn't hit or kick.

The Girl also has food, and not once- not even when that other, hungry, smell had made her sharp nose flair- had she refused to share.

Yellow eyes glitter with exasperation as Caskett muses that such stress could have been avoided had The Girl possessed the wit to fuel herself with her own offerings of vermin and fowl, but, alas, it is there that their tastes had seemed to differ.
She-

But any further thoughts are replaced by bright lightening, as fear courses through her old limbs like fire.

**ENEMY! ENEMY! ENEMY!**

Up above the garden in the warmth of the nursery, Regina frowns, pushing herself from the chair as she watches the cat's fur bristle alarmingly.

"What's got into you...?"

She muses; following the direction of the tabby's gaze and spying a flicker of movement ripple through her petunias.

Pursing her lips as she catches a red flash of fur, she looks down at her son and speaks to him quietly.

"Oh dear..."

Glancing back out over the garden, she watches as a large fox slinks menacingly across the lawn; edging ever closer to the battle-ready feline.

Jumping- startled- at the unearthly yowl the tabby unleashes as the fox leaps forth, she shakes her head and hurries for the door with Henry held protectively to her chest.

Making her way quickly down the stone steps and out onto the lawn, she brandishes her finger at the troublesome vermin with an irritable bark

"Go on, shoo! Away with you!"

The fox doesn't need telling twice- not quite so daring in the presence of a human- and darts abruptly for the hedges. Sniffing with distaste, Regina turns back to the scene of the commotion and scans the shadows for a sign of the blonde's cat.

"Where are you, you waste of space?"

She hisses vexedly; not at all impressed by this small disturbance to her evening.

Still, she knows that beneath her sharp tongue and irritable behaviour, she feels a pang of anxiety as she searches for signs of Cass; not wishing for anything to have happened to the troublesome tabby, nor for the younger woman to find herself missing her companion.

"Come on, cat, I don't have all- ah, there you are."

She raises a well-sculpted brow with a small smirk as she makes her way towards her apple tree; catching the reflection of the moon bouncing back at her from twin, yellow orbs.

"You know, I'm rather protective of this tree, and will be rather perturbed if you've scratched the bark on your way up there."

She warns lightly as Henry moves sleepily in her arms.

Cass lets out a low mewl in response, and the brunette sighs as she extends her hand to allow the tabby to sniff her fingertips tentatively.
"You're a long way from your human, Caskett."

She muses; pondering- not for the first time- as to the feline's rather unusual name.

*Well, her mistress is a rather unusual girl...*

She smiles and scratches Cass behind the ear.

*Yes... A rather unusual girl indeed...*

She reflects thoughtfully as she spies the fallen globes of the last of the summer apples dotting the lawn around them. She is reminded of Emma's curious tale of the old woman who had owned a similar tree back in Boston, and she runs a finger over her full lips thoughtfully as she returns her attention to the cat.

The old, battle-scarred, dirty-furred cat.

"...I have yet to make up my mind as to whether it was *sympathy* or *empathy* that led to Miss Swan taking you in... Nor am I sure I wish to really *know* the answer..."

Cass purrs quietly; letting The Dark Woman's soothing voice wash over her and obeying Regina's command to come down from the boughs of the tree with a swiftness that catches the Mayor by surprise.

"So, you've taken a *liking* to me, now?"

She smirks as she stalks back towards the mansion with Henry in her arms and Caskett at her feet.

*Rather like your mistress, indeed...*

Placing her hand on the door, she casts a glance down at the tabby, before letting her through with a sigh.

"Come on, then... But keep off the furniture!"

Cass offers up a swish of her tail that suggests she will decide whether she feels like obeying this command in her own time, and Regina rolls her eyes as she locks the door and takes Henry back up to his room; the young boy having fallen asleep in her arms.

Exiting the nursery in order to get herself ready for bed, the brunette frowns as she almost trips over the tabby that sits outside her son's room as though on sentry duty.

"Go on, get away from there..."

She snaps quietly; scooting Cass along gently with her foot and pursing her lips when the cat darts out of the way with an angry hiss, only to position herself at the end of the hallway and reaffix her gaze upon Henry's door.

Turning back to the Nursery with the fabric 'H' hung on painted wood, Regina pulls the door abruptly shut, despite her preference for keeping it slightly ajar when retiring to bed.

"Go on, cat..."

She repeats, but Caskett pays her no notice; simply sitting at the top of the stairs and keeping watch with her tail moving lazily to-and-fro.
"Madame Mayor..."

The waitress offers with start; looking up from the napkins she folds as she stands lent against the counter to spy the brunette making her way over.

"Miss Lucas. I believe I will take my breakfast inside this morning; it looks as though it may rain."

"I guess it's about time."

Ruby sighs, as she follows Regina over towards one of the tables with a clean set of cutlery.

"Indeed. Where's Miss Swan?"

"In the back, I think."

"I would like a word."

"Oh. Sure."

"And a cappuccino. No cho-"

"-chocolate, got it."

"... It's rude it interrupt."

"Sorry."

Ruby offers with a sigh as she turns back towards the counter with a subtle roll of her eyes.

Checking that all patrons appear happy, she slips into the back with a grin as she spies Emma sat perched up on a small step ladder and checking the expiry dates on several tins that are busy gathering dust atop one of the fridges.

"You're wanted."

"I'm wanted?"

"Deeply desired. Craved... Yearned for..."

"Uh... No offence, but I think we should see other people."

"Not by me, you idiot! And anyway, I got mine last night!"

"Uuhh, yeah, a dry, grandmother peck in the dark; my underwear's still soaked."

"Yeah, well, a sordid love affair like the one we have will do that to you... And you weren't wearing a bra, so there's that-"

"-How kind of you to notice-"

"-Hard to ignore-"

"-Oh god-"

"-And those really are some rather flimsy shorties, Miss Swan-"

"-They're yours, Miss Lucas-"
"-I know... Enjoy that."

Ruby winks, and Emma sighs as she wipes at her cheek with dusty fingers.

"Anything else? Or did you just have the overwhelming urge to come and hit on me?"

"Hardly. Regina wants to see you."

"Oh?"

The blonde frowns curiously; jumping down from the ladder in a pale flash of thigh.

"Did she say why?"

"Uuhh, yup, she said that she's totally into you, and can't quit thinking about what you might look like under your little waitress uniform. I tried to explain the boob shadows through the shirt situation from last night, but-"

"-Ruby-"

"-No, she didn't say."

The brunette giggles as the younger woman punches her lightly in the arm before hurrying out into the Diner in search of the Mayor.

"Regina."

Emma smiles as she approaches the darker woman's table, and the latter reciprocates momentarily, before sighing as though bored.

"Miss Swan. I had hoped you might at least come bearing my order."

"Oh, well, that's... I mean, Ruby was-"

Emma mumbles as she glances up at the waitress, before adopting a murderous expression when the latter raises her brows salaciously with a shit-eating grin, and in turn tries to convey Ruby's imminent demise with the angle of her jaw.

"-Miss Swan?... Is something wrong?"

"Oh, no, sorry... I think Ruby's just getting your... Umm...""Coffee. Cappuccino. No-"

"-Chocolate. Right. Yeah. That. She's getting that."

Emma nods; speaking up so as to spurn the young brunette into action while Regina rolls her eyes dramatically.

"Honestly, is waitressing really so hard...?"

She growls quietly, and the blonde glares at her momentarily before remembering she has been summoned to the table for some unknown reason.

"Ruby said you wanted me- uh- wanted to see me?"

"Yes."
"Umm... Why?"

"I was paid a visit last night."

"... Okay?"

The younger woman frowns; her mind flashing her the image of the Sheriff's beer glass before she swiftly tells herself that Regina is unlikely to be beginning her morning with bedroom gossip.

"Any ideas?"

"... No?"

"You need to keep a closer eye on your cat, Miss Swan."

"Cass came to you? I figured she'd just gone off to mooch in the woods... Sorry, I didn't mean for her to be any bother or anything."

"Bother? She was almost made into a midnight snack!"

"Huh?"

"You're lucky I was awake and looking out over the yard, Miss Swan. Else that fox might well have gotten her."

"A fox? Nah, Cass could take a fox, no problem... I-I mean... Thanks, though."

She grins sheepishly as Regina purses her lips with an irritation she doesn't truly feel.

"Next time I won't bother."

"I didn't mean... I mean... I'm glad you went and saw to it... Just... Cass has gotten into it with worse than some country fox, is all."

"Yes, I should have known; she's a Boston cat after all. Who knows what she might have seen while living there. What, with strange men being allowed into the apartment and-"

"-Okay, okay..."

Emma snaps angrily, before rolling her eyes and pointing out

"And it wasn't just men. I let a strange woman in too, and look how that worked out."

"Indeed. Just look how that worked out."

Regina sighs, staring pointedly at the empty space where her coffee should be.

Smiling apologetically, the younger woman hurries over to collect the steaming mug Ruby places on the counter and brings it back to the table swiftly.

"Better late than never, right?"

"I'd rather it was just delivered to me on time."

"Yeah... Well... That's obviously best case scenario."

The blonde nods, and the Mayor shakes her head with an ill-concealed smirk.
"Yes, well, whether she's still there when I return home or not is another thing, but I would appreciate it if you would come and collect your cat."

"Of course. I'll take her home with me after I finish at yours."

"After you 'finish' what at mine?"

"Uh... Working?"

"It's a Saturday. Rather eager?"

Regina smirks over the top of her coffee as Emma frowns.

"Oh... Do I not work for you on the weekend?"

"No, dear... You sound almost upset!"

"Oh... No, I'm not, just... Lost track of the days I guess."

"Yes, well, today is Saturday. Tomorrow is Sunday-"

"-I said I lost track, not that I've suffered a head injury-"

"-And then the next day would be Monday, on which I would like you to show up on time for a change."

"I come straight after my shift!"

"Well... Run."

The brunette scolds with a smile, and she chuckles lightly at the heavy sigh the younger woman offers her, before leaning across the table and brushing her finger gently against the blonde's cheek. She frowns when this action is met by a sharp intake of breath, before dismissing Emma's reaction as one of someone uncomfortable with physical contact. Holding up her hand, she shows the blonde the dust that clings to the whorls of her fingertips.

"I also expect you to show up having washed."

"Oh, shut up- stop it. I was in the back."

"I see. Well... Don't let me keep you. Get back to work."

"I-"

"-And don't forget Caskett."

"I won't."

Emma huffs, turning for the back room with a low grumble at Regina's quiet laughter.

Trotting after the younger woman as she disappears behind canned goods and sauce, Ruby smirks, following her out of sight of any diners.

"Well, it sure was nice of Regina to see to your pussy-AOUW! Don't throw things!"

She grumbles as she massages her knee.
"Then quit bugging me!"

The younger woman snaps, and the brunette sticks out her tongue before leaning against the wall and addressing Emma thoughtfully

"Okay. Sorry... *Gotta* say, though... *Didn't* really see much 'nudging' going on there..."

"Yeah, well, maybe I just haven't *started* yet. I didn't know she was gonna *be* here... I was unprepared."

By now the blonde has adopted a small grin, and Ruby giggles appreciatively.

"Oh yeah? What, and now you're gonna come up with some grand scheme to pull out the big guns?"

"I have to go get my cat back, *don't* I?"

"I hear wedding bells..."

"Keep talking and you'll see stars, too."

"Oh, you charmer, you-"

"-Don't make me do it!"

"Okay, okay, go on, go get changed, *I'll* finish up."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah... Go get that puss-"

The waitress starts, before yelping in surprise as she's pushed unceremoniously into several large sacks of flour.

"I will."
Chapter 33

"Hi, Cassie..."

The blonde smiles as the tabby comes trotting down the Mayor's driveway to meet her.

"Had yourself a little sleepover, did you?"

Cass purrs in response; winding herself around the young woman's legs in an uncharacteristic display of affection. Emma sees through her act immediately and chuckles as she scoops up mottled fur in her arms.

"Uh, uh, I have nothing for you, you dumb shit."

Caskett seems willing to let this go—just this once—rubbing her face against the light cotton of the blonde's dress.

Her rather short dress.

"Who's there?"

Comes a familiar voice from behind one of the stone pillars that play a part of Regina's impressive porch, and the younger woman lets the cat back down swiftly.

After all... What better reason to pick her back up again.

"Me."

She calls back, offering the brunette a small wave as the Mayor makes her way down the steps.

"Miss Swan. Good of you to show up."

Emma smiles—ignoring the irritable note to Regina's tone, as she has come to simply expect such things—and shrugs.

"I had to finish up at the Diner. And then, of course, Whale came wanting coffee to go after I'd switched off the machine, and I dropped a plate, and—"

"-You can spare me the exhilarating tales of your morning, dear; I think I may survive without being bored to tears."

"You're just jealous. I'll bet you wish you got to run around in skimpy polyester and take orders, too."

"Not quite my style, dear."

"I dunno... I reckon you could pull it off..."

The blonde grins, and Regina clears her throat with a bemused frown as she is unsure quite what the younger woman might mean by such a statement. Pointing to Caskett who sits patiently in their presence on the asphalt, she continues

"Well, she's still here, as you can see. I haven't fed her; I don't want her to get any ideas when it comes to running off to a new owner. Nor do I see it as my duty."
"No, it's cool, I'll get her something when I get back in.

Emma smiles, before turning around to gather the tabby up in her arms.

Regina frowns; suddenly accosted with a rather alarming expanse of bare thigh, and takes in the blonde's attire with a narrowing of her eyes.

The younger woman's dress is one she hasn't seen before, but, from the way the fabric appears rather worse for wear and over-laundered, she suspects it might have been one of the few items the blonde elected to take with her when packing up her possessions back in Boston. It is a simple, pale grey cotton, and seems to harbour no real tailoring or style at all. Size-wise, it is perhaps a little too small, however, which is no mean feat given the younger woman's startingly slight frame. Still, all innocence to the matter aside, Regina finds herself musing that she hadn't really needed to know what colour underwear the blonde might favour beneath scant fabric.

Scarlet.

As it turns out.

Thinning her lips thoughtfully as she tears her gaze from slender legs, the brunette pushes away any discomfort she might feel and returns the blonde's sunny grin with an icy smirk of her own.

"I suggest you refrain from bending over in quite that manner, Miss Swan, lest others see what they oughtn't."

"Oh!"

Emma offers with a widening of her eyes and a coquettish pull at the hem of her dress, and the Mayor frowns as something seems to be a little, well, off about the younger woman's flustered, girlish behaviour.

"Why are you dressed like that, anyway?"

She enquires; dark eyes flickering restlessly over the thin fabric that hides very little.

"Well, I... I mean, you said I wasn't working today, so..."

"You are still permitted to wear the clothes I gave you, even when you're not working... And I suggest that you do so... I, um... I wouldn't want to think what some people might make of your current... Look."

"... How do you mean?"

Emma asks with a confused furrowing of her brow, and the Mayor hesitates as she had expected a little more bite from the blonde's response.

"Well... Just that the dress you're wearing is rather revealing. Not in the same way as Miss Lucas might choose to portray herself, but... Some people might conjure up some rather inappropriate thoughts given the amount of flesh you have on display, Miss Swan..."

"... Might they?"

"Perhaps."

The brunette answers warily; matching the younger woman's intense gaze with her own and struggling to grasp the peculiar shift in tension between them. If anything, she would say the blonde
seems a little *disappointed* by her reaction, but she fails to see why that would be. Electing simply to push such thoughts aside, she shakes her head as it suddenly dawns on her that Emma probably just doesn't much like the fact that she's continuing to take any sort of interest in her ability to look after herself.

Well... *I'm sorry, dear, but you'll just have to grin and bear it, I'm afraid... I brought you here to get you away from that hell-hole you called home, but that doesn't mean this place is entirely a safe haven. There are many things I have yet to make my mind up about, but for the time being, I am uncomfortable with the notion of you getting yourself into trouble.*

*You are a pretty girl, and that in itself can bring out the worst in others...*

Distractingly pretty, and she shakes her head once more as she finds there to be something inexplicably strange about their current situation.

"So, what *do* you plan to do with yourself given as you have the day off?"

"I don't really know... Ruby's gone out with some of the others to the park, but... I dunno... I didn't really fancy tagging along."

"No?"

"Nah... I mean, they're nice and all, but... There's *better* company to be found in town."

She smiles pointedly, and Regina raises an eyebrow, before sniffing primly

"Not that I don't *agree* with that sentiment, but, if you're going to be staying around for a while, perhaps you might do well to make some friends- or acquaintances- your own age. I didn't sign up to be your babysitter, Miss Swan."

"Oh... Well, I mean... I didn't mean you had to feel *obliged* or anything..."

Emma replies awkwardly, and when her shoulders slump defeatedly, the Mayor finds that this only serves to draw attention to the careful composure of the blonde's *previous* pose.

*What is going on here, my dear? What are you up to?*

For there had definitely been something... Well... *Strange*, to Emma's stance only a moment ago.

Something she's having trouble deciphering.

She has no such trouble now, however; the younger woman's dejected way of holding herself with Caskett hugged firmly to her chest speaking volumes.

Sighing, she rolls her eyes and turns back for the door.

"Oh, come on then, dear. I suppose you might as well help me with my iced coffee."

She smiles as she catches the blonde's small reply of 'cool!' behind her; inwardly a little surprised that Emma should be so keen to spend time with her, and not just because she would have presumed Ruby would provide a little more entertainment than she herself has to offer the young woman.

She simply hadn't figured the blonde to be someone *keen* to spend time with *anyone*.

...And nobody *ever* wants to spend time with me.
"You'll have to excuse me a moment, dear, I must just run up and check on Henry. Go through to the kitchen and help yourself; you know where the glasses are."

Emma nods and does as she's told, before turning around with an amiable smile.

"Why don't you just bring him down? Not to have coffee I mean, but he could sit-"

"I don't think so, Miss Swan... And I do believe that what I do with my son is my business."

Regina retorts with a stony hiss, and the younger woman opens her mouth to answer back, before offering a small shrug and disappearing into the kitchen.

She is beginning to think she might do well to leave the subject of the Mayor's son be.

It is an odd thing that Regina should act the way that she has done whenever the boy is mentioned; the brunette quite clearly doting on her child despite her hesitation to share him with others...

But then, given how new she must be to all this, that is only to be expected.

*Oh yeah? And what would you know?*

*Enough!*

She closes her eyes and takes in a deep breath; willing the constant angry voices that live inside her head to quieten down. In all honesty, she doesn't really wish to know anything much about Regina's boy- or anyone else's- and couldn't give a flying fuck as to the Mayor's declination to bring him down to be viewed and cooed over.

It had just seemed like a logical- hell, friendly- suggestion.

And it is the avoidance and hostility that shrouds the subject that now whets her interest, rather than the boy himself.

"Careful, Swan. Don't go digging around in other people's business..."

No, not when she has no wish for the act to be reciprocated.

Sighing, she walks over to the large jug of iced coffee that sits on the table- thick with condensation- and brings it across to the counter to fill up two, tall glasses. Placing it in the fridge when she's done, she turns around to find Regina standing in the doorway with a look that challenges her to remain quiet about the small altercation a moment ago. Emma complies happily enough and simply passes the brunette her drink.

"Your cat just left, by the way."

"She'll be fine. She's probably headed back to the Diner."

"Hmmm... Then your coming here appears to have been a rather pointless exercise."

"Well... I..."

"Still. You did as I asked, so I suppose we can simply leave it at that."

The Mayor continues briskly; not having meant to sound quite so perturbed by the blonde's company, especially when it had seemed to upset her before.
"Shall we take these outside? It's looking rather grey, but it has yet to rain. Once it starts, it tends to go on for quite some time in this town, so it always pays to make the most of the good weather when we have it."

"Sure. Do you get a lot of snow in winter?"

Emma asks curiously as she follows the brunette out through a set of french doors and across the lawn to a pair of wooden chairs beneath a canopy of leaves.

"Some years more than others, but we always get at least a little. More than you will have gotten in the city, I imagine."

"In Boston? I dunno, I was never around for winter. When I lived in Oregon we got a fair amount, but we'd gone up to the mountains by that point so I guess that's not too surprising. This one time, the car got stuck, and we both had to get out and try and push it free. This biker came and helped in the end, and I said to N-... It was quite funny."

The younger woman finishes blandly, and the Mayor sips at her coffee with a raised brow but says nothing on the blonde's swift change in demeanour.

Instead, she finds her attention flickering back down to pale legs that remain almost obscenely bare; alabaster skin now afflicted with a visible colony of gooseflesh. Smirking against the rim of her glass, Regina imagines Emma might now be regretting her rather questionable wardrobe choice.

"You're cold."

"Nah, I'm alright."

The younger woman replies automatically, and the Mayor has a strange suspicion that she might answer in that exact same manner should she have severed a limb.

"Yes, I'm sure you are, dear."

She smiles, and the blonde shrugs as she bounces her knee distractedly.

So much for the 'devilishly desirable' route...

She sighs- confused- not quite knowing exactly how to go about this rather doomed ploy of seduction.

"I like your top..."

She grimaces as soon as the words leave her lips, and she imagines her own surprise that she'd spoken aloud matches Regina's. The brunette cocks her head and glances down at pretty, cream silk thoughtfully and nods.

"It is nice, isn't it?"

"Uh, yeah..."

Emma replies; inwardly speculating that it looks pretty much the same as any of the other blouses she has seen worn by the Mayor.

Licking her lips, Regina frowns, still confused by the strange way the blonde seems to be acting.

Her puzzlement only grows when Emma dips her fingers into her coffee and retrieves a cube of ice;
bringing it to her lips while her cool gaze locks with her own. Watching the pink flash of the younger woman's tongue, the Mayor finds herself momentarily captivated, before she shakes her head as though to clear her thoughts. Rolling her eyes, she drinks in ridiculously scant fabric, long curls and the rather sexual way the blonde goes about courting her ice cube, and she speaks up irritably.

"Don't do that; it's childish."

She doesn't inject her tone with any real anger, however, as she imagines Emma doesn't have a clue as to how her playing with her drink might look to another, and simply offers the blonde a long-suffering sigh.

"Sorry."

The younger woman mumbles; crunching the cube between her teeth with her own sigh.

She frowns, struggling to come up with some other way to make her intentions known, but is pulled from such sordid fancies by the low timbre of the Mayor's voice.

"So, I've organised for your car to be delivered on Monday. I trust you have the keys?"

"I... Yeah... You really did that?"

"I said I would."

The brunette's brow furrows in confusion, and Emma nods as she forgets about her disastrous attempt at flirting and struggles to keep her face from showing the tightness suddenly constricting her chest.

It is true. The Mayor had said she would get the car brought over... But...

*That doesn't change the fact that it's a goddamned nice thing for her to do...*

"Thank you..."

She offers finally, and the brunette muses wearily that the younger woman seems more distraught by her offer than anything else.

"It's no trouble. The company will freight it over, so we can go and collect it out by the town line after lunch."

"Oh... How come we have to go out there? Why not just ask-"

"-Because. Don't complain."

"I'm not! I'm really not! Sorry, I didn't mean... I was just... That's totally cool!"

"Well... So long as it's 'totally cool', dear."

Regina smirks, before frowning when Emma abruptly pushes herself to her feet.

"I need to go."

"Oh? You suddenly have plans?"

The Mayor chuckles, before her brow furrows once more and she quickly gets up to follow the younger woman inside.
"Emma? Are you... I mean, I had thought you had the day free. We could always go and get ourselves some lunch if you-

"-No... I-I mean that sounds nice, but, I just... You said yourself that you had better things to do than to keep me busy, and I don't want to eat into your weekend, and-"

"-Why the sudden concern as to manners?"

Regina purrs, trying to get a smile from the blonde; Emma's sudden skittishness confusing her.

"Well... I'm in good company and all that..."

The younger woman jokes, but it is a rather half-hearted attempt, and the brunette nods slowly.

"Well, that's true... Miss Swan... I-"

But she trails off; not sure what more there is to say on a matter she doesn't even know the existence of. Instead, she simply points to the sink and asks the younger woman to wash up her glass before she goes running off to whatever urgent matter that has suddenly arisen.

Emma does as she's told, before stilling as her attention falls on the collection of notes and receipts pinned neatly to a board beside the fridge.

"You pinned it up..."

She mutters, and Regina glances over to discern the object of the blonde's interest and shrugs.

"Well, what else did you want me to do with- Emma?"

She calls as the younger woman places down her soap-sudded glass and stalks swiftly from the room.

"What-"

"-I really need to go! I just remembered I have... Stuff... I need to be doing! I... Thanks for the coffee!"

Comes the blonde's harried reply; already stood with her hand on the front door, before slipping swiftly out and pulling painted wood shut behind her.

Pursing her lips thoughtfully, Regina walks back into the kitchen and studies the noticeboard with her hands on her hips. Between a receipt for a dress- a rather expensive dress- bought the day before heading to Boston and a recipe for key-lime pie hangs the younger woman's scribbled illustration she had handed over outside the Diner.

After all... What else was she supposed to do with it?!

"What on earth was that all about?!...

Tiptoeing past Ruby's room- imagining the waitress will still be out, but not wanting to take any chances- Emma hurries over to her door, breathing a sigh of relief when she is able to slip into the comfort of her bedroom unnoticed.

A good thing too.
She *really* isn't in the mood to be seeing people right now.

"Guess you're okay... *Just.*"

She sniffs as she falls onto her bed beside Cass who hisses in alarm.

"Shut up."

Yawning in response, and watching pensively as the blonde remains deathly still on her back with her eyes closed, the tabby gets up stiffly and climbs on top of her girl; curling up to lie on her stomach.

"Cass... What does she *want*? Please just tell me... Why didn't she want what I was trying to give her?"
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

A/N: This was a hard chapter to write. I toyed a lot with how much to include here as I had to toe the line between what I wanted to say, and it all getting a bit heavy, and ended up not quite following my original plan ('plan' being a really fancy way of putting: this is kind of what I conjured up while making pancakes). Hopefully it reads well :) For those of you complaining this is too slow of a 'slow burn' I do get it, but I want to keep this as believable as possible :) Oh, and the ice-cream isn't a reference to this week's episode with Ingrid, it just seemed like as good a food as any :p Hope you enjoy and please comment :)

"Cass... What does she want? Please just tell me... Why didn't she want what I was trying to give her?"

The tabby offers no response, and Emma sighs as she pets mottled fur gently.

Her choice of wording is entirely apt, as, in her mind, that is exactly what she's trying to do.

Trying to give herself to the Mayor.

Trying to give what she has to offer.

Trying to give what has always made others happy to keep her around, to help her out, to not turn her away in the past.

It should be that simple.

It should be painless.

Hell, it should be fun, as she actually likes the brunette.

Likes her, and is undeniably- though she had tried to deny it, she really had- attracted to her.

It should just be an exchange.

Something nice for something nice.

That's the way it's supposed to work.

Isn't it?

It should just be-

"-It shouldn't be like this."

No. She had been thrown to find that the darker woman had kept her idiotic little drawing. As though... Well... As though it had actually meant something to her.

And she doesn't want Regina to go to the hassle of getting the goddamn bug brought over.
Not when she hasn't even found a way to pay for what she already owes.

"I don't get it..."

She admits quietly to Cass, who nuzzles into the sharp peak of her ribcage comfortably.

"It's not that I think I'm, like... You know... I'd get it if she wasn't attracted to me. But it's not really about that. I mean, it'd be nice and all... But, I mean... Everyone likes to feel good... Right?"

Right.

Always.

They've always liked it.

*That's not true*... *What about Neal?*

"Neal liked it. So shut up."

*Sure he did. But not that first time. He wasn't filled with appreciation and the deep want to keep you around...*

No. He hadn't been.

Far from it.

"He was angry... But that's different."

At least... She *thinks* it is.

Probably.

Maybe.

But she's never been all that good at figuring out these kinds of things.

As it was, she had approached the situation with Neal in much the same manner as she approaches her current deal with Regina... He had been nice to her and he had been in possession of both warmth and comfort.

So, she had just wanted to give him something to say thank you.

Same as usual.

To say *'please, don't make me go away'*.

Only, of course, at the time she'd never *see* it in such a way herself.

Would never admit to something like that.

And he *hadn't* made her go away... Had seemed- at the time- like he would *never* do something like that. Had seemed like he not only appreciated what she had to offer but appreciated *her*, too. That was why he'd been so *angry*.

She gets it now...

Kind of.
"Worse or better?"

"...Both..."

"Oh boy, you have it bad!"

Neal grins as he studies the blonde appreciatively. She licks her lips pensively, still looking mildly irritated at the fact he had laughed at her concerns for her health, and surprised to be informed of the fact she might just have a liking for her car-mate.

He finds her reaction altogether fairly amusing, having brushed off what he now suspects had been a pitiful attempt at flirting when he'd first picked up the young blonde with the thought that it might just be her way of conducting herself. He hadn't presumed she'd had any real interest, and he'd liked what she'd had to say and hadn't paid much attention to the odd insinuation made gracelessly here and there.

Of course, when asked, he will later admit that he had liked her, right from the start, but... Well, things had all moved a little quickly—what with suddenly finding himself landed with a mobile roommate—and it had seemed unwise to think on her appeal.

Still, now that she's made her curious confession, he finds himself thinking on it quite deeply, and he offers up a tentative smile as she grins at him shyly.

"...I guess..."

And she leans in to meet him as he moves in his seat to find her lips once more.

And it had all been fine, until she'd tried to climb over onto his lap and he'd pushed her gently back into her seat.

"Hey now, not so fast..."

He had told her off for her sudden—almost mechanical—way of progressing with what had been a pleasant moment, and she had been confused and frustrated but had eventually simply let the matter go and slipped easily back into amicable conversation with the odd, knowing glance.

After all... She'd wanted him to be happy.

Had only ever wanted to make him happy.

And what was it he'd said to her?

I like you.

"I like you; I'm not just going to fuck you..."

That's what he'd said at the time.

And, if she's being fair, she does still truly believe that he'd meant it when he'd said it.

But, of course, things are never that simple, and how does that old saying go?

...The road to hell is paved with good intentions...

A little heavy for what happened, if she's being honest.
What had happened was simply... Well... *Life*.

The blemished, imperfect wrath of reality.

Nothing more or less than that.

At least, she hadn't thought so.

There had been fireworks, and there had been music, and there had been a quart of whisky shared between them in that old, yellow car parked in the shelter of the dunes. They had watched the chaos of colours erupt in the darkness, reflected over the soft waves of the water, and it had been a balmy evening with a great deal of laughter and mucking around.

Once or twice they had shared a kiss, but, it had been... Well... Sort of *sweet*.

But, there is *another* saying she recalls. A lesser known proverb, but no less wise than the first;

*Whisky is risky, and it makes the girls frisky.*

Not just the *girls*, it turned out.

What had happened had just been what has happened to about a million and one *other* people sharing good company and strong liquor.

She vaguely recalls that there had been a rather meaningful look shared between them- Catherine wheels reflecting in dark coals in a way that had made her laugh, but not know why- and that they had stumbled up into the dunes and lain in the sand.

As for the Grand Feature Show, she doesn't really remember a whole lot, and imagines it was probably nothing all too spectacular.

It was *probably* exactly what she would later describe it as.

Drunk fucking.

And that was fine. It wasn't calculated in the end- was entirely *mutual* from what she can piece together- and it had been nice.

Until she'd been woken up.

To this day, she's still not entirely sure if she'd fallen asleep or passed out while lying with her dress pushed up and her underwear caught around one ankle beneath a big, yellow moon, but she guesses it doesn't really matter either way.

She just knows that she'd been quite happily blissed out and listening to the gentle sound of the water hitting the shore when she'd been rudely shaken and pleaded with to wake up.

Complying groggily, she had opened one eye to find Neal looming over her with his nose almost touching her own.

She remembers that she had wanted to tell him to let her sleep for about nine more hours, but something in the brunet's expression had been wrong.

*Very* wrong.

And she had pushed herself up onto her elbows to regard him quizzically.
"Neal?"

"Oh, shit, Emma... Oh, fuck..."

"What? What is it?!"

"I... I can't believe I... Oh shit, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

"Why? What's happened?!"

"Emma, I'm so sorry..."

And she had stared at him with growing alarm; trying to figure out what in the hell could have gone so wrong in the short time she'd been out for the count.

It had taken only a little while for it to dawn on her just what he'd actually been apologising for, and, with this awkward realisation had come several fractured memories of how they'd ended up in this mess only hours before.

His reiterating- not for the first time since their conversation back in the car- that she was seventeen. Like she didn't know that already.

His schizophrenic, drunken need, clashing with the repetitive murmur of "I don't want to hurt you". Understanding the reasoning behind the anguish currently playing across weather-worn features, she had smiled reassuringly and shrugged at him.

"It's fine! It's not a big deal! Seriously!"

"But I... I shouldn't have... Fuck!"

"But you did fuck..."

She had teased with a smirk, before the expression had slowly died on her lips as she'd taken in the tension in his stance and the disbelief in kind, dark eyes. She had adopted a more serious tone; telling him softly that it really was okay. Telling him that, no, she wasn't hurt, and that, yes, of course she had wanted to do 'it' too. Telling him to quit freaking out. Telling him he was beginning to scare her a little.

Before being dumbfounded by his miserable response.

By his anxiety and anguish that he'd taken what she might not have been ready to give.

"It shouldn't have been this way for you..."

"Uh... What about for you? Why am I suddenly so special?"

She had replied tersely; pretty sure she had been beginning to understand the grand assumption to which the brunet had jumped.

And she'd been right.

He had hung his head and whispered some crap or other about her 'first time' and she had lain back in the sand and laughed.
Laughed and joked back at him to try and ease the mood.

"Oh, shit, was I really that bad?!"

But Neal hadn't seen the funny side.

Not at all.

His guilt had swiftly become something else, and again, those fucking words 'only seventeen' had come back up, and she had felt the first dark flames of rage swiftly building inside her chest.

After all, what the fuck did he know about it?!

About her!?

And, she had opened her mouth to say as much, when a curious thing had happened.

She remembers it perfectly.

The thought- the clear, sensible thought- that had flashed through her mind.

The thought that there were two ways in which she could handle this situation. That maybe she could just remain calm and accept that the man sat in front of her seemed genuinely upset that she might have been hurt. That she could simply explain to him that sometimes life really is the pigeon sitting on the branch above the car of you, and bad things happen, and it's nobody's fault- well, nobody that she'd care to speak to- and it will do absolutely no good now to anyone to dwell on the matter.

And... She'd almost managed to keep her calm and do just that...

But... In the end...

She had gone about it in a more tried and tested manner.

She hadn't yelled. Not at first. But she had shown her teeth, and there had been nothing pleasant in her tone when she had told him quite bluntly where he could stick his goddamned concern.

Asked him what good it was to her.

Asked him why he needed to know things he had no business asking about.

He couldn't change them.

Couldn't make it all go away.

Had hissed at him, and, she remembers this quite specifically

"You can't un-fuck a child. Once that kid's ruined, there's no fixing it."

Before pushing herself to her feet and yanking her underwear back up beneath her crumpled dress and stalking off.

And by that point, he'd been angry.

Yelling after her to come back, but his voice also carrying that old, familiar tone of disappointment.

Well, so she had assumed at the time.
And she had stayed away from him for the rest of the day; walking around in the remaining leaves littering grey pavements and kicking at them apathetically; thinking on anything but the disconcerting question posed by a weary voice in the back of her mind

*What happens now?*

She doesn't entirely recall, but she would hazard a guess that she'd never come up with any real answer.

In the end, it hadn't mattered.

She'd been sat out by the harbour, watching the boats as the moon had risen with an angry, scarlet hue.

Throwing rocks and thinking about very little.

In the end, the sound of footsteps had caught her attention, but she had remained rigidly still, her gaze carefully cast out to the water.

He'd taken a seat beside her- not too close- and they'd endured each others' silence for a cruelly long period of time.

Eventually, Neal had cleared his throat and spoken to her quietly.

"I want to get going and continue heading east, and I don't plan on sticking around. I'm going to leave tomorrow morning once the sun's up... I would... I would think it a shame if you didn't come with me."

And she'd simply shrugged; inwardly willing herself to drop the mantle of anger worn so heavily around her shoulders, but not quite ready to face things without its familiar weight.

She had waited for him to get angry and walk off once more, but he had simply sat there, saying nothing more on the matter.

As for how long it had taken for her to yield and whisper that she was cold and wanted to go back to the car, she has no idea, but she imagines it had been quite some time as her legs had been stiff when they'd made their way back to the bug.

Once inside, they had spoken quietly, about everything but what had happened between them the previous evening.

About Neal's father, and about how things had been for him growing up, and about how in some ways she was able to relate.

She had told him several things she had never spoken of out loud before, and doesn't imagine she will again, and, when she had eventually climbed over the seats to sit across his lap, he hadn't pushed her away.

It had been slow, and gentle, and everything that had been lacking before.

In the end, she had made him happy.

They had both been happy.

But it had been a hatefully confusing experience, and one she doesn't wish to repeat.
With Neal it had been... Different.

But then, in the end, it had all gone to shit.

"If he'd told me what else he'd wanted, I would have given it to him, Cass. If I'd known what it was... What I could do better... It didn't have to be the way it was."

No, if she'd known what he'd wanted from her, she'd have done it.

Because up until then, he'd helped her, and she'd only wanted to make him happy.

"I can't fuck up like that again, Cassie, I just can't. I can't go back to Boston... I just... I..."

But she stops herself before her voice can take on the raspy quality she hates.

That weak tone.

No. She's not going to go back.

Not to Boston, and not to how things had been before Regina showed up.

"If she would just tell me what she wants-"

A low knock on the door and she massages her temples as she muses that she really isn't in the mood to spend time with the chattery young waitress.

"I'm busy."

She calls out, before raising a brow in surprise when it is not Ruby's friendly tone that offers a response, but a sultry voice she has come to know disconcertingly well.

"So you keep saying."

"Regina?"

"Indeed."

"Ummm... What are you doing here?"

"Well, right now I'm stood out on the landing, wondering as to your manners that I should be left waiting for an invitation to come in."

"Oh... It's open."

"And you can tear yourself away from whatever it is you're doing?"

"... Just come in."

"Yes, I can see that you're up to your eyeballs in things that need doing."

Regina muses as she lets herself across the threshold and smirks at the younger woman lain sprawled out on the bed.

"I was thinking."

"Well... That says more about you than many of the other people in this town."
"Depends... You don't know what I was thinking about."

Emma grins as she pushes herself up with a sigh.

"Given that answer, I'd imagine my ignorance might be somewhat of a blessing."

The brunette quips back smartly; taking up a seat in the chair by the window and smiling at the tabby that springs from the bed and wanders over.

"What are you doing here?"

Emma asks curiously; struggling to keep her thoughts from getting away from her as she currently suffers a peculiar mix of emotions when faced with the immaculately dressed Mayor.

Confusion.

Frustration.

Anxiety.

... Attraction.

"I... I think I might be getting sick... I just... I feel so weird... Not right at all. Not like myself. It's in my stomach, and, well, a little lower, but it's mostly in my chest. Like something might be wrong with my heart..."

She is careful to keep her expression neutral.

"I came over to get myself some lunch. I figured I might as well see if you were hungry and wished to join me."

Regina sniffs, before crossing her legs and regarding the blonde pensively.

"You know... I'm not sure what reaction I was expecting from you in concerns to your car... But you can colour me confused by the one I received, dear."

"...Oh."

"I presumed you'd want to have it here. If I thought wrongly, then-"

"-No. I do... Just... Well, you can't really get away with calling that one a 'business expense'."

"No, I suppose not... But perhaps I simply wanted to do something nice."

"... You've already been nice to me."

Emma murmurs with her eyes cast down at the carpet. Sighing, the brunette brushes the subject away with swift efficiency; not in the mood to pussyfoot around.

"Yes, well, fortunately, there is no recommended limit on such things. Now, if you've quite finished moping around thinking, there's an ice-cream parlour down by the park, and I do like to treat myself on a Saturday."

Nibbling at her lip before adopting a shy grin, Emma cocks her head to the side as she teases

"Just Saturdays?"
"With ice-cream, yes."

The brunette nods with a sense of seriousness, and the blonde swallows as she inwardly scolds herself for automatically reverting to the gutter given the way Regina's words could be taken.

_Hot shit, you need help! She's the fucking Mayor! She's hardly going be referring to any other kind of... Treat._

The thought has her blushing delicately, and she motions towards her wardrobe as she climbs from the bed.

"I'm in, but I guess I'll get changed first, seeing as my attire seemed to offend you so much earlier."

She smirks, and Regina rolls her eyes.

"I was hardly offended. I was simply concerned there might be those who'd look upon you in hopes of a flash of your undergarments, as they might well have found themselves in luck!"

_And that scarlet hue did contrast with your skin quite prettily._

Pursing her lips at the thought, she stalks for the door with the low declaration of

"I'll wait outside."

_Watching the door close gently, Emma raises a brow as she pulls her dress over her head. Catching sight of herself in the mirror, she runs her tongue thoughtfully over her bottom lip and fixes the seam of her underwear._

If she had been confused before, she is nothing short of entirely _clueless_ now.

She is observant enough to understand that the offer of ice-cream is simply a mask for the brunette to come and check on her after her- admittedly- rather abrupt disappearance earlier on. She is a little surprised that Regina would bother herself with such things, but supposes that it's hardly the _first_ time the darker woman has surprised her.

That said, she had imagined the Mayor might be a little perturbed by her earlier behaviour.

As it is... She had seemed altogether rather _friendly._

_Nice._

And the younger woman hadn't missed the way the pink velvet of the darker woman's tongue had flickered over her lips upon the mention of her dress.

_Clutching at straws now, Swan? Ever so slightly delusional, don't you think?_

_Perhaps._

Still, she believes she'll go mad if she thinks on the subject any longer, and pulls down a light shirt and some jeans; the latter bought by Regina as an after-thought once the counter had been laden with work-appropriate garments.

_Pulling them on and tying back her hair, she pads out to meet the Mayor with a smile; following the brunette down the stairs with a slight frown as she finds her attention flickering restlessly to the gentle sway of the latter's hips._
Sighing as she places the baby monitor on her nightstand and slips beneath crisp, freshly laundered sheets, Regina closes her eyes with a small furrowing of her brow as her thoughts return, yet again, to the peculiar afternoon spent with the young woman she'd brought here.

This morning, Emma had seemed in a particularly strange mood.

This afternoon, though... Well... She doesn't quite know what to make of the blonde's behaviour.

Emma had been pleasantly chatty, and had apologised twice for acting 'kind of freaky' during her visit to collect Cass. She had explained the premise behind one of her favourite books with surprising eloquence quite far removed from her usual way of conversing, and had listened politely to whatever the Mayor had to say.

All in all... A pleasant outing.

And yet... Not entirely in character.

No.

The keen interest in discussing literature might have been something she'd expect from the younger woman, but the request to sample her choice of rum'n'raisin had most certainly not been.

Not when in doing so the blonde had proceeded to lean across the table and pluck up her spoon to help herself.

Nor the way she'd offered up her own spoon- held out over the table- to be met with a measured look and the eventual shaking of the Mayor's head.

"No... Thank you, dear."

It had just seemed... Well...

But her musing gives way to sleep as heavy lashes draw closed.

"Good morning, Madame Mayor."

"Good morning, my dear."

She purrs, and She glances down at the multicoloured array of ice-cream tubs that adorn her desk.

Sure that something about this isn't right.

But not sure what that might be.

"You're late."

"No, I'm not. It's eight-fifteen."

The blonde explains, and She nods, as She supposes this is true.

"It's always eight-fifteen."

"You're doing your very best to make it so."
"It's as it always has been, dear."

"No. The hands moved. You went to the Sheriff. You go to the Sheriff for lots of things, Madame Mayor."

"Hush."

She hisses in reprimand, and the blonde smirks in response as she stalks slowly over; the light grey cotton of her dress skimming her hips to reveal pale flesh and scarlet lace.

She looks away.

"I know you saw..."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I wanted you to see."

The young woman reveals huskily, and She looks back up to find the blonde stood before her desk with the flimsy fabric of her dress now riding above her navel and doing little to hide the fact that it is all that she wears above her hips.

"Why?"

She asks quietly, and She runs her fingers thoughtfully over the intricate whorls of her throne.

"You know why."

And the girl swipes her finger through crimson ice, and She wonders if the blonde knows that its colour matches the wet blood that had sprayed from her throat perfectly. That it matches the lace that hides what She shouldn't see- what She oughtn't see- perfectly.

Pink velvet trails slowly over melting ice, and She shivers; the stiff leather of her corset creaking.

"What are you doing?"

"I want to give you something. A present."

"You've given me something already."

"Not like this."

"He used to cry, you know. Now that he's here, the crying's stopped."

"For now."

The girl shrugs disinterestedly, and she stalks slowly around the table and stands before the Queen.

"Why won't you unwrap your present?"

She pouts childishly, as she lowers herself slowly to straddle the rich silk of a Sunday Black gown.

And She doesn't answer immediately, but simply leans forward to taste the pale flesh of the girl's throat.

"...I might not like it. I might decide I have to take it back."
“Toss it out?”

“Get rid of it.”

“I'm giving you what I can...”

Comes the growled response, and She groans against bowed clavicles as a mischievous hand disappears beneath midnight silk and strokes forbidden flesh.

“You should unwrap your gift.”

The girl persists, and She nods distractedly as she runs sharp nails up beneath the rags of the latter’s dress the same way She has done to several of her peasant girls in the past.

“Scarlet suits you.”

“Why won’t you unwrap your present?”

And She frowns irritably as She is finding it hard to concentrate with the little bitch whining in her ear, and opens eyes She hadn’t realised had been clamped shut as teasing fingers enter her slickly.

“Do you want some?”

Dark eyes glitter with confusion as She looks down to find herself dressed in a most peculiar concoction of linen and tailored cotton. The girl sits perched on her lap in a tight, rough material that clings to her legs in a washed-out promise of sky blue beneath some sort of loosely fitted blouse with no discernible fastenings.

The girl holds out a spoon heaped with golden ice and proffers her a sunny smile.

“It's gingerbread. It's good.”

And She shakes her head to decline the blonde’s offer, before crying out as the slim fingers that now disappear between a peculiar metal row of tiny teeth find her most sensitive spot and tease her mercilessly.

“What are you doing?”

“Giving you your present. Take it. Everybody else does.”

And She frowns as her breathing becomes nothing more than a harsh panting against salted flesh.

“I dream about killing you.”

“Yes. You do. But that's not all.”

“No?”

“Not anymore. You're not killing me, Your Majesty. Perhaps you will, and perhaps you won't. But that's not what's happening right now. You don't just dream about killing me anymore.”

“I... I... Oh, God, yes-”

“-It doesn't have to be a dream, you know... I'd let you do it.”

“Kill you..."
"Fuck me."

And She screams as pleasure overtakes any sanity She has left, throwing her head back and tasting her heartbeat as her sex clenches and her muscles contract.

Eyes flying open in the darkness of her bedroom, Regina clamps her teeth over her bottom lip as she clenches her thighs around her hand, slipped beneath the silk of her negligee.

"What in the world...?"

Her breathing is laboured- as much with pleasure as with confusion- and she rolls onto her back and stares up at the ceiling with wide eyes.

Her first reaction to the sordid scene of her dream is shame.

And it is not an emotion she wears well.

That said, the girl who'd played the object of her subconscious's fancies is young, and for her to be thinking of Emma in such a fashion is entirely inappropriate.

Not to mention a little alarming.

That's just one of many alarming things your mind deemed suitable to conjure up...

True...

But... Despite her initial struggle with the twisted theme of her dream, she finds herself musing again and again on the scarlet lace of the blonde's underwear.

I know you saw...

She plays these words back in her mind with a frown.

After all... She had seen.

That part had been based on fact.

She frowns.

Yes... She'd seen. She'd seen due to the blonde showing up wearing an uncharacteristically short dress and bending over in a strikingly oblivious fashion.

Oblivious?

Had she really been?

She plays back the rather peculiar time she has spent with the younger woman today with a deepening furrowing of her brow.

Plays back soft lips closing on cold silver as the blonde had sampled her ice-cream in a rather more intimate fashion than she'd expected her to.

Plays back pale fingers dipping into iced coffee, and slick velvet flashing between sharp, white teeth.

"... Surely not..."

She whispers in the darkness of her bedroom, as it finally clicks in her mind what she had found so
odd about the younger woman's stance earlier that day.

*It was an attempt at seduction...*

She should know. She herself has adopted that sultry, poised look many a time.

She just hadn't *thought* to associate it with the blonde.

"... No. Surely..."

She shakes her head slowly, before turning distractedly onto her side in the vain attempt to push such strange thoughts away- cautiously ignoring the wetness of the silk between her thighs- willing slumber to take her once more.

She has a feeling sleep might be a long time in coming.

"You're looking cheerful this morning!"

Ruby grins as Emma bustles past her with an armful of laundered dishrags, singing beneath her breath.

"Well... It's a new day."

"It was yesterday, too."

"Yeah, well... I just think things might go a little differently today."

"Is this about your... Thing... With Regina?"

"... Maybe."

"Yeah? You think you're getting somewhere."

"Not yet. But as I said... Today's a new day."
"Hey... Ruby?"

"What's up, princess?"

The brunette raises a brow and chuckles at the look of disgust Emma offers this new nickname; entering the younger woman's room as the latter beckons her amiably.

"Do you think you could do my hair like you had yours the other day?"

"Sure!"

The waitress smiles, ushering the blonde over towards the armchair by the window and telling her to take a seat. Plucking at soft cotton that hangs over the back of the chair, she holds up the flimsy wisp of the younger woman's grey dress curiously, before tossing it onto the bed with a smirk.

"Ah, so that's what had Granny's bloomers in a twist."

"Huh?"

"She wasn't all too in favour of your choice of wardrobe when you left here yesterday... Something about legs and a lot of them... Was that your grand, master plan for Regina, then?"

She grins as she runs her fingers gently through long hair in an attempt to loosen unruly tangles.

"Let's just agree not to discuss it..."

Emma growls with a disgruntled glance in the dress's direction, and Ruby smiles as she sections golden curls from the younger woman's crown.

"If that's what you want... Though... I gotta say... I'm quite impressed. 'A' for effort."

"Thanks... That almost makes my near brush with hypothermia worth it."

"Oh, quit it, drama queen; it may be getting a little overcast, but it's still hot as hell!"

"Not true, and I get cold easy."

"Yeah, well, that's hardly surprising, I mean, look at the size of you!"

"... I've put on like two pounds since I got here."

Emma grumbles irritably- not a fan of their current subject- and the waitress shakes her head and begs for a truce.

"I just meant... Never mind. And that's good!"

"Is it?"

The blonde replies stonily, and Ruby sighs as she works with practised ease.

"Sure..."

Nibbling her bottom lip as she stares pensively down into rich, golden waves, she continues
cautiously; having imagined she would endeavour to steer their conversation towards the juicy subject of the Mayor, but finding herself curious as to the younger woman's predictably bristly attitude when it comes to their current topic.

"You know... You can totally tell me to shut up or whatever, but... Like... What's your deal, anyhow?"

"How'd you mean?"

"I mean, like... You're small... Skinny..."

"And you're brunette... What next, Captain Obvious? Is the game just to state inane facts about each other?"

"I've seen you in just your bra..."

"And I've seen you in your clothes. Okay, your turn..."

The blonde snaps, but Ruby isn't so easily deterred, and she states quietly

"You have marks along your sides... Did you... I mean, did you used to have issues with your weight, or...?... I mean, not that I'm judging or anything! I just... It's like a 'thing' for you, isn't it? Those marks along your stomach?"

"... I can probably finish this off myself. Thanks."

Tugging at the heavy plait in her hand so as to force the younger woman into tilting her head back, the waitress studies her coolly from above.

"Hey... I said you could tell me to shut up, not dismiss me entirely."

"... Then, shut up."

"Sure."

Ruby smiles, as she gently pushes the blonde back into position to finish off her hair.

"So... Is this some sort of new cunning plan? Dazzle Regina with your golden locks? I'm intrigued what's next, after you were so cheerful at breakfast!"

"Nah. This is more just... I have way too much hair and no clue what to do with it..."

Emma mutters, but any of her previous annoyance has left her tone and the brunette chuckles lightly.

"Next time, I'll teach you how to do it yourself. So what's new? Did you make progress?"

"When you put it that way, it sounds kind of like some weird sort of conquest."

"Well... You did tell me you planned to seduce our good Mayor... I-"

"-Yeah, well... It's not exactly like that."

"No?"

"No. It's not... I dunno... It's not that simple."

"Okay... So, what did happen that's got you all perky?"
"... I had a nice day yesterday."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah... I didn't think I would. I went there in that shitty dress and things were all a bit awkward... I kind of high-tailed it out of there, too."

"Too many heated looks and breathy retorts?"

The waitress teases.

"... She was nice to me."

"Ah... That bitch."

"It was just... It was a lot to take."

"... That's sad."

"Huh?"

"That's sad. It's sad that you think that."

"Why?"

"Well... Usually, when people are 'nice', that's not really the reaction they get back."

"Yeah... She kind of said the same thing."

Emma sighs, and the brunette frowns as she ties up tamed tresses and pads over to the blonde's bed to take a seat.

"So, you went back and apologised for leaving so suddenly?"

"She came to talk to me after I pretty much ran out of hers."

"Really? Regina?"

"I already told you; she's-"

"-Nice. Yeah. You keep saying."

"Right... We went out for ice-cream."

"Awwwww!"

"Don't make me come over there and sit on you..."

"And you say your flirting endeavours have been failing?"

"Shut up! Will you just... Can I just..."

"Okay. I'm sorry. Go on."

"I was... I don't know... In a bad mood. Kind of. Just... I was thinking about stuff... I kind of realised I'd gotten my head all mixed up about how to go about this... But, then I realised something. Regina's different."
"Well, yes, she is- in many senses- but in what way for you?"

"Wearing that dress was stupid."

"Okay...?"

"It was like... I don't know... Taking someone to a candy store than isn't hungry."

"She doesn't want what you're selling?"

Ruby grins, and the blonde shrugs, before continuing thoughtfully

"I kind of think that may have been the issue."

"How do you mean?"

"Selling."

"You've lost me... Are we still talking candy?"

"When we went out and got ice-cream, I dressed like I normally would and didn't... Do anything bad."

"Bad?"

"I kind of flirted- at least I think I did... I've never been much good at playing it cute rather than just putting all my cards out on the table- and we had a nice time. I still tried to, you know, slip in a few hints, but... Not in the way I tried to with the ice."

"With the ice?"

"I didn't... I dunno... Give too much away."

"And you seem to be doing the same thing now!... I don't follow!... What cards on what table? And what did you do with ice?!"

"Oh, I kind of played with it with my tongue a bit."

The blonde shrugs with a faint blush colouring her cheeks, and the waitress shakes her head with a small grin.

"Oh, Emma."

"I kind of think she just saw it as bad table manners..."

The younger woman chuckles at her own expense, and Ruby nods and suggests this might well be the case.

"Okay, so you guys weren't on the same page... And, what? You've never played it cute and girly before?"

"Not really my thing."

"So, then, how..."

"I dunno. Usually, if I want something- someone- I just make it clear."
"You're assertive?"

"If that's another word for naked..."

"Emma! I-"

"-I just mean that... *Most of the time, it's a case of knowing someone else might like me and making it clear that I'm game... What I imagine you can get done in fifty minutes with giggling and inane, simpering glances, I can get done in *five* by simply calling the shots and presenting the goods."

"Wow... No love lost with you, is there?"

"It's just... Practical."

The blonde shrugs uncomfortably- unsure what in the hell she's *supposed* to say when the truth doesn't seem to fulfil what the waitress wants from her- and Ruby holds up her hands to show she means no trouble.

In a couple of weeks, this will be one of the moments- along with several others- that she will look back on and berate herself for not pushing the subject further, but as it is, once again, she elects to simply put Emma's answer down to the blonde's rather quirky way of seeing things.

She lets the matter drop, and focuses instead on the prize to be won.

"And you don't think Regina would appreciate such a, uh, *practical* approach?"

She means it as a joke, but the blonde sighs, before glancing up and studying her shrewdly.

"Can I tell you something?"

"I thought you already *were* telling me something."

"I mean, like... Without you-"

"-Without me telling anyone? Because *again...* Kind of thought we were there already-"

"-Without you thinking I'm... Bad."

That word again, and a small frown plays across the brunette's brow as she muses absent-mindedly that she has heard Emma beg away from the term on several occasions now, with all the sheepishness and distress of a child fearing that they might be sent from the room should the verdict read true.

It is a vague reflection however, and it slips through the intricate web of her mind without ever becoming a fully-fledged thought, and painted lips curve into a pleasant smile as she flashes her teeth in a wolfish grin.

"But I *like* thinking you're bad... I like being friends with such a bad, *bad* girl..."

She allows the words to fall from her tongue with crass sordidness, and Emma chuckles darkly as she is shaken from her nervous worrying.

Licking her lips purposefully, the blonde smirks impishly back at the waitress, and she pulls her legs up in front of her onto the chair.

"*Well* then, let me feed that fantasy..."
She winks, before adopting a slightly more serious tone and lowering her eyes down to the honeyed ends of her plait as she winds her hair nervously around her finger.

"I kind of did something a bit embarrassing before I came here... And Regina found out... Kind of walked in on it actually... But-"

"-Oh my god!... Don't tell me you were... You know... Right?!"

"Well... No... Not yet..."

"Emma! Who?! What?!"

The brunette crows gleefully, before cocking her head and simmering down when the younger woman wrinkles her nose in a way that suggests this isn't the time for such exuberance.

"This guy that lived downstairs in my old building... It's just... Okay, look, here's the thing... I had no interest in him. None. But... I thought Regina had left by then, and I saw him down in the alley outside, and he had a big bottle of whisky, and... I really needed some right then."

"And you couldn't just get it yourself, because you're too young."

Ruby nods- trying to show that she can be understanding- and it is perhaps because of this fact that Emma shrugs and lets the waitress in just a little further.

"Right... But, I also just didn't have any money."

She adds quietly, and Ruby pulls a face of discomfort.

"Oh."

"So, yeah... I just... I was kind of in a weird place, I guess. Regina coming to find me threw me completely, and then she was gone, and I wanted a drink, and I just... I dunno... Maybe it was the heat... Maybe it was- I guess it doesn't really matter now what it was. Whatever reasons I had aside, I asked him up, and... Yeah."

"To share a drink?... Or...?"

"Yes. To share a drink... But I'm not stupid- and, yes, I realise that this isn't such a great topic to provide evidence of that fact- but-"

"-You're not stupid... You don't talk like you're stupid."

"It's not just what you say... It's what you do."

"Or who you do... Was he at least a nice guy?"

"Dunno. He was always nice enough when I spoke to him out in the hall. He was an old guy-"

"-Nothing wrong with an older guy-"

"-Maybe about fifty, maybe a little less than that."

"... Oh."

"See, that's the thing... It didn't really matter how old he was... His age didn't have jack shit to do with what I wanted."
"... A drink."

"Right."

"Emma, that's-"

"-It's dumb. It's a bad thing to have done. It's a whole load of other stuff. I'm not telling you this to get it off my chest, I'm telling you because... Regina walked in."

"Yeah... I mean... Were you... You know...?"

Ruby pulls a face and brings her hands pointedly together, and the blonde shakes her head before resting her chin in the palm of her hand.

"Nah, nothing like that. Just drinking. I had my top off because it was hot, but that was all... But... She knew what was going on. She didn't walk in on it, but she knew what she would've walked in on if she'd shown up a couple of minutes later..."

Falling back onto the bed, the brunette whistles quietly and turns her jaw to the side to maintain eye contact with the younger woman.

"Yeah... You're right... That's kind of awkward."

"Yeah, and I think... It was cheap, you know?"

"Well, I mean... I wouldn't say that."

"Wouldn't you?"

"Well... Not to your face."

Ruby offers a small smile; hoping to receive a similar expression in return as she tries to inject some humour into the situation, but Emma simply nods as if in agreement.

"Regina's not cheap."

"No."

"And that's why I shouldn't have worn that dress, or played with the ice... I don't want... I don't want her to think that I see her like I saw Mr Clayton... I don't want... I don't want her to see me like that, either. It... It didn't make her happy."

Emma finishes thoughtfully, and the waitress frowns as she feels like she and the blonde are no longer on the same page.

She has a vague inkling that there might be more to the younger woman's words, but- lacking in understanding of what this might be- she merely shakes her head and agrees.

"No, well, I can see how that might be... I'm sure she wasn't exactly thrilled by the situation... So, no more flashing your legs around... You gonna try girly and flirtatious a little more, then?"

She smirks; the weight of their previous topic slipping from her shoulders as she finds herself once more within familiar territory.

"... I'm going to try and give her what she wants."
"And what's that?"

"That's what I'm planning to find out."

"Gonna go do some sleuthing? Ask a few leading questions?"

"... I guess you could call it that."

Ruby chuckles and pushes herself up off the bed with a smile.

"Well, she's probably just put the little one down before lunch. Now would be your time to head over."

"I'm not going over there today."

"Then where are you going?"

"The Station."

When her alarm goes off to herald the soft glow of dawn and the quiet grizzling of her son from down the hallway, Regina finds her mind slowly piecing together the frenzied shards of her dream, and the disconcerting assumption derived from its content.

Scarlet lace.

Heavy lashes.

Pink velvet playing across melting ice.

Glittering green, while stolen silver had disappeared between sinful lips.

All of these snippets born from reality.

Suggestive of a situation she can't even begin to wrap her head around.

"No. It's simply preposterous. You've fabricated something sinister from an idle misunderstanding, dear."

She assures herself as she pads into Henry's room to see to the boy.

And, half an hour later, as she finds herself sat in front of the large vanity mirror in her room and painting her lips, she is almost sure that she must be mistaken as to several of the more sordid scenes now hazy in her mind.

By the time she fixes herself dinner that evening, she has all but forgotten the dream entirely...

Scarlet.

Cream.

Emerald.

Salt on flesh.

Soft weight across her thighs.
Pleasure.

Darkness.

Guilt.

"Enough!"

Yes, enough.

So, she may not have forgotten, but she won't think on such things any longer!

And, for heaven's sake! For her to be sat here questioning the existence of any real lust on the blonde's behalf... To entertain such a bizarre notion...

"No. There's no way..."

No. No way that the younger woman sees her in such a light.

Not past the interests of simple humour.

She only made those obscure comments to throw me... Back when she still had somewhat of the upper hand.

"Quite."

Still... She frowns as she goes about shaving slivers of parmesan onto her salad.

"I just thought..."

But she stops herself with a shake of her head- glossy locks catching the hazy light of the setting sun as it struggles behind storm clouds outside- and takes a seat at her rather lonely dining table.

A place set for one.

"...It appears I have overcompensated with the food, once again."

She murmurs as she serves herself.

Enough for two, at least.

She tells herself that she isn't- in fact- surprised.

That she hadn't been expecting Emma to show up at some point, looking for entertainment and company.

"Well, why not? Why shouldn't I expect such a thing, given all recent events? It has seemed as though I am unable to get shot of the damn girl!"

... A fair point.

But, I hadn't been hoping.

No. Surely not.

A knock at the door, and she pauses with her fork halfway up to her mouth.
A smile.

Placing down her knife and fork, she pushes herself from the table and brushes herself down before stalking into the hallway- teasing her hair expertly away from her face- and pulling open the front door.

"...Oh..."
"Oh..."

Smile faltering somewhat, the Sheriff cocks his jaw to the side as he struggles to decipher the Mayor's current expression. If he were to hazard a guess, he would say that it resembles something between confusion and disappointment, but he learnt long ago never to jump to any conclusions when dealing with Regina.

"Were you expecting someone else?"

He asks- half jokingly- and she shakes her head before applying the small, kittenish smile he has come to know so well.

"Who else would I be expecting? It's a Sunday; Johanna has the day off."

She reminds him as she beckons him into the warm light of the hallway and takes his coat.

She is careful to keep any bitterness as to the fact that her list of possible visitors is tellingly sparse from her voice.

"Is Henry asleep?"

"He is; I put him down before fixing myself dinner... Would you like some?"

"That's okay, I ate before heading over. I always do on Sundays."

Graham frowns, as it is hardly as though this is a new occurrence for the two of them. He has been visiting Regina's at eight fifteen on a Sunday evening for as long as he can recall.

"Oh."

"I can come and sit with you, though..."

He offers tentatively; his time spent with the Mayor infrequently involving all too much casual conversation. Still, despite possessing a cruelly cutting tongue, he finds the brunette's mannerisms rather charming, and he supposes he ought to tell her what happened earlier before she finds out for herself and jumps to any number of conclusions.

"That would be fine."

She informs him primly as she stalks back towards the kitchen, and he takes a seat opposite her at the table and nods affirmatively when she offers him a glass of wine.

"So, I had a visitor today..."

He starts quietly, sipping from his glass as the Mayor shrugs disinterestedly.
"What of it?"

"It was your girl."

"My girl?... If you mean Miss Swan, Sheriff, then she is certainly 'a' girl, but I fail to see why she might be 'my' girl."

She frowns; snippets of her dream flashing distractingly in the back of her mind.

"Well, you brought her here."

"She is not my girl."

"I just meant... Anyway, Emma came by the Station today."

"What did she want?"

"Nothing much really, she just came by to chat so far as I can tell... Not that much 'chatting' actually happened."

"-what do you mean by that?"

Regina snaps immediately, and Graham shakes his head patiently.

"She's not a girl of many words, is she?"

"No? I would have to disagree... I have found myself wishing on a number of occasions that the girl would desist speaking."

"Then she is much friendlier when it comes to you than to myself."

"Yes, well, you would do well to have less young women behave quite to friendlily towards you, Sheriff."

The Mayor growls, although she supposes most of her disquiet stems from the fact Emma has paid her Sheriff a visit.

*What purpose does she have seeking him out?*

None that she can fathom, but she supposes she had told the blonde to go and find herself others to bother rather than just herself.

*Yes, but I meant she should befriend some of the waitress's imbecilic lot, not go wandering into the Sheriff's Station in search of camaraderie.*

"What did you chat about?"

She continues silkily, and Graham shrugs as he tries to find a suitable answer.

"I don't know... You, mostly."

"Me?"

"I suppose. Just general stuff. She asked me how long you'd been Mayor, and what kind of things you liked to do, and how you were getting on with your little boy. Just small talk, really."

"I see... And, how did you answer her?"
"Well, I told her I couldn't really recall a time when you hadn't been looking after the town and doing what you do. I suggested that juggling a baby with your responsibilities can't be easy, but that you manage it perfectly well, and then we just talked for a little while."

"... And why did she come to you to enquire about all this? Why would Miss Swan presume you would have the answers?"

Regina frowns, and Graham furrows his own brow as he supposes he hadn't really thought about it.

"I guess maybe she figured I'd know more than Granny or Miss Lucas..."

"... That must be it."

The brunette answers eventually, and she places her knife and fork down in the centre of her finished plate.

"Either way, I just thought I'd let you know. She's a nice girl though, isn't she? Quiet, but refreshingly thoughtful."

"Thoughtful?"

"Well, yes. She got to asking about what you might like- perfume, drinks, flowers, stuff like that- and even made a little note on a scrap of paper. I think, Madame Mayor, you might be receiving a gift in the not so distant future. I think she wants to thank you."

Graham smiles indulgently, and dark coals study him pensively as the Mayor feels her lips form a tight line.

"... And is that something else you might know in place of Widow Lucas and her girl, Sheriff?"

She purrs dangerously, and Graham frowns as he muses upon this thought with belated disconcertion.

"I... I'm sure she just figured... She must have... I mean... Maybe she-"

"-She better not have been given any reason to suspect anything, Sheriff... Or else there had better not be anything to suspect... And I would so hate to call an end to our little arrangement."

Her eyes darken as she warns of this last part, and Graham clears his throat a little nervously.

"As would I, Madame Mayor."

He assures her quietly, and she nods; pushing herself up from the table and stalking to the door.

"Come. Upstairs."

Is all she offers, and she turns without waiting to see if he'll follow.

She knows he will.

Who wouldn't?

And, as she leads them into her bedroom and closes the door, she strives to eliminate all memory of her dream the previous evening. Tries to forget the damning wetness soaking her underwear as she has awoken with her thighs twitching.
Tries to clear her mind of the taste of soft, vulnerable flesh as she grazes her teeth against the Sheriff's throat.

"The Sheriff said you paid him a visit yesterday."

Regina states lightly as she deploys her turn signal and cruises a little deeper into the forest.

"Did he?"

Emma responds just as noncommittally, as she drinks in the passing scenery. She wears the same outfit she'd worn on her first day of working with the Mayor after having been gifted with suitable clothes, and Regina muses with a vague sense of distraction that it really is a lovely ensemble on the girl.

"Didn't you?"

"Yeah, I did... I guess he must have told you about it this morning... I mean, I left after hours yesterday, so..."

The blonde muses aloud, and the Mayor flashes her a sharp glance before returning her attention back to the road.

"... Only a couple of miles further, I think."

She murmurs, changing the subject.

She had been uneasy this morning prior to the younger woman's arrival; thrown by her thoughts- both conscious and subconscious- about the way in which Emma might perceive her, and had been uncomfortable with the idea that the blonde might show up clad as minimally as she had on Saturday.

As it is, Emma had wandered in- on time, for a change- with her shirt neatly tucked into her pants and her hair pulled back smartly, and had smiled her good morning with none of the giddy tension she'd favoured over the weekend. She had seemed relaxed- pleasantly so- and had responded to the reminder that they would go and collect the bug after lunch with a cheerful grin and an appropriate show of gratitude.

It was all in your head...

No- Regina frowns- she doesn't think that's true.

Doesn't know what to think.

And, as she strives to simply let the matter drop, she finds her nostrils flaring as she detects the faintest note of Chanel. Not the scent she had donned herself this morning, but the familiar- slightly sweeter- smell of her favourite kind; bought for her last Christmas after placing her request to the Sheriff, but long since used up.

She has been putting off purchasing any more of it before finishing with what she has...

Dark eyes flash over at the blonde and the Mayor studies her companion shrewdly.

"... Nice perfume."

"Thanks."
"Oh for-... Goddamn it!"

"What's wrong?"

Mary Margaret enquires worriedly as she addresses the irritable pharmacist; the little man stood with his right hand balled into a fist and the left holding a large, spotted handkerchief which he wipes habitually under his nose.

"Bloody thieves, that's what. It's those damn kids again, I'm sure of it. Though what they'd want with any of that ghastly smelly stuff, god only knows. But they're at it, I can tell you that much."

"Are you sure you didn't just miscount your stock or something? I'm sure the kids aren't-"

"Sure I'm sure. You think I don't know my own store?!"

"... Well, have you told the Sheriff?"

"Many times! But don't think I won't be placing a call. One of these days, I'll get them. Candy bars and trading cards are one thing... This is something else entirely. That was fancy stuff!"

Mary Margaret smiles sympathetically and places her items on the counter as the little man continues on with his grumbling; taking her leave with a small wave, and breath of relief once she's out in the sunshine and away from such irritable muttering.
"Cass, Cass, Cass!"

The blonde sings as she enters her room and falls down onto the bed beside the tabby. Caskett raises her head and observes her Girl curiously; recognising the lingering scent of exhaust and cigarettes that clings to the young woman's clothes, yet not the floral note gracing her flesh, nor the peculiar tone of her voice. She hesitantly makes the call that it is not a sound that should be feared, and purrs quietly; climbing onto the blonde's stomach and closing her eyes as skilful fingers scratch her behind the ears.

The Girl is happy.

She no longer smells of the city.

"You know... At first, I figured I never wanted to see that yellow pile of shit ever again. I went and picked it up when I got out, and... I just wanted to, hell, I dunno... If there had been a sledgehammer handy, that would have been the end of it. Finished... Might have been a good thing too... Did I ever tell you about my stupid idea that evening?... Well, one of them. You know, one day, I'm going to write a book, Cass; 'Emma's Stupid Ideas'... Probably not gonna win any prizes, but it'd be thick enough to use as a paperweight, anyhow."

Emma laments, but not without a fair dose of mirth, and Caskett purrs contently as she lets her Girl continue on with her own, strange sounds.

"Kind of like a Thelma and Louise thing with the car... Well, Thelma or Louise. Just one of them, I guess, as it was only me... And that kind of ruins the whole idea behind that story... So, actually, it's nothing like that at all... Just... A slip of the handbrake and a cliff by the water... I was going to jump out once it got going. Probably. I just... Man, I wanted that thing gone, you know?... These things just don't always work out like you think they will, and sometimes an incline isn't much more than a shitty, useless slope... But now?... I dunno, I guess while I was heading to Boston I figured having a car wasn't so bad. Not even the bug... Especially the bug... Do you get what I'm saying?"

The old feline digs her claws into taut flesh as she stretches comfortably, and the blonde growls and shoves Caskett back onto the bed.

"Always rough play with you, isn't it? We can never just chill out and talk, it always has to be pain and pleasure..."

She chuckles appreciatively at her own dirty thoughts and rolls onto her belly to study the cat lazily.

"You know... I think she kind of likes me- oh, don't roll your eyes at me!- I... Well, I dunno... I just think she does. Not in the way I'd like, but... I think she kind of likes having me around, and that's a start, Cass."

She smiles; rolling off of the bed in order to get changed for her shift down at the Diner.

She stills as she approaches the armchair over which crisp, white cotton hangs at the ready; spying a small, manilla envelope on the seat.

_Emma._

She recognises the no-nonsense capitals that grace the paper easily and raises a brow in curiosity as
she slips her finger beneath the flap in order to see what in the hell Granny might be doing leaving her sealed messages.

Her mouth falls open in surprise when she is met with several crisp, green notes, and she bites her lip hesitantly as she slowly slides the money from its neat packaging and counts it timidly.

"Oh, good, you are here! It was hard to tell, as I have a busy restaurant and insufficient staff."

Comes a low growl from behind her, and Emma whirls round in surprise; almost dropping the bills in her hand.

"Granny!"

"Come on, dear, do try to hurry along. I respect you've been on your feet all day, but I can't have Ruby running the place on her own, and my arm's been playing up."

"Oh, sorry, I was just about to, uh... I mean...I... What-"

"What on earth is the matter with you, girl?"

The old woman huffs, but her eyes twinkle, and she places her hands on her hips with the patience of one who spends a great deal of time rolling their eyes at- and yet watching over- the youth of today.

"Sorry... I just... You left this on my chair."

Emma frowns as she holds out the money awkwardly, and clears her throat when Granny simply raises an eyebrow.

"I realise this; you think I'm going senile?"

"No, I just..."

The younger woman frowns and tries to keep her breathing even as an intense wave of fear sweeps over her that the notes in her hand are a means to an end. A bid to get rid of her.

Oh shit, what have you done? What have you done now, Swan, you fucking idiot!? Shit! Please don't tell me to leave! Regina will be so goddamn mad! And I didn't mean to do anything bad, and I don't-

"I would have given it to you in person, but I wasn't sure if I'd catch you- having thought you'd be in a little more hurry than you clearly are to get down to work- and I'm turning in for the evening."

"Okay... But, what's it for?"

"Wages. What else would it be for?"

The old woman frowns, and she sighs as she catches a flicker of relief cross sharp features.

"But... I thought the room and stuff was-"

"Oh, you'll not be hitting the stores on any sort of spree with what's in that envelope, dear, but I don't expect you to work morning 'til night just for a place to sleep. You should go out with Ruby- and I mean out for ice-cream or a couple of games at the arcade before she fills your young head with fanciful ideas of accompanying her to that no good bar down the way!- or buy yourself something to wear over the weekends... I know the Mayor's given you plenty in that respect but-"

And she smiles as she cocks her head towards the door, before lowering her voice companionably
"I have a feeling that might be your first paycheck, girl, and there's something to be said for the first purchase you might make with it. It's up to you. That's your money, Emma, and you can do whatever you want with it."

"Well, shit."

"Excuse me?"

Granny barks- trying her best to hide a smile- and the blonde blushes sheepishly.

"I mean... Thanks... Thank you, Ms Lucas."

"Granny, dear."

"Granny."

Emma agrees, and the old woman nods; taking initiative and stepping further into the room to embrace the blonde briefly, before shooing her away with practised irritability and padding back out into the hall.

"Get a move on!"

"I am!"

Emma yells back obediently; stripping off and donning her uniform briskly.

Collecting the money she'd lain out on the bed, she rolls it up and stuffs it neatly into one of her socks and buries this beneath the others in the drawer, before hurrying for the door.

"Back later, Cass, don't wait up."

She grins, as she trots down the stairs; feeling rather elated at Granny's brief offering of comfort and the warmth of her hug.

"And that's two in one day, that's got to be a record!"

"Henry, Henry, Henry."

Regina sighs with a smile, as the small boy blinks up at her innocently.

"Why is it you insist on waiting until three in the morning to make a fuss, but you're perfectly content when I'm up and about?"

She sighs; rocking the baby-chair on the seat beside her as she turns the page of her book with her free hand. She squints every now and then- some of the blonde's cramped scrawl spilling out onto the edges of the text- but it is not something she finds anywhere near as annoying as she had thought she might.

Not at all.

In fact, the scribbling she is able to decipher catches her interest occasionally, as it relates to what is being said between the main character and his mother with carefully thought-out insight.

As though the owner of that messy hand might like to imagine herself as a voyeur of the world being described, rather than that outside the page.
"Here, try this one. It's good, and I think you might like it. I've read it three times now, so it's about time someone else did."

And, so far, she likes Emma's recommendation just fine.

She smiles, taking a sip from her wine.

She is curiously relieved as she sits and reads both the text and the blonde's annotations, as she feels it allows her insight into what she had glimpsed back in Boston.

Who she had glimpsed...

...As for in the flesh, she is still not quite sure what to make of Emma's strange mood-swings.

Today, after having been perfectly well-behaved in the morning up until their journey to collect her car, the blonde had seemed to slip into almost being herself for a little while- or, at least, what the brunette is pretty sure is 'herself'- once they had parked up outside the mansion.

She had sniffed irritably when stepping out from her car as she had mused upon the younger woman's bug being pulled up outside the perfection of her home, but it had been a half-hearted feeling of superiority at best.

In actual fact- now knowing who the car belongs to- she had found a strange sort of appreciation for dusty yellow paint and duct tape patching.

"You drive like an old woman, did you know that?"

Emma had informed her amiably as she had wandered over with her hands in her pockets.

"A fine way of showing your gratitude, dear."

She had scolded, as they had remained stood outside drinking in sleek midnight and beaten sunshine.

"I'm just saying... That whole road between here and the edge of the woods was completely dead!... I was half tempted to pull up alongside you and initiate a drag race!"

The younger woman had grinned- having spent their trip back following the Mayor's car into town- and the brunette had rolled her eyes before heading for the house, while the younger woman had run and collected a couple of old paperbacks from the backseat of her car.

"Well, I'm glad you didn't! That would have been incredibly juvenile."

"I think you just know I'd have won."

Sharp teeth catching the sunlight and cool green challenging her playfully.

"Won? What was up to be won?"

"Oh, we could have played for something...

"Really? You have nothing I would ever want."

She had sighed dramatically, but she'd quickly noticed- and why? Why had she noticed? And why would she care?- the way the blonde's expression had changed and had recognised her words as mildly spiteful. Rectifying any possible rudeness-
Of course I have no interest in what the girl might think of me, but I would hate to have been considered rude!

-She had offered Emma a sly smile of her own and pointed out

"I neither wish to own a cat, nor anything quite so obnoxiously yellow."

And, she had thought she'd done her duty in clearing the air... Before Emma had gone and muddled it all once more with the low reply of

"Who says that was up for the prize? The winner could have had the loser do whatever she wanted..."

A shared look- though of what meaning, she'd struggled to comprehend- before she'd shaken her head and led them into the cool sanctuary of her hallway with a rolling of dark eyes.

"And what might you have had me do, then, dear?"

A moment's silence, and an obscure gaze of contemplation, before slim shoulders had lifted in a small shrug, and Emma had replied

"Maybe I'd have let you win..."

Regina had narrowed her eyes while musing upon this answer, before the impish pull to pale lips had dissipated and green eyes had become wide and sincere.

"Look, I'm sorry I was such a dic- idiot about you bringing the car over... It was a really nice thing of you to do."

And she had taken in a sharp breath as the younger woman had embraced her, brushing her cheek with a distractingly soft kiss, before reciprocating the gesture woodenly with one arm and wondering how long Emma might mean to remain stood that way.

Still... It had been- not comforting! Don't you dare think it was comforting, nor anything else so ridiculous!- almost pleasant. The blonde had tightened her hold and pressed her small frame up against her, and she had eventually clasped her own hand against a skinny shoulder blade; breathing in the strangely pleasing scent of the younger woman's shampoo, before Emma had stepped away and headed towards the office with all of her usual sark and apathy.

They had said nothing more on the matter.

And yet, still, she had found herself repeatedly frowning over the sweet scent of Chanel so recently adopted by the younger woman, and the occasional comment made here and there that seemed just a little... Suggestive.

All in your head... It has to be...

But she finds she is no longer sure, and she fears what scenarios her subconscious might throw her way once she retires to bed.

"Hey, look, quit it, okay? Stop looking at me like that!"

The blonde hisses as she meets defiant yellow eyes through the darkness.

Pulling off her shirt and skirt, she stands with her hands on bare hips, and sighs.
"Come on! Don't be that way!"

Cass blinks apathetically and Emma throws her hands up with a snarl

"Oh, fuck you!"

She snaps, looking from Caskett to the perfume that stands on her windowsill.

"It's not like I killed someone!"

She appeals, but brindle fur twitches in response, and she sighs as she hangs her head and grumbles irritably

"You're a pain in my ass, you know that?"

Rolling her eyes and dragging her feet as she walks over to her wardrobe; she dons the jeans she'd worn over the weekend and a light sweater.

"Fine, you win, dick-biscuit. Save me a place for when I get back."

And she snatches something from out of her drawer before creeping from the room and into the night.

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"Wait... You're reporting a break-in, but... No crime?"

"It's like I said! I got here this morning and the door was open! Unlocked! No damage to the frame!"

"Maybe you simply forgot to-"

"-Sheriff...I have never, never, forgotten to lock up this establishment. Someone got in. I don't know how, but they did."

"... But they didn't take anything?"

"No! That's the strangest part... They left something."

"Left something?"

"Yes!"

The pharmacist wheezes, before sliding over his recent find in a neatly sealed plastic bag.

"... Thirty-two dollars?"

"And the note."

The pharmacist points out, and Graham frowns as he tries to make out intricate scrawl.

Sorry for any inconvenience.

---

A/N: $32... I have no idea what inflation for perfume is, but as this is about 14 years ago, it's my guess :)
Taking care to move with grace as She descends the stairs and stalks down the hallway, the soft click of stilettos on marble accompanies the gentle sway of her hips.

Frowning, She contemplates the sinful leather that lends her feet their cruel point in confusion.

It is a work day- surely- and She has a great number of more suitable shoes for such an occasion.

"How strange..."

She purrs, and her voice seems to come from very far away, yet echoes maddeningly in her skull.

Come to think of it; She isn't all too sure about the rest of her outfit either.

Business attire- or what She understands of the term- but isn't that just a little bit curious as She has little clue just what 'business' might await her.

For, isn't the pattern of the tiles reminiscent of her Summer Palace?

Evidently not, as She turns into a comparatively small kitchen drenched pleasantly in early morning sun.

Peculiar, as She could have sworn it had been eight fifteen when She had decided to make her way downstairs.

"What are you doing here?"

She barks, purrs, enquires, demands, as She sashays over to a modern glass table surrounded by ancient, high-backed chairs.

The girl doesn't answer, and She growls irritably as She picks up woven wool from off the table and purses her lips at the dainty, purple letters embroidered upon it.

"Emma."

The girl glances up at her- taking a break from blowing bubbles into her chocolate milk, her coffee, her whisky in cracked porcelain- and grins.

"You dressed up for me!"

A husky note of glee within childish melody, and She frowns as she takes a seat across from her guest and licks her lips.

"Why are you here?"

She tries once more; drinking in familiar grey cotton with a sense of unease.

There is something different about the girl's ensemble from when She had last encountered that scant fabric, however.

Sinful scarlet lace has been replaced by a messy ponytail, and several girlish barrettes, just like the ones She has seen worn by the children on their way to school.
Snow's children.

No.

How could that be?

Snow has no children.

She'd made sure of that.

Had banished the child.

Had lost the child.

Had found the child.

Had saved the child.

...Saved the Savior...

And the girl smiles back at her as she goes back to blowing bubbles through her straw.

"Emma?"

That name again, and She knows She's right, as it has been sewn into the blanket.

"Why are you asking me? I'm only here because you brought me here."

"To Storybrooke?"

"If you like."

"Why are you dressed that way? Aren't you cold?"

"A little. But how I'm dressed is entirely on you. This is your game, if you will."

"My game?"

"For now."

"I don't-"

"-Oh, stop that. Stop pretending you can't see what's right in front of your goddamn nose. You know what's going on, or else I wouldn't be here."

The blonde scolds, and she gets up to stalk around the table and brings over a series of books and papers before sitting back down and staring over the top of a curious pair of thick-rimmed glasses.

"What's this? What are you doing?"

"Work. Why else would I be here?"

"But you just said-"

But She trails off as the girl regards her with confusion, and the large, bay window of her office bathes them in sunlight.
Glancing around the familiar decor, She opens her mouth to inquire how it could be that they might find themselves here, before the sweet scent of honey distracts her.

"That was always my favorite..."

She confides, and the blonde nods.

"Yes."

"How did you know?"

"You know the answer to that, too. You do."

"...Graham said you came and talked with him..."

"Would he lie to you?"

"...Never..."

"Well, then."

"Why were you talking to him?"

"Why are you focusing on the Sheriff? We both know I wasn't."

"But..."

She frowns—considering this fact—before leaning forwards and studying sharp features critically. There is a bruise colouring one of the girl's eyes, and up close she can smell liquor on her breath.

"I don't understand."

"Really?...What's so complicated?"

And She raises an eyebrow as She finds herself lacking in an answer.

Dark eyes falling back to the baby blanket that lies on the floor, She takes in a harsh breath as she spies patches of mould and decay, before clenching her lashes shut and shaking her head.

When She opens them again, She is met with nothing but virginal white; painstakingly cared for over the years.

Sighing, She looks back up at the blonde, who perches on the table in front of her; primping the short pleats of her uniform.

In the girl's other hand, she holds a cracked mug carrying the heavy scent of whisky.

"...Did he tell you to take your top off, Emma?"

"Who?"

"You know who."

"Do I? I don't even know where we are..."

The girl shrugs—with no apparent concern for this fact—and She blinks as she takes in the familiar
decadence of her reign suddenly surrounding them.

"You were going to let him use you..."

She growls; keeping her posture carefully straight so as to keep her crown in place.

Green eyes regard her curiously atop filthy rags, and the blonde cocks her head contemplatively but offers no response other than to step forth when she is beckoned.

"Why are we here?"

"I can't answer that, Regina."

"Regina? A little informal, don't you think!?"

She snarls; lashing out impulsively and digging in cruel nails at the girl's throat.

"Madame Mayor."

The blonde rectifies raspily, although She knows that that's not quite right either, except...

Dark coals glitter with confusion as green eyes water in return; scarlet manicure digging into pale flesh as the She- the Mayor- regards the young blonde sat dutifully beside her at her desk.

A singular bead of blood falls down onto the pretty, white collar of the girl's shirt- bought for her so that she might have something suitable to wear while on the job- and sharp nails retract instantly; full lips pulled into a maw of disquiet

"I'm sorry..."

"What for?"

"You're bleeding..."

"Not as bad as last time-"

"-No! don't speak of that-"

"-You could have used the knife-"

"-No-"

"-Yes. You could. Look."

And She looks down at her free hand to find her fingers clutching the hilt of the blade.

"Why are you doing this?!"

"Doing what?... Regina, I'm not even really here..."

The girl points out patiently.

"But..."

"The question is, Madame Mayor, why are you doing this?"

"... What do you want?"
“You know the answer to that.”

“I was just... I was only trying to help you...”

“Yes.”

“But I... What you want... It's... It's not right!”

“Why not? I want to thank you.”

“But-"

“I only want to make you happy...”

Emerald sincerity accenting alabaster flesh, and She licks her lips in approval as her eyes trail bare, sinewy limbs, before flickering up to the plastic barrettes marring messy curls and the sporadic freckles dappling fading bruises.

“It's wrong...”

“Why?”

“I..."

But She finds She doesn't really know, and so She simply leans back against the fine upholstery of her throne and pulls the girl into her- fingers getting caught within cornsilk tresses knotted with childish accessories- and tastes her deeply as her eyes flicker to a desk that has no business standing within her private Palace quarters, littered with stacks of books, and an ancient, yellow-eyed cat.

Fluffing her hair in the mirror, the Mayor tells herself irritably that she doesn't look as exhausted as she feels.

Tells herself to pull her thoughts firmly back under control.

Forbids herself for thinking upon the fact that she had awoken this morning for the second time with her hand between her legs and her mind clouded with hazy depictions of the troublesome young girl she'd brought to town.

“What is wrong with you?!"

She scolds her mirrored image, and dark eyes reflect back, marred with uncertainty.

She sighs; deciding that she might take a break from tradition and enjoy breakfast in the peace and quiet of her own home this morning.

She has no wish to see Emma any earlier- or for any longer- than she has to.

“But, I've always gone for coffee at the Diner..."

True. And she imagines that in not doing so, she may arouse suspicion.

Really? Who would care?

No one- she sighs irritably- but, questions might be raised. Johanna might wonder, as might the ditzy little waitress.
"This is ridiculous."

She mutters, but even as she does so, she pulls on her summer jacket and raises a hand as she spies the ageing redhead trudging up the drive.

"Morning, Madame Mayor."

"Good morning, Johanna."

"Supposed to rain later, did you hear?"

"Is it? Well, I suppose it's about time."

"Gosh yes, and we could use a little water for the plants! My petunias have all but-"

"-Johanna, dear, you will have to tell me about your flowers some other time."

"Oh, right, of course, breakfast. Excuse me."

"Not at all. I simply-"

"-Like to stick to routine."

The older woman smiles, and Regina nods stiffly.

"I try to."

"Madame Mayor."

"Miss Lucas."

The darker woman acknowledges as the young brunette approaches her table.

"I'll go get Emma-"

"-Why? Are you incapable of doing your job all of a sudden?"

"No. I just thought..."

"You thought what?"

Regina snaps, and the waitress shrugs uncomfortably, before pulling out her order pad—despite knowing she won't need it—and quietly inquiring what the Mayor might like.

Pursing her lips as she shoos Ruby away with her usual request, the darker woman sighs as she spots the blonde sauntering in her direction with a sunny grin.

"Why must you insist on-"

She grumbles beneath her breath, but she stills as Dr Whale raises a hand to herald Emma's attention, and the blonde turns to tend to him with a small shrug.

She watches out of the corner of her eye as Emma chatters amiably—well, that's progress—with the doctor, and licks her lips unintentionally as she studies tousled curls; her fingers twitching with the memory of being plunged into that thick gold in her dream.
Whale says something with a shaking of his head, and the Emma chuckles appreciatively; sharp teeth bared in a grin and Regina looks swiftly away.

Looks away before she can contemplate the younger woman's attractiveness a moment longer.

"I mean, really!"

She mutters angrily; blaming Emma's recent queer mannerisms for this sudden confusion.

She sighs a breath of relief when the blonde turns back for the kitchens, and disappears in a flash of pale legs.

...What do you want?

You know the answer to that...

Yes, she believes she might. She has been blind to such things for perhaps longer than she ought to have been, but she believes finally understands the curious signs Emma has attempted to throw her way.

Perhaps.

Frowning, she supposes she still clings to the fleeting hope that she is merely misreading the younger woman's intentions with her sometimes bizarre comments and behaviour.

Lest she be required to think upon her own feelings towards the proposed situation.

"It's ridiculous."

She sniffs resolutely.

Yes... But she finds herself biting at her tongue lightly when Emma hurries back out with the doctor's coffee; a smile stretched across lips that she remembers tasting strangely sweet in her dream.

"Stop that."

"Hey!"

"Good morning."

"You cheated on me."

"... Excuse me?"

The brunette frowns, and Emma laughs lightly as she enters the darker woman's office with twin paper cups held in her hands.

"You've been my best customer all week! Then this morning I'm snubbed for Ruby!"

Pretty teeth flash in a grin, and Regina finds herself baring her own teeth uncomfortably.

"I-"

"-Never mind. I brought us some seconds- thirds for me- so I guess I can fill the void."

Emma winks as she passes over hot coffee, and Regina glances down at the cup held in her hand
thoughtfully, before looking up at the blonde intently.

"Miss Swan... What exactly is going on here?"
A/N: This has probably been the hardest chapter to write as I kind of fucked up what I'd planned to do over the next few scenes by initiating this conversation so soon, so had to do some damage control. Hopefully it reads okay, and, as I have taken the day off work "sick" I'll try and make things a little more apparent in the next chapter :) Just read this with the underlying words 'sexual tension' added in with each line-break ;). Please review!

"Miss Swan... What exactly is going on here?"

The brunette asks quietly, and Emma frowns as she looks from the coffee she'd offered the Mayor, up into arrestingly dark eyes.

"Umm... I kind of just thought you'd want some... I was trying to be nice."

"I'm not talking about the coffee."

"...Okay?"

The blonde's brow furrows deeper before she catches a glimpse of the challenge that glitters behind heavy lashes, and she takes in a deep breath and leans back in her chair; maintaining eye contact.

So, there it is...

She wants to answer the Mayor's question simply.

Wants to tell her how she feels.

The problem is... She isn't sure it's so much a case of her 'feelings' as her 'desires', and she doesn't want to have misread Regina's enquiry only to ruin what they've built between them.

Regina is her friend.

She has often been one to make the first move- to throw all caution to the wind and fuck the consequences- but it has landed her with more pain than it has pleasure.

And it's Regina! She could be referring to fucking anything! Don't go-

"-Miss Swan?"

"I... I don't know what you're talking about."

"You don't?"

The brunette purrs, and she thins her lips as the younger woman shakes her head childishly; sending loose curls tumbling over the front of her shirt.

"Nope."
They have reached a stalemate.

She doesn't wish to broach the subject that lingers between them any more than Emma does, and for remarkably similar reasons. True, her intentions may differ vastly from the blonde's- she doesn't even really know what her 'intentions' might be- but she is wary of bringing the matter out into the open when there is still a possibility- a small possibility, but it exists- that she's misread the signs the younger woman seems to have been putting out.

And she will not be made to look a fool.

"I'm not so sure that's strictly true..."

She probes, but she is met with a similar wall of self-preservation.

"What are you referring to?"

Emma asks, cocking her head to the side curiously, and the Mayor finds it hard to believe that there is no malice in the way the blonde wets her lips casually with a sharp flick of her tongue.

"Your behaviour, Miss Swan, is what I'm referring to."

"My behaviour?"

Wide, doe-eyes, and the brunette muses that the younger woman is either genuinely perplexed and now woefully distressed at such a suggestion, or- and she believes this to be much more likely- she's quite the little master of deceit.

"Yes, dear. Your behaviour... Around me."

Emma raises an eyebrow, before looking down at her cup thoughtfully; running her finger slowly around the plastic lid as though mulling over Regina's words. She supposes, in a way, that is precisely what she's doing, but not in the way the brunette might perhaps imagine. No. She's trying to gage the darker woman's manner behind her purposely vague statement; trying to gage whether the Mayor's words are tainted with mere discomfort or anger and repulsion.

She would hazard a guess that it's the former, but she recognises the need to tread carefully and doesn't imagine pushing herself up from her chair and simply offering herself up to the enticing brunette will go down all that well... However much the idea tickles her fancy.

It is how she has gone about similar conversations in her dreams the last couple of nights; stalking into the office and displaying her... Gratitude.

Somehow, she doesn't foresee attempting this trick in reality will end up with the same pleasured fucking and whimpering that has graced her slumber, and the thought causes her to smirk down at her hands.

Looking back up into carefully controlled features, she runs her finger over her bottom lip before enquiring quietly

"Do you not like the way I act around you, Regina?"

The Mayor's breath catches in her throat; Emma's husky query undoubtedly baited. Green eyes glitter back at her feverishly, and a knowing smile flickers like a shadow at the corners of the blonde's mouth.
The darker woman studies her ward silently—fiery gaze boring into cool ice—as she realises she doesn't quite know the answer to Emma's question.

*Do I like the way you act around me?*

*Do I like your crass tongue and skittish mannerisms?*

*Do I like your crude remarks and playful teasing?*

*Do I even understand the way you act around me?*

She supposes the simplest answer is 'yes'. She enjoys Emma's company, much as she loathes to admit it.

And, for *many* of the blonde's peculiar quirks, she believes she knows there to be an explanation in the way the girl had been living before coming here.

A less palatable truth behind a giddy masquerade.

She supposes that's what she'd hoped the sudden tension between them had stemmed from...

Rather than anything lewd.

Because, if Emma wants to know what she makes of her unwanted dreams and the heat that finds her cheeks— and somewhere *less* innocent— when faced with impish remarks and sly grins, she has no clue how to answer her.

*It's wrong.*

Yes, she believes it is.

But that doesn't mean she feels only disgust towards the fact.

She swallows.

Along with her dreams have come memories. Memories of that other world. Memories of watching a young girl— *several* young girls over her time—strip off dirty rags, bathed in the flickering firelight at her request. She had selected them carefully—just as she had done with the men she had allowed up into her chambers— as, apart from her brief marriage, it had been all about what she'd wanted and what they could give her. With the men it had been different; a more sordid, yet public affair. But the girls had been more familiar simply due to their sex in an almost comforting manner. They had been pretty little things, and she had enjoyed looking at them while they had served her. She had enjoyed being their Queen.

She imagines a couple of the young maids selected and summoned for can't have been any older than Emma is now, but... Things are *different* here.

Here, she is not the Queen, and here, there are bad parts of this strange land where unspeakable things seem to happen.

She had reigned back in that other land with an undoubtedly cruel hand, but her punishments and wrath have little in common with the mindless anguish the sorry inhabitants of this realm seem to endure.

She blinks as she is met with the sudden mental image of the blonde strung up by her wrists as her maids had been back in the Enchanted Forest, with her pale flesh on display before a grand throne;
completely at Her Majesty's mercy.

The idea causes her stomach to tighten with a sensation she strives to pretend is something _other_ than desire, but she is also met with the memory of Emma's dank, lonely flat and the girl's foolish self-endangerment, and she _knows_- _knows_- that things are different over here.

The blonde is young; almost half her age.

She is also damaged, and, having seen what the younger woman had deemed an entirely _appropriate_ response to wanting a drink, she doesn't feel Emma's sense of judgement is all that trustworthy.

_I only wanted to help you..._

Well, she supposes there had been _some_ selfish intent also, but... It's still _true._

It is not just in standing and context that Emma differs from the young girls she had allowed to make her feel oh, so good.

She hadn't _cared_ about those pretty, little wretches.

Hadin't given a second's thought as to what might happen to them once banished from her chambers.

... She doesn't want Emma to get hurt.

She doesn't think the blonde's desires are appropriate.

Because, the _reality_ is that she is eighteen years Emma's elder- and many more given the way things have moved on timelessly since arriving in Storybrooke- and over here, it isn't a case of instructing a useless maid to drop to her knees and see to her needs. Over here it's being trusted by an- albeit foolish- young girl who doesn't necessarily know any better. A girl who's simply feeling things towards someone that has shown her kindness.

She imagines she might be viewing Emma as a little _too_ weak and defenceless in this respect- after all, for all _she_ knows, the blonde might have herself in total control of her emotions and simply lusts after what she sees- but, it's a _risk_ to presume such a thing, and, from what she _has_ seen, Emma might not be weak and defenceless... But she most _certainly_ isn't in total control.

Regarding the blonde intently, she answers her carefully.

"I think you behave in a manner that is not always appropriate, given as you have entered a professional environment working beneath me, and I am quite a number of years your elder..."

"How so?"

And she recognises the defiance in the blonde's eyes urging her to enter the fray and get to the matter they skirt so precariously around.

"I just _do._"

She snaps with finality, but the younger woman is having none of it and shakes her head.

"How can I _fix_ it if you won't tell me what's _wrong?_"

Emma asks, and Regina eyes her warily as she is sure the blonde injects a _purposefully_ teasing amount of innocence into her tone.
"Emma... Enough."

She warns, reaching for her paperwork, before catching the irritable look the younger woman throws her; entirely serving to support her thoughts about age, as, with the stony expression that graces open features, the blonde is every bit the moody teenager.

Sighing with her own sense of frustration, Regina pushes herself from the table and stalks for the door with the declaration that they need more coffee, despite neither of them having finished the cups brought over from Granny's.

Tapping her foot on the cool tiles in the kitchen as she waits for the machine to kick into gear, she runs a harried hand through her hair as she struggles to pull her thoughts under control. She is flustered by her conversation with Emma- not that all that much was said with words- and she doesn't wear the emotion well. A part of her is angry at the blonde; angry at her for making things uncomfortable, and angry at her for being the culprit behind her broken sleep and disturbing dreams. Angry at her for the fact that she has woken up twice now with her fingers glistening with forbidden arousal and her thighs tense.

"Do you not like the way I act around you, Regina?"

No.

Come to think of it, she doesn't.

Because, before Emma started with her curious little games, any thoughts of an inappropriate nature had never even entered her head.

"She's confused..."

She murmurs quietly; ordering herself to believe this to be true. After all, she doesn't want to remain angry with the girl, and this explanation is far more palatable than some of her other options.

And, it's not like Emma would be the first. She knows full well that she possesses a great amount of appeal, and she is no stranger to others falling for her allure.

"This has been an incredibly peculiar situation for the both of us, and she's confused."

She repeats; glancing over at the small drawing that hangs on her noticeboard.

"She means well... And, let's face it... It's not as though you possess any real attraction to the girl when awake. Surely?"

_Great. Talking to yourself. Miss Swan must be rubbing off on you._

Sighing, and pouring two mugs from her cupboard full to the brim with coffee, she walks back into the study to find Emma stood by the window, contemplating her apple tree.

"Emma-"

She broaches, placing their cups down on the desk and waiting for the blonde to acknowledge her.

"-I apologise if I was a little strange towards you just now."

She smiles, and the younger woman regards her curiously as she stalks hesitantly back towards the table.
"Yeah?"

"Yes. I... I think I may have read too deeply into a few things."

"... Is that so?"

The blonde breathes, and dark eyes flicker as Emma closes a little more of the distance between them and captures her gaze.

"Indeed... I know you mean well... You're a nice girl..."

"Am I?"

A slow smile, and the Mayor's breathing becomes a little shallow as the blonde's nose is now only a mere inch from her own; those damning, green eyes full of dancing fire and forbidden promise.

"I..."

She frowns- struggling to find her train of thought- before clearing her throat and taking quick a step back to compensate for the one Emma takes towards her to close the gap between them.

"Sugar!"

"...What?"

"Sugar. I forgot sugar."

Regina stammers, turning swiftly for the door and letting it slam shut behind her; leaving Emma stood expectantly behind the desk.

"Goddamn it!"

The blonde hisses; turning to her left and punching her fist into the wall.

Wincing and cradling her hand against her stomach as ugly pain throbs up her arm, she inspects the paint for any damage before turning her attention to her fingers.

"Ugh, really?"

She sighs; wrinkling her nose at the shallow grazes painting her knuckles.

"Well, that didn't go to plan..."

She grumbles to the empty room, before chuckling wearily as she bends and flexes her aching fingers experimentally.

Sighing deeply, she drops down into her seat and waits for Regina to come back; reasoning that the brunette can't exactly remain locked away in the kitchen for the rest of day in an attempt to avoid her.

As if on cue, the door swings open, and the darker woman stalks over to her seat without another word on the matter; simply sipping delicately at her coffee, and averting her attention to the papers on the desk.

"You can get started on that other pile. No, not that one, the other one! Use your head."

She snaps coldly, and Emma swallows as she does as she's told with an awkward pull to her mouth.
Glancing up after several minutes spent working in silence, the Mayor rolls her eyes and addresses the younger woman in a kinder tone

"Don't put those finished documents back in with the others, dear. Here, put them with these."

And she reaches for the papers the blonde holds uncertainly- her fingers brushing against Emma's- and smiles.

"Sorry, I know I hadn't told you what to do with them... You're doing a fine job. I suppose I am simply used to doing things in my own way and I forget that you haven't been shown everything."

"Oh. It's okay."

Emma shrugs, and the brunette regards her thoughtfully as she catches a lingering note of tension in the blonde's voice.

"Look, Emma, about before... If, for any reason, you thought I was implying anything... Um... Unsavoury, I-"

"-It's cool. I think we might have just been on a different page."

The younger woman growls.

Yeah, right.

I don't think you were 'implying', Regina, I know it! I just wish you'd make it clear what in the hell you make of it!

"I imagine we were."

The Mayor nods indulgently; refusing to let her gaze linger on the blonde's lips that had so recently hovered inches from her own.

"Oh well."

Emma offers defeatedly, and Regina struggles to find something more to say on the matter; not wishing to aggravate the situation, but not liking the awkwardness that lingers between them.

"... About what I said concerning your behaviour, though, dear... Please don't take that to mean I don't like having you here... I do enjoy spending time with you, Miss Swan."

She smiles- feeling uncharacteristically indulgent, but she simply wants to call an end to the peculiar atmosphere- and Emma regards her with an unreadable expression.

"... Cool."

She offers eventually, before throwing the brunette a sunny grin; Regina's wish to defuse the situation backfiring drastically.

Not that the Mayor will be aware of this fact until darkness falls.
A/N: Clearly, pretending to be ill and copious amounts of beer make me very productive! Oh, and a note about the previous chapter; a couple of you have said Regina should be in her early 20s as this is long ago, but I had presumed she'd be the same age as when we first see her in the show as time has stopped before now? As for being 36 specifically, I have no clue, it's just my guess given how much older she needs to be than MM, and it seemed about right :) Hope you enjoy! Reviews are always much appreciated!

"Madame Mayor..."

Ruby frowns in surprise; the errand of fetching lunch usually left up to the blonde. That said, a quick glance up at the clock reads that it's almost three in the afternoon and much later than she'd ordinarily expect either of them to come by for supplies.

"What can I get you?"

"That really depends on what you have left... Something that hasn't been sitting out all day, mind!"

"There's still some lasagne, and Granny brought out a second batch not too long ago."

"Fine. Lasagne."

"Sure... To go, or-"

"-No. I believe I'll eat it here."

Regina informs her as she helps herself to a table.

"Okay... Cool..."

The waitress nods; bright eyes flickering expectantly over to the door.

"Is something wrong, Miss Lucas?"

"Huh? Oh, no, not at all. I was just wondering where Emma was?"

"How should I know what that girl does with her spare time?"

"I don't... I mean, I thought she was working with you?"

Ruby frowns, and the darker woman rearranges her cutlery with a tight-lipped expression of annoyance.

"Yes, well, I let her off early as the day's tasks had been completed."

The Mayor snaps, and Ruby senses she should let the matter drop for whatever reason that has put the brunette in her foul mood.
"Okay... So, just the lasagne then?"

"Yes, dear... Just the lasagne. Who else would be dining with me?"

Regina growls, and the waitress pulls a face of discomfort at the steely note in the darker woman's tone before attempting to lighten the mood; not something she would ordinarily attempt when faced with the Mayor, but she has found herself more and more curious as to Emma's positive, well, almost adoration for the seemingly unapproachable woman.

"I just wanted to make sure... How's Henry?"

"Why?"

The older woman demands, before gathering herself under control and sighing as she regards Ruby wearily.

"Why do you ask, dear?"

"Well, it's just been a while since you brought him in is all. A couple of weeks ago, you had him with you every day, but not for a while now, so I was just curious. You should bring him in! He's so cute!"

"... I believe what I choose to do and not do with my son is my business, and mine alone."

Regina replies dangerously, and the waitress holds up her hands and shakes her head placatingly.

"I just meant... I just wondered how it was all going, that's all. I just thought it was really nice seeing you with the little one, Re- Madame Mayor. Is he sleeping through the night, now?"

Regarding Ruby thoughtfully, the Mayor eventually lowers her guard- although her nerves tingle as she supposes she hadn't really thought about how it might look that she's kept her son hidden away in the mansion, and she just prays that neither Ruby, nor anyone else has given any thought as to the events surrounding his sudden disappearance- and sighs.

"When I'm lucky. He doesn't cry like he used to, but he likes to keep himself busy when he wakes up in the early hours, and he generally goes about doing so quite loudly."

She smiles reluctantly; not one of the waitress's greatest admirers by a long shot, but finding it refreshing to converse with another without that ever present shroud of hierarchy and tentativeness. Other than Johanna, she supposes Emma's the only one she really speaks to in such an amiable fashion, and she feels her face drop when she wonders if she's somehow blown her curious friendship with the blonde by bringing up her strange insinuations.

Insinuations? That was no confusion on your part! The girl was an inch away from-

-No, enough. Enough of this. Just leave it be.

"He smiled for the first time the other day, actually... He's pulled faces before, but this was a smile without a doubt."

"That's lovely!"

Ruby grins, before glancing up to see Granny tapping her watch pointedly, and excusing herself to go and see to Regina's order.
"Hi!"

The schoolteacher beams as she strolls across the playground towards the hedge. The blonde glances over at her from her perch on the bike racks on the other side and raises her hand amiably; careful not to drop the cone of ice-cream she works on.

"Hey."

"What are you doing here?"

"Needed to sit some place; I don't trust myself to walk and eat... Some messy experiences."

Emma grins as she chases a sprinkle from her thumb.

Mary Margaret smiles and leans against the old bench that overlooks the schoolyard.

"Live and learn, I guess. I meant more as in what are you doing around town? Don't you work for the Mayor during the day?"

"Yeah, but, she let me out early."

Emma shrugs, and the raven-headed woman studies her thoughtfully as she catches a slight hint of agitation to the blonde's tone.

"Look, I know I might regret asking this, but... Are you okay?"

To her surprise, the younger woman chuckles and offers her a smile.

"Oh, I'm far too drained to bite your head off, don't worry. I'm good, just thinking about stuff, I guess..."

*Yes, like what on earth to do now... Talking didn't work. Flirting didn't work. Goddamn perfume didn't work. What's left?! So, I know she's partial to gin thanks to the fucking Sheriff, what now? I go over there offering her to drink and play!?... Actually... That's not too bad of an idea, Swan, I mean, you've had worse plans before! Not that you can actually go and buy liquor, but-

"-ter than my day."

Snapping from her thoughts at the sound of the schoolteacher's voice, the blonde grins apologetically and nibbles at her cone.

"Sorry, what was that?"

"I said that eating ice-cream and daydreaming sounds better than my day."

"Yeah? Don't you build birdhouses with kids and get paid for it?"

The younger woman enquires with genuine confusion, and Mary Margaret laughs as she shakes her head.

"There's a little more to it... Usually, I love my job, but Archie called in to say he couldn't make it in as Pongo's sick, and he was supposed to be helping me with school pictures today."

"Isn't he a psychiatrist?"

"A psychiatrist that owns a camera."
"Oh... One of those."

Emma smirks, and the schoolteacher rolls her eyes before lamenting wearily

"He's let me borrow it, it's just a lot of organising of who needs to be where for one person."

"Huh... Well, I mean... I guess I could help if you wanted."

The blonde shrugs noncommittally; imagining the raven-headed woman won't actually want her assistance in case she fucks up.

"Really?"

An earnest smile, and Emma nibbles her lip awkwardly but reiterates she's willing to lend a hand.

"That's really nice of you."

"Yeah, don't tell anyone."

"... You're a strange girl."

"I've been told. Are you sure it's ok for me to help out though? I mean, like, legally?"

"Legally?"

"Well, don't you have to run background checks or anything?"

"... For what?"

Mary Margaret frowns; utterly perplexed as to what on earth the younger woman might be talking about. Sensing she's entering unchartered territory, the blonde simply shrugs and muses that things must just work differently in a small town.

"Never mind... Come on, show me what you want me to do, let's enter the fray."

She chuckles, and the schoolteacher raises a brow as her companion vaults over the hedge to land beside her; brushing her hands free of any crumbs on the sides of her pants.

"Oh my god, thank you so much!"

Mary Margaret groans as she locks up the classroom and falls into her chair behind her desk.

Emma glances over from her seat in one of the stunted chairs in front of the blackboard- long legs stretched out under a similarly dwarfed desk- and shrugs.

"Not a problem. Kids sure are loud, aren't they?"

"And boisterous!"

The schoolteacher agrees with an exhausted nod of her head.

"Still, you got all the pictures done, and everyone smiled, so I guess you did good."

"We."

"Huh?"
"We did good."

"Oh... Thanks."

Emma answers awkwardly, and Mary Margaret cocks her head as she watches the blonde go back to stacking the Polaroids into a neat pile ready to be handed out to parents the following morning.

"I guess it's not too long ago since you were having your own school photos done. Must be a natural."

She jokes, and Emma looks up at her with a shake of her head.

"Nah, I flunked out a while back. Not because I'm dumb or anything-"

She assures the schoolteacher defensively

"-I just... Had attendance issues. As in I didn't."

"Oh."

"I don't think I ever really got it done before that. Wasn't really much point-... I just must have been sick on those days or something."

She shrugs, and the raven-headed woman regards her thoughtfully, running her finger over the bulky camera on her desk.

"You never had your school picture taken?"

"No. But, like- hey!"

Emma blinks in surprise as her vision prickles with the camera's flash.

"Problem solved."

Mary Margaret grins triumphantly; holding out her hand in anticipation for the slide the camera spits out.

"I'm sure that's a very attractive shot..."

The blonde remarks sarcastically and the schoolteacher glances down at the developing photo in her hand and nods with a smirk.

"A bit 'deer in the headlights' but it's passable."

"Oh, good... Now if only I had a fridge to stick it on next to some fucking plastic alphabet letters."

"It's ok; I do."

Mary Margaret chuckles, and Emma raises an eyebrow with a bemused shake of her head.

"Knock yourself out."

"I will treasure it forever."

The schoolteacher jokes, and the blonde nods seriously in return.

"You'd better. I'd expect nothing less from an almost-stranger."
"I'm not a stranger-"

The older woman sighs with a smile, and she zips Archie's camera neatly back into its case.

"-I might not have known you long, but I wouldn't say we're strangers."

"I guess not."

Emma agrees thoughtfully; realising- not for the first time- that she feels an odd sense of pull towards the woman sat in front of her, despite the fact that they quite clearly have nothing in common.

"Not at all...Oh geez, I'm shattered. I think I'll forgo the glass of wine with dinner and get straight to the gin and tonic when I get home!"

Mary Margaret chuckles, and the blonde glances up at her with an unreadable expression, as she enquires casually "Gin?"

"Not something I make a habit of, but it's nice to indulge now and then."

"Yeah... Of course... Hey, do you think maybe I could come over and take a look at your art stuff after all?"

She asks before her conscience can get the better of her and shroud her with guilt.

"Of course you can!"

Mary Margaret beams, and Emma smiles back with the taste of deceit tainting her tongue.

__________________

"Ruby! I need a favour!"

"Hey! Woah! Knock! Changing, here!"

The waitress cries as she covers her breasts swiftly and hurries to pick up her shirt.

"Sorry... And it's not like you don't do it to me all the damn time!"

"That's different."

"How is that different?"

"You have nothing to hide! You're a little girl! I'm a beautiful, fully grown woman!"

Ruby winks, and Emma rolls her eyes as she falls down onto the brunette's bed and offers a graphic display of what she makes of this last statement.

"Yeah, well, woman, go find something sharp and sit on it."

"No, but thank you... Didn't you come here wanting a favour?"

"Oh yeah!"

"Mmmhmm..."

"You have really nice boobs by the way... And your hair today, I mean-"
"-Yeah, I know, now quit pandering. What do you want?"

"I need you to cover my shift tonight."

"Uh, I work the same shift as you, I can't cover."

"I know, but will you really need me? It's mid week, and it's been raining on and off today; there's gonna be like no one there!"

"Big difference between 'like no one' and 'no one', babe."

"Please?"

"Oh, how could I say no to that little face?"

The brunette coos as she leans over the bed to pinch the younger woman's cheeks; the latter thrashing away from her, giggling.

"I'll bite you!"

"You better not! So what's happening tonight, then? What could you possibly have planned that promises to be more fun than waiting on a bunch of tired old men and mopping up ketchup spills?"

"I'm going over to Mary Margaret's."

"... Since when?"

"Since, like, I dunno... Maybe three o'clock or something?"

"I meant more as in since when do you and Mary Margaret hang out together?"

"Oh... I guess, again, since about three this afternoon."

She grins, and the waitress smiles back as she ties up her hair.

"Fine, fine. But I'm going to tell Granny you're helping Regina out with something or she'll get all mad. And you owe me."

"Well, who knows, maybe I will help Regina out with something a bit later."

"What was that?"

"I said you can tell her whatever you like, and I'm willing to cover for you any time, and you're lovely."

"Yeah, that's what I thought you said..."

The brunette giggles, and she shoos Emma off to go and make her way to the school teacher's apartment; advising her amiably

"Don't do anything stupid though, okay?"

"I can't promise anything."

The Mayor jerks awake with a start; her lashes having fallen closed while watching Henry dream.
She doesn't wish to daydream.

Doesn't wish for her mind to wander.

Not when every time she closes her eyes she is met with the scene from earlier, only, this time, she doesn't take a step back when Emma moves towards her, and instead kisses the blonde hungrily; closing her fist around long hair and growling against the younger woman's throat.

"I want you to make good on every glance, every comment, every purposeful flash of skin you've been teasing me with."

"I want you to worship me."

"I want to fuck you."

"This is insane."

She laments with a grimace of distress, and she leaves the nursery quietly and pads downstairs to pour herself a glass of wine to take the edge off her nerves.

"What happened to your hand?"

Mary Margaret frowns as she reaches out for the blonde's wrist as the latter goes about decorating one of the schoolteacher's numerous birdhouse prototypes.

"Oh... Banged it on a wall."

Emma explains a little uncomfortably; pulling her wrist from gentle fingers with what she hopes is a polite shrug.

"You banged your hand hard enough to do that? It looks like you punched somebody!"

"... What colour do you want me to do the petals?"

The younger woman changes the subject swiftly and Mary Margaret recognises the need to drop the subject.

A good thing, too...

She has no clue why on earth she feels the compelling need to fetch the first aid kit from beneath the sink; the Swan girl more than capable of looking after herself by the sounds of things.

That doesn't mean that someone else shouldn't...

"Would you like a drink?"

She asks; dispelling her own discomfort with a smile.

"Please."

The blonde nods.

"I did buy some wine, if you wanted, but- and I really don't want to sound like I think I'm trying to be your mother or anything, just that I'm the responsible adult here- maybe have like a small glass, or-"
"-I thought you said we were having gin?"

Emma smiles winningly, and the raven-headed woman hesitates—thrown by such sudden, disarming warmth—before returning the younger woman's sunny grin and shrugging her shoulders.

"I did say that, didn't I? How would you like it?"

"Uh..."

The blonde falters—never actually having sampled the drink for herself— and simply waits as her host starts prepping her own glass with ice and lime and informs her nonchalantly that she'll have the same.

A decision she comes to regret moments later after taking an indulgent sip from her glass.

Fortunately, Mary Margaret remains engrossed in their painting endeavours when the younger woman sticks out her tongue and squeezes her eyes shut with a shudder against the taste of what she is sure is pure poison.

_Holy fucking shit... What the hell is wrong with these women?!_  

Composing herself swiftly, she offers the older woman an amiable smile when the latter glances up at her, and only hopes that her eyes aren't watering.

"Is that enough lime?"

"Oh, yeah, this is how I always have it."

Emma assures the beaming schoolteacher with an indulgent nod.

_How are you even still alive?_

"Good."

Mary Margaret replies, and they continue to paint and chat amiably in the cosy warmth of the older woman's apartment.

When it gets on for close to eight, Emma sighs and suggests that she should probably make her way back home; asking the older woman if she can use her bathroom before she leaves while glancing surreptitiously over towards the counter where the bottle of gin stands in plain sight.

Mary Margaret woman points her in the right direction, and she goes about teasing her hair into submission and checking herself over in the bathroom mirror. She isn't usually one for makeup, but when she spots a small porcelain pot holding a number of cosmetic items, she pulls out a dark, kohl pencil and lines her eyes carefully, before placing it back where she found it.

"Well... Here goes nothing... Again."

She whispers, before slipping from the room and spying Mary Margaret bent over her birdhouse as she touches up the edges of the snowdrops painted down the sides. Reaching out with a practised hand, the blonde swipes the bottle from the counter and lets it drop silently into her bag.

"So, thanks for tonight, it was fun."

"It was! You should come around again soon! I'll make us something to eat."
The schoolteacher suggests as she makes her way over to bid her guest goodnight.

"Sure, I'd like that."

The younger woman replies, and she is inwardly surprised to finds that she means what she says.

"Have a good night, Emma. Get home safely."

"I will. See you around."

And she raises her hand as she hurries down the stairs and out into the descending darkness; leaving behind the schoolteacher who closes the door gently with a warm sigh.

Padding over to the table, Mary Margaret collects their glasses and takes them to the sink, before glancing over at the counter and frowning as she could have sworn she'd left the gin out in case of the event of seconds.

"Just one step ahead of myself."

She smiles, retiring to the sofa and picking up an old book as she wriggles beneath the woollen throw draped across the seats.

Standing at the mouth of the Mayor's driveway, Emma looks up at the mansion that looms above her in the moonlight.

"Showtime."
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

A/N: Oh dear... The storm before the... Calm? Well, not quite. The storm before things get a little heated. Finally. Promise. :p I'm sorry in advance, but hope it reads well, and please review :)

=

"Showtime."

The younger woman breathes, before making her way up the driveway. Several of the lights in the mansion are on, and they create yellow all-seeing eyes within white stone. Mounting the steps while trying to quieten down the frantic beating of her heart, Emma knocks at the stately front door and composes her face with a smile.

Nothing.

Sighing, she wonders if she's being ignored, but she senses no movement through the frosted glass that bookends painted wood, and so doesn't imagine Regina's absence is anything personal.

"Well... I did try to do this the right way..."

She assures herself as she tries the handle without invitation and bites her lip when she finds the door to be unlocked.

Well, if she didn't want anyone coming in, she would have locked it, surely...

A familiar ethos that she has taken unto entering properties without consent several times before, but she stands by the fact that it holds maybe a glimmer of logic.

"Regina?"

She calls out as she lets herself into the hall, and she politely removes her shoes as she closes the door behind her.

"You around?"

Rewarded with no response, she pads over to the Mayor's office and peers around the door.

Empty.

And a brief inspection of the kitchen offers much the same.

"Huh."

The blonde frowns, as she wanders back out into the hallway and studies the stairs pensively.

She had knocked on the door fairly loudly upon her arrival and would have presumed the brunette would have shown herself by now. Cocking her head to the side, she listens out for any signs of life
and frowns when she picks up on a low whimpering from upstairs. Taking a hesitant few steps up the grand staircase, she is able to make out the telling sound of water running from the opposite end of the house and deduces Regina must be in the shower.

"Perfect."

She smirks, although in all honesty, she knows she is merely being a letch. She doesn't really think it would be a smart idea to burst in on the Mayor whilst nude and unaware.

"A shame, though."

She chuckles, before cocking her head once more as that other sound becomes a little louder

Wailing.

Weak and needy wailing.

She recognises that sound from the little wretch beyond the walls of her apartment back in Boston and feels her spine tingle.

Still.

She doesn't know how long the brunette has been in the shower, and how much longer she might remain unavailable, and to listen to such unhappy bawling without offering any reprieve doesn't seem quite right.

Mounting the stairs, she thinks briefly on Regina's rather obscure mannerisms when it comes to any mention of her elusive son, but she shrugs and supposes that the Mayor is just a little out of the ordinary in some respects.

Most respects.

"I mean... I'm not doing any harm..."

Shivering with content as warm water cascades over her bare flesh, Regina appreciates the scent of her lather guiltlessly. She is tired- not all that unusual given her schedule, but she imagines a fair amount of the blame should be placed on the blonde- but blissfully relaxed after a glass of wine and a couple of chapters from her book to take her mind off of things.

Off of the Swan girl.

Sighing, she finds that here- in the privacy of the bathroom and while pleasantly relaxed- she feels a little less appalled by the thoughts that have clouded her mind.

Not that she believes they are appropriate, of course!

But... Well... This is her own time.

And she answers to no one.

Closing her eyes- and knowing deep down that all of her inner turmoil and confusion comes to one very simple conclusion- she runs her fingers teasingly over her water-slick flesh as the scene played out in her study flashes behind her lashes.
The blonde takes a step towards her- closing the distance- and, instead of stepping away, she tastes her dominantly; breath laboured and hands roaming over soft, willing flesh.

"I'd let you do it-

The younger woman purrs against her parted lips, and she swiftly blocks out the mention of death that had plagued the dream she recalls those words from, and instead gets straight to the part she wants to hear.

"-Fuck me."

Backing the blonde roughly up against her desk, she finds her lips once more as she tugs and rips at the latter's pretty little servant's outfit; undressing her aggressively while the hard leather of her corset- a corset fit for a Queen- catches the flickering light of the fire dancing in the hearth.

The younger woman pants against her wantonly as she allows the rags to be torn from her body, before whimpering as the brunette increases the force with which she pushes her into the unyielding wood of the desk and drags her nails down her stomach to find her heat.

Humming quietly, Regina slides her palm down the wet flesh of her stomach to enter herself with a small, choked noise; steadying herself as she places her other hand flat against the wall of the shower.

"Oh, fuck, please, Regina..."

The blonde begs in her ear, and, unlike in the Mayor's dreams, she doesn't go on to speak in perplexing puzzles and rhymes, but rather throws her head back with a pleased cry as the Queen works her magic; pinned between the brunette and the desk and spreading her legs just that little bit wider at the darker woman's request.

Soapy palm slipping against cool tiles, Regina grits her teeth as her breath comes out in shallow pants; her fingers moving expertly just as they do in her mind.

"You shouldn't want this..."

She teases huskily as she leans into the blonde's quivering body to whisper into her ear.

"But I do... Please! You shouldn't want this either, but, you do..."

Emma assures her through ragged breaths, before her knuckles blanch against the table and she lets out a pleased sob as full lips close at her throat and apply blissful pressure.

The younger woman begins to quake as she cries and thrashes beneath the Queen's pleasurable wrath, before tensing tellingly with a yelp and closing her eyes as the brunette laughs softly into the thick waves of her hair.

Biting back her own cry, Regina braces herself with a shaking hand and tries to get her breathing under control as her thighs twitch and her sex thrums contently.

"Oh, god..."

She groans; licking her lips and shutting off the water as she feels a little light-headed.

"So, so inappropriate..."

She reprimands herself as she reaches for her towel.
True... But, dear lord... Any anguished wondering as to whether or not she might find Emma to be attractive to her- regardless of whether she would ever act upon such a thing- has been put firmly to rest.

Shaking her head, she pads over to the windowsill and unscrews a generous pot of sweetly scented moisturiser.

Pushing open the door at the end of the hallway, Emma steps into the small nursery and lets painted wood swing silently shut behind her.

Pulling a face at the baleful wailing that comes from a stately crib in the corner, she edges over slowly; feeling inexplicably awkward.

"Um... Hi..."

She offers the red-faced infant that bears his gums in anger at this confusing, brightly coloured world.

Garnering herself a break from unhappy bawling, she nibbles her lip as watery eyes stare back at her and raises her hand.

"Is it really all that bad?"

Henry hiccups in return, before closing his eyes and taking in a deep breath that threatens more screaming to come.

"Hey! Hey! Look! Dude! What's this?"

The little boy opens his eyes once more- face screwed up and ready to wail- and watches, bright-eyed, as the blonde spins the mobile above his crib to create a dizzying rainbow of colour.

Throwing his arms up demandingly, he lets out a series of low, bleating sobs; waiting for the curious girl to take the hint and bring him closer to the whizzing shapes that fill the sky.

"That's more like it."

Emma grins, before weighing up her options and shrugging as she bends over the crib and scoops the little one up in her arms.

Attention focused on Henry; she doesn't notice as the steady pounding of the shower shuts off and the pipes gurgle with their final hum.

"What was all that fussing about, anyway? Way I see it, you've got fuck all to complain about."

She admonishes amiably, and Henry gurgles in return as he wraps one, small fist around a section of cornsilk and presses the other against the blonde's chest.

"Oh no, not from me, you don't."

She chuckles, smiling at the little boy curiously as he stares back up at her with wide eyes.

"Where's you're mom anyway, kid, I have something for-"

"-What are you doing in here?!

The brunette's words come as a low rumble as she stands at the threshold with her mouth open and
the colour draining from her face.

"Regina!"

Emma jumps in surprise, and she whirls round to face the darker woman; moving carelessly and knocking the baby's foot on the side of the crib to illicit an ear-splitting howl.

"Fuck, I-"

"-What have you done!"

"Regina, I-"

"-What the hell do you think you're doing!? Look what you've done!"

The brunette screams at her as she makes swift work of the space between them and snatches her bawling son from the blonde's arms; the latter regarding her wide-eyed and open-mouthed which only serves to fuel her anger.

"What the hell is wrong with you?! What are you doing in here?!"

"I-I... I just... He was crying, and-"

"-And you figured you'd invite yourself in and ruin everything?! He's my son, you little bitch, and it's my job to see to him if he's upset! You had your chance! And by the looks of it, it's a good thing you made just as much of a mess of that as out of everything else you've done!"

"Wh-what?"

"I've seen your files! I know all about what you did! That bad, bad thing you did!"

"Regina... I-"

"-It's Madame Mayor! Not that it matters! I want you out! I want you gone! Get out!"

Fear-filled eyes blink back at her in shock- and she suffers enough awareness to note that her anger has caused the blonde to tremble visibly- but right this second she doesn't care. Her heart is in her throat and she feels as though she is going to be sick as her worst fear has come to fruition and she needs the younger woman to get out of her sight before she does something irreversible.

Not that Emma needs telling twice.

The blonde staggers slightly, but then she's off; running down the stairs and fleeing from the house at a sprint.

Closing her eyes as Henry wails in her arms, the Mayor shushes him desperately and bounces him on her hip as she becomes slowly aware that her hands are shaking.

Finally getting the baby to quieten down to mere, pathetic whimpers, she checks his foot but struggles to spy anything out of the ordinary save for a faint, red mark.

"Oh, no..."

She whispers as she holds Henry tight to her and shakes her head.

"What have I done?"
She deserved it. What right did she have coming in here and-

"-And seeing to a crying baby?!

It's not that simple! She'll try and take him away! Just you wait and see! She shouldn't have been in here! Should never have come to this place! Should never have been allowed anywhere near Henry!

"But how was she supposed to know that?"

She groans, and she hurries for the door and flies down the stairs; grimacing when she sees that the younger woman has left the front door standing wide open in her haste to leave, worn out sneakers strewn beside the mat.

It doesn't matter what she knows! She's bad news! Nothing but bad news! Nothing but trickery and saucy little games, and the minute your back was turned, what did she go and do?! What did she-

But she shuts off that accusatory voice that she recognises from that other land, and steps out into the driveway.

"Emma!"

She yells, though she is almost certain the younger woman won't have stuck around anywhere nearby.

"Come back... Please?"
Chapter 42

"Fuck!"

The blonde screams as she fumbles for her keys lost inside the loose fabric of her bag. Her vision is blurry with salt, and her fingers tremble; eliciting a broken tune as tarnished metal plays against the glass of the gin bottle.

"Ah!"

She yells, and she remembers this feeling, but it is anything but a fond memory. The feeling that all of the blackness that seems to be curdling inside needs to escape somehow, and the only way she can think of making that happen is through trying to shout it from her lungs and beat it from her fists.

She finally manages to snag the little, metal loop that holds her keys together and pulls them from her bag, before wrestling them jerkily into the bug's lock; scratching the paint as she misses on the first couple of attempts.

"Fuck, fuck fuck!"

Finally getting the door open, she falls behind the wheel and slams it shut, experiencing similar trouble with her keys when she strives to slot them into the ignition.

"What do you want from me, you piece of shit?!"

She cries down at the mismatched collection of silver and brass in her palm, and, if such misplaced anger at inanimate objects would usually serve to make her laugh, now is not the time.

Glaring down at the small collection in question, she contemplates the large room key that hangs against those for her car and her old apartment through a barrier of tears. Wrenching it free- snapping the little loop that has kept it in place- she rolls down the window and throws it out into the street with a choked sound, before winding up dirty glass and wiping her nose with her hand childishly.

Taking a moment to catch her breath- eyes closed and back of her hand pressed hard against her lips, mashing them against her teeth- she eventually takes a big gulp of air and tries the ignition once more; finally successful.

Growling as the old pedals bite uncomfortably at her bare feet, she reverses shakily- leaving a squealing strip of burnt rubber- before turning onto Main Street and speeding towards the woods.

"You want me gone? Fine! I'm gone!"

She yells up at the moon that struggles to break through a dense patch of cloud, and she sniffs irritably as she strives to turn her hurt into anger, as at least this is an emotion she has a better hand at dealing with.

It is a hard task however, as, more than anything, she still doesn't have the faintest clue what she should be angry about.

Doesn't know what Regina was so angry about.

...You messed that up just like you have everything else you've ever done...
I know what you did!

Look what you've done!

"You don't understand!"

She cries as she slams her hands against the wheel, causing the car to drift between lanes.

"I thought you understood, but you don't! I'm not bad! I'm not... Bad."

She growls this last part, gripping the wheel tight as her throat hurts from yelling.

Breathing harshly through her nose, she reaches over to open the glovebox and fumbles out her glasses.

"Shit..."

She curses beneath her breath; a slice of white tainting her vision from the crack in the left lens.

"Fuck it."

Shaking her head and trying to settle her nerves, she swallows, before leaning over once more to retrieve the gin bottle from her bag. Un螺丝ing the cap with her hands off the wheel, she takes an indulgent nip and shudders; hating the taste, but finding that fact to be just goddamn fine.

Sitting defeatedly on the bottom step of the stairs, Regina gazes numbly out into the darkness beyond the front door. Henry sleeps contently against her breast, and she runs her thumb repetitively over the pink star of his foot. She can hear the steady ticking of the clock in the kitchen but has no clue how long she's been sat there.

A good twenty minutes at least, she guesses.

Sighing as a low rumble is followed by the heavy patter of rain, she pushes herself up with a wince and closes the door; resting her hand on the deadbolt as she does every night, before retracting her fingers and leaving it unlocked.

Licking her lips nervously, she flicks the switch to her side that ignites the porch light, before ascending the stairs slowly. She glances over towards Henry's nursery when she reaches the landing, before retiring to her room with the boy in her arms.

"Oh, dear..."

She murmurs unhappily as she settles down upon plush covers and holds her son to her for comfort. It has been a good many years since she has last argued with anyone, rather than simply using her stature to demand a surrender of any opposing will. Disagreements as the Queen may have been sporadically bloody... But disagreements with a friend, it turns out, are much worse.

It is a... Well... It is a 'crappy' feeling. She imagines that's what Emma might call it, and it suits her just fine.

An ache.

She feels horrible for the things she had said to the younger woman upon finding her up in the nursery, and although she has no earthly clue why Emma might have been in Henry's room in the first place, she doesn't believe- now that she's calmed down- that it will have been out of malice.
"I'll talk to her tomorrow..."

She murmurs down at Henry as he dreams peacefully. It is a conversation she's not looking forward to- is dreading, actually- but she doesn't imagine that Emma will be the one to seek her out given the spiteful things that had fallen from her lips.

And she wants to make amends as soon as possible.

"I knew bringing her here would be trouble... I just never foresaw it being like this."

No. Nothing like this.

She supposes sleep might be a long time in coming as her chest aches miserably, and she imagines Emma won't be finding it any easier. She sincerely hopes that the blonde will have the good sense- and have changed enough- to go and seek out the waitress when she gets home. The thought makes her feel a little queasy- not relishing the idea of the younger woman disclosing anything about the hateful things that have happened here tonight- but, she doesn't want to think that Emma will have elected to sit awake and alone feeling the way she must be feeling.

"She's come further than that. She'll seek comfort... Surely."

*Come further than that? Well, dearest, perhaps so... But what now? Any progress made has had little time to anchor its roots... And you may have just succeeded in wrenching free whatever positivity was blossoming; perhaps taking some of the foundation along with it...*

"I didn't mean it..."

No?

No. Not that she wants the blonde gone.

"Oh, Henry."

She sighs, and, it appears her fears as to the fickleness of sleep were unfounded, as her lashes flutter exhaustedly closed and she enters a fitful and uneasy slumber.

"Shit!"

The blonde yelps; swerving swiftly as a set of headlights rush towards her. Giving herself a rough, mental shake, she swallows nervously- tongue bitter with liquor- and focuses her attention more firmly on the road.

She is unsure at exactly what point she'd decided to cross the state line and come this way. She's not entirely sure she's even been awake for the whole journey, though she supposes she must have been. A worrying sensation, as it's getting on for midnight, and she's been on the road for a couple of hours now.

"Where the fuck are you going, Swan?"

She murmurs; glancing up into her rearview mirror and looking back into bloodshot eyes morosely.

It's a wasted question.

Signs for Boston large and ominous as they loom over the highway.
It's not really a 'solution' she supposes, but...

It's no worse or better than anyplace else.

*Storybrooke was-

"-Fuck Storybrooke!"

She shoots down the timid voice that's doing quite a number on the inside of her skull, and she swears irritably as she almost misses her turning; slamming down on the brakes and clipping the curb as she directs the bug unsteadily towards town.

That small voice- the one that won't just shut the fuck *up-* whispers nervously that she better hope that any cops working the night shift have something better to do than watching the road, but the angry blackness that has engulfed the rest of her growls back that she doesn't much care.

*Don't be like that, you were doing so much better! You were-*

"-Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!"

And she skids around the corner towards the old, familiar lean-to, the idea never crossing her mind that it's not just the *police* she should be wary of, but also her reckless use of the car.

"Ow!"

Emma yelps- balancing on one leg- as she brushes fractured glass from the bottom of her foot.

"Bitch."

She offers at the broken bottle lying guiltily in the tarmac lot, before limping over to the front door of her old apartment building with chattering teeth. She fishes for her keys and lets herself in; wrinkling her nose at the putrid stench that lingers in the hallway.

"*That, I did not miss.*"

She tries to chuckle, but the sound is all wrong, and she swiftly shuts her mouth before it can drive her insane.

Making slow work of the stairs- still not entirely sure what she's doing here- she stands outside the door to her apartment and sighs.

It's not so much a case of what she's doing *here.*

It's what is she going to do anywhere *else?*

It's *still* her apartment, at least until the end of next month, so it makes sense to have come home.

"Ha!"

She wipes her eyes and opens up the door, pulling a face as she is met with an unpleasant smell in here, too.

She looks around for the culprit- bare, cracked walls and a few, strewn leftovers of her past providing no answer- before noticing the plates stacked by the sink.
Padding slowly over, she looks down at mismatched crockery for a long time— the remnants of egg and bread clinging stubbornly to the plate and coated in an unsavoury skin of mould— before holding her hair back neatly and vomiting into the sink.

Turning on the tap, she stands with her palms braced against the counter and her head bent— arms shaking— and spits.

Pushing herself up only when her hands have started cramping against the lip of the surface, she washes them beneath the frigid water, before splashing the cool liquid into her face.

Stripping off her clothes clumsily, she pulls the bottle with what's left of the gin from her bag, and knocks it back with a wince, before gagging and letting the empty vessel drop from her hand with a shake of her head. Crawling into bed— the mattress slightly damp from over a week of changing weather and an open window— she closes her eyes with a frown as she feels around for what she knows is missing.

Realisation striking her, she cries out in a way she hasn't done since she was a child.
"Cass!"

But the apartment is empty, and she pulls the covers up over her head and sobs quietly.

Making her way downstairs, Regina rubs her eyes wearily; feeling as though whatever sleep she'd managed to get has counted for nothing. She feels drained. Unhappy.

And that's not something she will generally allow.

She had awoken in the early hours as Henry had squirmed in her arms, and had put him quietly to bed before slipping back beneath her own plush covers; any of the erotic scenes that have tormented her dreams the past few evenings replaced by flickering scenes of anger and disbelief.

"Well... She'll at least have to hear me out."

Will she?

_Hear you out about what, exactly? What explanation do you have that you're willing to give the poor girl?_

"I'll cross that bridge when it comes to it."

She sighs; wishing Johanna would make an appearance so that she might leave to get things over with. She isn't thrilled at the idea of cornering Emma at work— that is, if the blonde has even shown face this morning— but she deems it highly unlikely that the younger woman will be coming over to her office once her shift at the Diner finishes.

Pacing the hall, she finds herself uneasy as she continues to wait and stalks briskly over to the front door in order to head down the driveway to collect her mail.

Just something, _anything_, to keep her occupied.

Pulling back painted wood, she raises a brow in surprise as she is met with a distressed mewling and mottled fur winding around her calves.
"Caskett?"
"Caskett?"

Regina blinks in surprise, and the tabby streaks past her into the house.

"Cass?"

The brunette follows the old feline into the kitchen, any of her usual irritation at being landed with such a burden absent from her current demeanour as she bends down to pet the cat gladly; frowning as Caskett goes back to her wanting mewling.

"What's wrong?"

She inquires with her brow furrowed, observing the tabby as she paces the spotless tiles restlessly before settling down in front of one of the teak-fronted cabinets and miaowing pointedly.

Narrowing her eyes, Regina stalks over to the refrigerator and gives its contents a swift once over. Unsure just what she's looking for, she reaches for a Tupperware container filled with several strips of sliced chicken. Holding a piece out towards Cass, she coaxes her curiously.

"I'm not sure if you'll like this, but-"

She is cut off as Caskett devours her offering ravenously, before looking up at her with wide, expectant eyes.

"Hungry, are you?"

She glances up as a gentle knock sounds at the front door and scolds herself for her brief flicker of hope that it might be the blonde looking for her cat. It's eight o'clock, and therefore she knows it's Johanna, and, even if it does happen to be somebody else, she knows deep down that the last person it's going to be is Emma. It's not going to be like last time with the younger woman grinning impishly and flashing teasing amounts of flesh in her skimpy dress.

No.

Because she told that smiling, coquettish young girl that she ruined everything.

That she had ruined everything and that she would continue to ruin everything.

It's not going to be Emma.

"Good morning."

It's Johanna, and she offers the ageing redhead a strained smile before heading back towards the kitchen with the older woman following at her heels lamenting last night's weather.

"-Would have been fine if I hadn't left the washing out, and- oh, who are you? Go on, shoo! What are you doing here?"

Johanna waves her hand at Cass who streaks around on the slippery tiles; spooked by this irritable newcomer.

"No, no! It's alright! She's alright."
Regina assures the older woman swiftly, approaching the corner where the tabby cowers and crouching down to beckon her out.

"You know this animal? She's filthy!"

"That's mostly just her markings... She's Emma's."

"The wee chick you've got working for you? What's her *cat* doing skulking around your kitchen? I beg your pardon, Madame Mayor, but as far as hygiene goes-"

"-It's fine. She's just hungry."

"I'm not surprised! Look at the *state* of her; just fur and bones, and most likely fleas."

"She doesn't have *fleas*, dear, and she can't *help* it that she looks that way. It's *not* her fault."

The brunette sighs with careful patience; inwardly bemused as she can think of someone else of whom she could say much the same.

"Well, Jesus, she looks as though she's been in the wars!"

The redhead breathes, but she takes a couple of steps towards the Mayor and holds out her own hand while cooing gently for the old tabby to come and sniff her.

"I think she's fairly old."

"Look at that scar though! How'd she manage that?"

"I have no idea. You would have to ask Miss Swan."

The brunette replies, but she feels an uncomfortable wave of disquiet as she watches Cass slink warily past Johanna and reclaim her position in front of the cabinets; mewling pointedly.

"Why is she doing that?"

"... I don't think she's been fed."

Regina replies numbly, before turning swiftly for the hallway to fetch her jacket.

"She's fine to remain here, Johanna. There's a couple of tuna steaks wrapped up in the fridge, please cook one of them and give it to Caskett-"

"-Caskett? -"

"The *cat*, dear."

"You want me to prepare a tuna *steak* for a *cat*?!!"

"Is that a problem?"

The brunette snaps, and the older woman shakes her head immediately, although her eyes belie the fact that she might believe the Mayor to be losing it a little.

"No, ma'am. Of course not... Will you be coming up to the nursery after breakfast?"

"I don't know, yet. There's something I need to do. I may be a little while."
"Of course... Um... Regin- Madame Mayor?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Are you... Is everything alright?"

Dark eyes bore into cornflower blue, and the Mayor shucks on her jacket and offers one, very simple answer before taking her leave.

"No."

"Miss Lucas?"

The brunette frowns as Ruby hurries past her with an uncharacteristically sour expression and several plates balanced in her hands.

"One second."

And Regina opens her mouth to berate the waitress for her rudeness when she catches the younger woman doing her own fair share of scolding when the town's doctor enquires if he may have a new bottle of ketchup.

"There's still some left in there, I can see it at the bottom, and if that's not enough, then go into the back and get some! It's not like it's a great big mystery where we keep the sauce!"

The Mayor suspects that her own expression of surprise mirrors Whale's, and she recognises a threat of tears in the waitress's voice. Glancing around the Diner, she is surprised at just how many people have decided to dine out this morning, and with none of the other young girls employed by Granny in sight, she imagines she has a fairly good idea what has the young brunette so stressed.

Raising a brow as Ruby stalks back towards her with a pale hand running fretfully through her hair, Regina shakes her head when the latter points her towards a table by the window.

"You're working on your own?"

"Granny's working the grill."

"But where are the others? Where's Emma?"

"Well, that's a pretty good question, isn't it?"

The waitress growls angrily, and the Mayor regards her questioningly.

"She didn't come down this morning?"

"No. Probably a good thing, too. Granny's just about ready to skin her alive! I mean, last night was one thing, and I don't mind doing the others a favour now and then, especially Emma, but to just not show up this morning, and without any damn notice or word or anything, it's just plain rude!"

Ruby sniffs irritably, and the Mayor frowns as she follows the waitress over to Archie's table as the younger woman pours him a fresh cup of coffee.

"You haven't seen her since last night?"

"Not since about just before five or so when I was getting ready for my shift. Kind of thought if
The waitress confides distractedly as she nods when the psychiatrist requests a glass of orange juice.

"What do you mean by that? Why would I know?"

Regina asks as she follows the bustling young brunette.

"Well, I just... I dunno."

Ruby shrugs awkwardly- playing her words back in her head and supposing she may not have meant to voice them out loud- and skirting around the counter to fetch a glass.

"Did she say she was coming to see me? Did she say why?"

"Uh, no, I don't know."

"Damn it."

The Mayor growls, and she turns for the door, causing the waitress to frown and scurry after her; waving a dismissive hand at Miss Ginger who hollers her over impatiently from the corner.

"Wait, Regina. Madame Mayor... Is something wrong?"

"I... I'm hoping nothing that can't be fixed. Now, Miss Lucas, I need you to do me a favour. When you do see Emma, tell her she's to come and find me. Tell her it's non-negotiable. Make that last part quite clear."

"Okay... I mean, I doubt it'll be an issue or anything, she-"

"-It might be. She might not want to come and see me. But she must. If she argues... Tell her... Tell her I'm sorry."

"Regina, what's going on?"

The waitress enquires nervously, and the darker woman looks around them at the rowdy crowd of patrons she has grown so hatefully sick of, and takes a step towards Ruby and speaks to her curtly and quietly.

"I made the mistake of saying several things to Miss Swan that I did not mean. I now have a... An employee that I have no idea where they might be, and a pair of sneakers lying in my front hall that are cluttering up the place. Oh, and a rather vocal cat. So, Miss Lucas, I would like to make amends and rid myself of Miss Swan's private property."

She sniffs irritably, as though simply irked by the inconvenience, but Ruby isn't quite so blind so as to overlook the truth, and when Regina asks her final question, she feels a sense of unease when she is unable to answer.

"Do you at least know what time she came home last night?"

"I don't know... I don't even know if she did."

Red.

Pink.
Orange.

The sky goes through its phases as dawn turns to morning and morning turns to afternoon. The blonde lies on her side without moving; eyes open and watching the changes in the weather through the large, open window. She had awoken at around three AM and imagines she had only slept for so long as the alcohol in her system had kept her drowsy. She blames the same culprit for pulling her from her fevered dreams; waking up feeling nauseous and shaky and positive she can still feel the gin sloshing around in her stomach.

As sunrise becomes tainted grey with a light haze of rain, that queazy tipsiness is replaced by a dull ache, and it slowly dawns on her that, with the Mayor excusing her before lunch the previous day, she hasn't eaten anything for the past twenty-four hours save for some chocolate ice-cream and a sprinkled cone.

Not that such things seem all that important.

Just something to think about, she guesses.

Something that doesn't concern Regina.

"You're a fool..."

She murmurs- her stomach rumbling, and she elbows her gut sharply in reprimand- before closing her eyes.

"You never learn. Didn't learn from what happened with Neal... And now look..."

She sniffs miserably. It aches. Whatever it is that she's feeling; it aches.

And the worst part is, she doesn't know where she fucked up.

Doesn't know what she did wrong.

Just like with Neal- there one second, and gone the next- things had turned on their head without warning, and she must've done something terrible- Regina had been angry, so terribly, terribly angry- but she doesn't know what, and she isn't sure whether she wants to know or not, because surely the only thing worse than this confusion would be knowing what it is that she did and wishing pointlessly to change the past.

Because you can't change the past.

Can't fix things that have been broken; smashed beyond repair.

You can only grieve and pray that things will get better.

... And they had... Before she'd blown it.

Because she knows- despite her confusion- that it's her fault. History has taught her that. She may not be clued up on the facts, but...

"This just keeps happening!"

Yes.

And isn't that why she had promised herself- sworn to herself- that she wouldn't let anyone else in?
"But it didn't seem like it would be that way! She seemed to like me... To-

I know what you did.

You ruin everything.

You.

Ruin.

"But I don't mean to..."

She whispers, blinking salt from her eyes as it stings and settles thickly in her lashes.

Her stomach rumbles once more—cramping uncomfortably—but she doesn't want to eat, she wants to drink.

Because if she drinks, she might be able to get back to sleep.

And sleeping is so much easier.

Through the wall, the baleful wails of an infant bleed through—piercing like ice—and the blonde grits her teeth as she rolls over to bury her face into her pillow.

"No... No... No!"

It's a muffled sound, and regardless, the little shit takes no heed and just goes right on with his hollering.

Tossing agitatedly onto her back, Emma clenches her fists, before opening her mouth and letting out her own uninhibited scream; loud and shrill until her throat becomes hoarse and the note cracks.

Taking in a new breath, she lies deathly still and listens.

The baby's wailing stops for a couple of seconds, before recommencing; an irritable murmur swallowed by the wall responding to his pitiful cries.

Nothing else.

No questioning or querying the harrowing shriek heard from somewhere in the building.

And she begins to laugh.

Because, really, what else is there left to do?

"That's people. Real people. That's how it is."

And, of course, she had known she would receive no response.

Had known from experience.

Known from that first time. That first time after coming to this hateful place and wanting some company—any company—and something to make her forget. That first time after moving here; after serving her time and being given the all clear by the facility's medical team. It wasn't anything new. Not something she hadn't done before. But it still hurt, because what she'd had with Neal had been different. Of course, that had turned out to be nothing but a shitstorm, but she had been blissfully
ignorant of that fact for the best part of a year, and going back to the faceless, nameless game of 'getting things' had hurt.

But that hadn't been the only thing that had proven to be painful, and what had started off as careless caresses and saying all the right things and making all the right noises had soon become distressed breathing and troubled whimpering as they had started to get down to the main act, and she had panicked and insisted that they couldn't- please, they couldn't- because it was hurting -it was really hurting- and they had to stop. Please. Now. Stop.

One thing had led to another, and she fingers the flesh beneath her eye- the pale skin where the brunette had spied a fading bruise- and glances over to a dull stain in the carpet from where a bottle of bleach never quite succeeded in obliterating the blood that had gushed from her companion's nose.

One thing had led to another, and she had found out for the first time that in the real world, when you ask, plead, scream for help, there isn't some fancy Mayor in her lavish Mercedes waiting to lend a hand.

In the real world, there's an irritated pounding from the other side of the wall and the disgruntled yell to shut the fuck up.

And that's fine.

Because at least she knows that now.

She should really have known that before- she is aware of this- but she most certainly knows it now.

And good god could she use a drink.

She groans, before cocking her head as she catches the faint drone of conversation outside.

Familiar conversation

No, Swan, don't, come on-

Pushing herself up, she staggers over to the window and spies three familiar males sat out by the dumpster with a mean-mannered dog and a couple of paper bags.

She watches them pensively- one cracking a joke and receiving a punch in the arm in return- and rubs at her mouth with the back of her hand; lips feeling chapped and dry.

You don't have to do this! You shouldn't do this!

"Yeah? Why not? I want something, and they have it. This is what I'm good at. No complications. No naive hoping for anything that isn't right there in front of me. In front of either party."

She growls angrily, as that stupid, hateful voice pipes up shrilly.

She doesn't want to listen to it.

Wants to expressly disobey it, in fact.

Because that voice has been the cause of so much pain recently that she just can't stand it.

Because what she's about to do, it's stupid, but it isn't hurting anybody.

Isn't harming anybody.
It's just a trade.

Just a trade so she can sleep.

There's no emotion to it. No desire to it. And it can't hurt her.

Pulling herself up onto the window ledge, she giggles as she slips slightly and catches herself clumsily with her palm braced against the very edge of the wall.

"Denny!... I have a proposition for you!"

And she waits as he struggles to get to his feet to see what she might want yelling out at him the way she does.

Because men like Denny are always up for a trade.

Men like Denny don't hurt you.

Because the worst pain- the worst way to hurt- is to find out that someone doesn't care.

"-Because I care about her, you moron!"

Regina snaps at the Sheriff, and she imagines she is just as surprised as Graham when the words leave her lips. Composing herself, she taps the sharp toe of her heel impatiently on treated concrete and challenges him with her glower to show caution with his response.

"You don't even know if she's actually missing, Regina, and-"

"-Well, she's not at the Diner, and she's not in my office which is where she should be at eleven o'clock on a weekday."

"Maybe she went for a walk? I mean, if you say you have reason to believe she might be a little upset about something, maybe she's just gone into the woods to cool down."

"Well, I don't want her in the woods. Do you know how many acres of forest surround us? I want you to find her."

"Regina, I appreciate that you're concerned, but I really doubt there's any need for panic. She's not a child."

"She's eighteen, that's good enough for me- in fact, that's probably worse! God, teenagers and their muddled thoughts!- not to mention that Miss Swan is highly susceptible to frequent bouts of complete idiocy!"

"...Well, do you know where she was last seen?"

"I believe at my residence. Probably at around nine."

"Your residence? What was she doing at yours at nine in the evening?"

"I have no idea."

"Well... Did she give any clue as to what she might be distraught about, or where she might be going, or-"
"-If she'd told me where she was thinking of going, I wouldn't be here talking to you, would I?... We had... We had a minor altercation."

"An argument."

"Of sorts."

"What about?"

"What does it matter? Sheriff, I came here to request aid in tracking down Miss Swan, not to fill you in on girlish gossip!"

"I just thought... I mean, it might give some indication as to where she's gone..."

"We didn't argue about where she should go!"

_I want you out! I want you gone!_

"No, but-"

"-Her car. I didn't see her car..."

"You think she-"

"-I don't know what I think. Get out to the town line. Use the woods road; it's the one she would take."

"You want me to go out of town?"

Graham asks, and, it is a vague thought, but something about that idea has him feeling uncomfortable.

"No. I want you to go out to the town line and come _back_. I want you to check that stretch of road."

"Of course, but if she's left town, I mean, she could have gone _anywhere_..."

"... That's what I'm afraid of."

The brunette sighs, and the Sheriff snaps his keys from the desk and smiles at her reassuringly; not used to seeing the Mayor flustered like this.

"It's probably _nothing_, Regina... She may not have had much to say, but from what I _did_ gather, she likes it here. Not only that, but you've made things better for her... Why on earth would she _leave_?"

_Because I crossed the line._

_I crossed the line when I've been trying so hard to toe it._

_And when you cross the line with someone like Emma, there's no getting that person back._

"I have no idea. Perhaps you're right. Perhaps it's nothing."

_But I know Emma. And I'm beginning to think Caskett's appearance this morning is anything but a good sign._

"Check the road. If she's in town, you'll find her."
"Come on!"

The brunette sighs as she sits at her kitchen table, watching the phone. She silently laments the fact that it had never occurred to her to gift the blonde with a cell phone, but she supposes it's pointless fretting over such things now.

She doubts- even if Emma had been given the means to do so- that the younger woman would accept this form of being reached out to.

With Emma, she knows she'll need to speak to her face to face. That she'll need to force the blonde to look at her so that she can explain to her- hell! She doesn't know!- but to at least tell her that she's sorry. That she didn't mean it.

So, for now she is stuck waiting for a call from the Sheriff.

Sighing, she recalls the confrontation- if you could call it that- the previous afternoon. The baited, treacherous dance conducted in her study. There had been a tension that had hung thick in the room between the blonde and herself, but it hadn't been born from anger or disagreement, but rather from toeing the line between right and wrong.

And, she had thought she'd done her best.

Had tried to keep from ruining the curious bond forming between them.

Had stepped aside when the blonde had made her bold move, and, though a part of her- a very secret, guilty part of her- had regretted it... Wanted it... She had believed she'd been doing the right thing.

Had believed that she was in some way protecting the girl.

"What you said to her, though..."

She closes her eyes and tries to shut off the constant showreel playing in her mind of her terrible anger that evening, and Emma's complete and utter shock. It had been a look she'd recognised, but not from here. That look of fear... Back in her old guise, she had relished that expression- thrived off of it- but, when faced with that wide-eyed terror and hurt from the blonde...

"I'm sorry."

In some ways- bleak ways- she supposes the events of last night have served to put things into perspective.

Have served to help her understand just where she stands when it comes to Emma.

She had hunted the blonde down- sought her out- unsure whether she would wind up killing her, or simply find some way to keep her as far away from herself and her town as she was able.

And now?

Now she just wants a way to bring her back.

And it's funny, in a way, as she is unable to say at precisely what point things had changed quite so
drastically.

Unsure at exactly what point she'd landed herself with a companion.

Someone with whom she's truly bonded.

A part of that might possibly have something to do with the blonde's age. She is young, and with the way she's been acting over the past couple of days, the brunette has been wary, because, in her head, she has continued to fixate on the idea that the girl needs help- guidance- and is somehow untouchable. Due to her demeanour, her age, but also... Simply because of who she is.

But, there have been times... Times sat together in her office, in her car, down by the docks, when the conversation has flowed freely, and she has forgotten about all those things- those barriers she's raised- and simply enjoyed Emma's company.

Pushing herself from her chair, she stalks over to the small scrap of paper bearing the younger woman's scribbled illustration and pulls it down from the noticeboard to study it properly.

"Alice in Wonderland... If you only knew how amusing that pseudonym was, dear. You know, it's funny... I've spent eighteen years thinking about you.

Fearing you.

And... This isn't what I was expecting, but then things never are... Finding out about your tie to Henry threw me... That was never part of the plan... Not so far as I had been told, anyway... Before that unsavoury discovery, I was waiting for you... Waiting for the day you would turn twenty-eight, when the Dark One had warned you'd come and find me. Find us all... I had imagined many things, Miss Swan- Emma- as to how that might go... What you might be like... And by day I would scoff at the very idea that any child born from those two idiots would come and best me. That they would have it in them to destroy what I'd created...

... At night though...

Well, sometimes you'd play a part in my dreams... Nothing like the way you have recently, understand... But... Oh, it's ridiculous, dear, some of the fantastical scenes the mind will conjure. I saw us fighting, arguing, battling with one another in the way one must when there is no magic to lend a hand... You would probably appreciate this- if it were possible for me to actually tell you such things- but I do believe that in one hazy dreamscape you deemed it suitable to go after my apple tree with a power tool!... A grown woman!"

She chuckles sadly as she smooths the small dimple in the paper she holds where the pin had fastened it to the cork board.

"I hated you... It didn't matter that we'd never met; I hated you.

And then, when I found out about Henry... That hate... You have no idea! No idea how deeply I despised you..."

She shakes her head with a sigh; remembering the feeling well. That blackness and anger, and the feeling of complete incredulity that the Savior might have ruined her so soon... So deeply.

Remembers the way she had seethed in the car on her trip to Boston.

How resolutely she had been sure that the woman she was attempting to track down was nothing but pure filth.
She had been thrown, then, to be shaken from such one-tracked fury by the fear that had overcome her when approached in the tarmac lot back in Boston, and confused by the company of the young girl that had so casually come leaping to her aid.

A pretty young girl with whom she'd shared a curious meal in a rowdy bar, and, despite everything else churning away in her mind, she had found herself drawn to peculiar mannerisms and sunny features.

A girl that had come to her aid a second time and pulled her from the fatal trajectory of a carload of hooligans.

And, she had been shocked to discover the blonde's true identity, not because Emma's deceit had been particularly crafty, but because it had confused her that the Savior could be anything other but loathsome.

She had imagined her, this Savior; porcelain skinned and raven-haired- a clone of her mother- with an arrogant sense of self-entitlement and an iron-clad set of sickening morals everyone but she should live by.

Emma had come as a shock.

Both good and bad.

It had been a pleasant sort of surprise to discover the young blonde to be dissimilar to her mother in every way, from attitude to looks.

But, she remembers how swiftly the cruel glee at the girl's situation- what would Snow make of that?- had turned to disconcertion.

Dismay.

What she had seen in Boston had been bad.

An unpleasant discovery.

Because she had cared.

A shrill ringing of the phone on the table pulls her from her thoughts and she rushes over to snatch up the receiver.

"Graham?"

"...Mayor Mills?"

 Comes an uncertain reply, and she frowns as she struggles to place that irritable growl, before sighing as she reclaims her seat by the phone.

"Widow Lucas."

"Ayuh... Ruby says you were down here this morning looking for Emma. Says you two had some sort of disagreement."

"Well, I wouldn't call it-"

"-If that's so... I think you might not like what I'm about to tell you."
"... What is it?"

"I just had Marco come in to drop by something he found out in the street. One of my room keys."

"... Emma's."

"I wouldn't be calling you if it wasn't."

"No... Alright."

She sighs, and she places the receiver down without offering a farewell; her head aching as she purses her lips unhappily.

"Why would you throw away everything I've tried to give you because of one little argument?"

She sniffs, but she knows that's not what their screaming match had been.

_Match? I believe there was only one person screaming, dearest... Hardly a match..._

"Still..."

_Still, you're a fool if her reaction surprises you..._

_You touched a nerve..._

"But-

But she desists trying to argue her case. She knows she'd crossed the line with what she'd said-screamed- at Emma, and the younger woman's disappearance simply proves that fact.

"Graham's not going to find her... She's left."

She addresses the silent phone numbly; not used to this feeling of failure without the accompanying dramatics of her power and her wrath.

Fingering the scrap in her hand, she looks down at it sadly, before bringing it closer to her face to read the small line of print beneath the illustration and message.

_I'm glad you came back._

Eyes widening as she is struck by a sudden, strong suspicion- _hope!_- she pushes herself up and hurries out of the room; making swift work of the stairs and letting herself into Henry's nursery with Emma's note still tucked inside her palm.

"Johanna."

"Madame Mayor..."

The redhead answers, looking a little guilty as she sits with Henry in her arms and Cass on her lap.

"I need you to stay a little late today, dear, is that a problem? If it is, would you be so kind as to call Mr Glass and ask him to-"

"-No, no, don't you worry, sweetness, I have nothing I need to hurry back for. Is there a meeting or-"

"-No. No meeting. I need to go to Boston. Now."
"Boston? That's quite a drive for a spontaneous little journey..."

"I know... But at least I'll be wearing shoes."
Chapter Notes

A/N: Little bit worried about this one as it's such a pivotal point. I know there are still several issues- pertaining to Henry mostly- that need to be addressed, but, it's not the end of the fic yet! :) I know a lot of you had said you were worried as far as Regina having gone too far and it would be almost impossible for her to get Emma back. Hopefully this is an okay- realistic- attempt at that :) Also, thanks so much for all the reviews the last few chapters, they've all been so sweet, and some of the longer ones were really interesting, and I'm just really grateful for you guys taking the time to leave some feedback and thoughts :) Really appreciate it :)

Numb.

She feels numb.

Staring up at the ceiling, the blonde's eyes sting dully, but she supposes that's not all that surprising. She doesn't think she's ever cried quite so much as she has in the last twelve hours.

But she's done with that now.

The covers pool about her waist, and, with the window open, her bare skin ripples with gooseflesh against the mild chill, but again, this is something she no longer cares about.

It doesn't matter.

No more so than the occasional cramps of hunger tormenting her stomach.

She imagines they'll go away eventually.

Her body will get bored of pestering her.

She's beginning to feel a little drowsy, and she has enough experience with the type of sleep that comes from a bottle to be comforted by the knowledge that all of the things that currently play on her mind will leave her be.

It was a trade, and she got what she wanted.

Sleep.

Because, really, what else is there to do?

A small part of her... And she has a feeling it's that no good, fucking voice again, stirs uneasily as it recognises this apathetic, shut-down as 'bad'. Recognises what just happened as 'bad'. But... The bigger part of her being- the black, angry, burnt part of her being- has beaten that smaller voice into submission with such cruelty and such aggression since coming back here, that it no longer dares to speak up.

It had flourished back in Storybrooke...
And now it pays the price.

All being well, she imagines she might well kill it entirely before too long.

Closing her eyes, she tries to urge on the onset of slumber.

Missing her bed at Granny's.

Missing the soft noise of the brook running along the back of the yard.

Missing the childish tapping through the wall of one with no knowledge of Morse code as a bid goodnight.

But most of all, missing Caskett.

"Too bad. She's better off there than with you."

She tells herself sternly; working with carefully honed practice to compartmentalise Cass- sweet, kind Cass- and put her with the things that 'no longer matter'.

She just about kid herself she's successful, too.

Just about kid herself she's got this ice-bitch thing down.

Just about kid herself that she can go five minutes without thinking about that stupid fucking town, with its stupid fucking people, and its stupid fucking Mayor with her shitting well-fitted suits and her hatefully pleasant way of speaking and making everything seem like it might just end up being okay.

"Enough!"

She yells, and her throat hurts, and her tongue tastes like whisky, and she wishes she could compartmentalise that, and not give the way she got it any thought.

"It was a trade."

Yes.

A trade.

And, she had thought it might make herself feel better- having what she was offering accepted rather than so confusingly refused- but it hadn't.

She doesn't feel better.

She just feels drunk.

Numb.

"That's what you wanted..."

No... This is nothing like what I wanted...

"Oh, shush."

The Mayor grumbles as she taps her hand irritably against the volume dial on the stereo; shutting off the garbled nonsense that fills the car.
It's getting on for dinner time and she's hungry, but she supposes she'll wait until she catches up with Emma before finding herself something to eat; imagining the blonde might want something too, and more than happy to get it for her.

"If she's there..."

She reminds herself cautiously; trying not to put all of her hope into this trip, but unable to see any alternative. She can't deal with the thought of Emma not being at the apartment, because if she's not... She could be anywhere.

She holds out hope on the basis that the younger woman had fled with no shoes and no more than whatever money Granny had given her, which, having only worked for the old woman a short while, she doesn't imagine to be a lot.

That said, she recalls several times that Emma has mentioned her rather transient life before Boston, and she isn't so sure that no shoes and no money would stop the blonde from seeking out fresh pastures.

"Well, how would she imagine she would get by?"

She mutters sensibly, but the question only serves to have her thinning her lips as she imagines Emma might find a way.

And she doubts she wants to take that particular train of thought any further.

"She'll be there."

She tells herself resolutely.

And, she is.

Struggling with the trick to the front door of the building, the Mayor had proceeded to do much the same when she'd reached the younger woman's old apartment; creating quite a racket while doing so.

Worrisome, then, that she is met with no response.

But, she'd recognise the pale curls that tumble from beneath the worn throw in the corner anywhere.

"Emma..."

Her tone exists somewhere between relief and uncertainty, and her brow furrows when the younger woman doesn't react.

"Emma!"

She barks loudly, panic setting in when silence prevails, before swallowing shakily when she catches a low, sleep-heavy sigh.

"Gods, will you sleep through anything?"

She scolds, but she feels her heart hammer a little faster as she pads hesitantly towards the mattress to look down on the younger woman.

She's only about halfway there when she catches the strong smell of whisky and feels her stomach tighten.
"Miss Swan?... Emma?"

Nothing, and any relief she'd felt upon finding the apartment inhabited is slowly turning sour.

Stood directly above her, she can now see the near-empty bottle curled in the blonde's first, and the shadowed slice of her profile which appears pale and drawn.

Leaning down to pull the covers away gently, she stops when she realises the younger woman wears nothing underneath.

Emma's lashes don't even flicker.

"Emma!"

Loud now, and she shakes the girl's shoulder none too gently, but apart from a low groan, she gets nothing back.

"It's ok, it could be worse, she's had a rough night, and..."

She trails off as she tries to reassure herself. She knows her words hold some merit, but that doesn't change the fact that she had worried before when the blonde had disclosed she'd found herself seriously ill on a couple of occasions as a result of drinking too much, and being faced with it now is something she finds pretty distressing.

She is hatefully aware of the similarities between now and when she'd last come back to this hateful apartment to find Emma in a similar state, but at least then she had been somewhat coherent.

Conscious at least!

She supposes that she is at least relieved to find the blonde alone, and-

I wanted a drink.

Looking from the bottle loosely clutched in a pale fist- curious grazes freckling the younger woman's knuckles- and the bare swatch of her shoulder, the brunette shakes her head slowly.

"No."

And she tells herself she must be mistaken- jumping to the worst conclusion- but then she spies something in the blonde's hamper and she feels her heart stop.

Having taken some of her meagre collection of clothes with her when she'd last left the apartment, the hamper in question is only about half full, and fairly reminiscent of a waste receptacle.

At least, that's what it's been used as.

She is unsure how long she stands there, staring numbly down at carelessly discarded latex.

Used latex.

Finally looking away and walking stiffly over to the chair in the corner, she takes a seat and lowers her head into her hands; feeling saltwater seep between her trembling fingers.

"Why?!"

She is unsure exactly what to feel. She wants to feel angry. Angry at the younger woman for being
so stupid.

But she doesn't have it in her.

Doesn't have it in her to find rage, because all it does is remind her of last time. Last time when she'd berated the blonde for getting herself in such an idiotic situation, and in turn, it reminds her of Emma's apathetic answer.

*I wanted a drink.*

She'd clearly been embarrassed when the subject had come up later on, but Regina has speculated since that it had been her own discomfort and scolding over the situation that had lent the younger woman her shame.

Because in her eyes, she'd been doing nothing wrong.

Because, as she'd said, no one was about to come in and tell her off for it.

No one was about to come in and check up on her and what she might be up to.

Because no one cared.

"I thought you didn't think that way anymore..."

She croaks as she parts her hands to dig in at her temples and studies the younger woman's bare shoulder and dirty curls unhappily.

No, she had thought things were changing...Had *seen* them changing!... Had seen the way the blonde had smiled at her when shopping for clothes, when eating lunch, when working together. Had recognised the fact that something had *shifted* when she'd brought the younger woman's car over to Storybrooke, and- despite her concern when Emma's initial reaction had been undoubtedly peculiar- she had been *sure* it had been a step in the right direction.

Had been sure that, as those last bruises dappling pale flesh had faded, so had some of the stoniness the younger woman had kept cradled about her shoulders.

"It did."

She whispers, but, whatever progress had been made seems to have crumbled, and she doesn't know what to do.

Doesn't know what to do to make it better.

"I feared you coming to find me when the prophecy claimed you would... I feared you coming to Storybrooke when you were twenty-eight... I don't... I don't see how you would even *make* it that long..."

She sniffs, but a glance up at the counter where a couple of plates fill the apartment with the stench of their rotting remains answers her question.

*Somehow, someway, she would have made it on her own. Maybe not happily, and maybe not pleasantly, but she would have made it. Because, if you hadn't said what you said... If you hadn't told her those things... She wouldn't be in this state.*

"You don't *know* that... Who's to say something *else* wouldn't have happened to-"
But she doesn't continue. She understands the younger woman well enough to know that this is about what had been said. Sure, life had been pretty dismal before she'd shown up, but... Emma had been coping. She'd had her mask. It had been an act, but at least she'd had that.

"I was trying to help..."

She reiterates as she pushes herself from the chair and falls down heavily to sit on the edge of the blonde's mattress; the girl's lashes fluttering.

"You didn't mess up... Not by giving him up. Maybe if things were different, but... Look at this place. Look at you... And, I knew... I saw those things. I saw how you were, and I saw this horrible place, and I shouldn't have said it, because I understand why you did it. Because if not this place in this city, it would have been the same place in another city. I didn't want to understand, but I do...

I did a bad thing. A very bad thing.

"You didn't do a bad thing... Well... Recently, you may have done a bad thing, dear, but that's not what this is about... You're not bad."

She twists slightly so that she leans over the blonde, and runs her hand gently through tangled tresses at the latter's temple.

"I didn't want you to get out... Not really... Maybe out of the nursery, but never out of town..."

She sniffs as she knows that at that precise moment that's exactly what she'd meant.

"On my way over here, I kept thinking... I kept thinking about what you'd said about your friend-though I'm not sure that he was- with the watches. I know what he did hurt you... You said before that, you were alone. And, I know that after that you were alone...

I didn't mean it when I said I wanted you gone.

I don't. I really don't.

Or I wouldn't be here.

It's certainly not been a visit for the scenery!"

She chokes back a watery laugh, and the younger woman frowns as she mumbles something incoherent; her lashes twitching and brow furrowing, and the Mayor imagines this is a good sign.

Wiping at her eyes and sniffing irritably, she shakes her head as she strives to pull herself together. She glances up at the plates on the counter, and back at the hamper with what she knows lies on top of worn cotton, and purses her lips before pushing herself from the mattress.

Stalking over to the sink, she cranks the tap, and breathes in a sigh of resolution as a rusty jet shudders from the curved faucet.

"Reg... Regina..."

The blonde croaks as she peers at the Mayor with lashes slitted against the light streaming in through the window.

"Me."
The brunette agrees as she looks around, and she watches as the younger woman frowns before rolling weakly onto her back; her complexion chalky, which answers what was going to be her first enquiry.

"Are you still drunk, or just hungover?"

She asks quietly; aware that they already tiptoe on eggshells and deeming it to be wise to feel out the situation.

"Why are you here?"

Emma answers with her own query, and, from the blandness to her tone and the way she studies the ceiling, Regina imagines she's at least sober enough to bear her some ill feelings.

"You left your shoes at my house. You need to collect them."

She offers lightly, but the blonde simply shakes her head, before closing her eyes as the action sends a monstrous bolt of pain through her skull.

"Why, Regina?"

"Because... You disappeared. I was worried."

"You told me to get out."

"I didn't mean it."

The Mayor answers quietly, and she goes swiftly back to packing the books she'd been stacking neatly into an old satchel found hidden beneath an unravelling sweater so as not to allow the blonde to see the salt that coats her lashes, as she understands that those words might mean very little after what's happened.

She's wrong, though.

To the blonde, they find a way through the grey haze of her own making, and she looks to the side to study the Mayor silently.

Sniffing, and closing the satchel up, Regina pads back towards the sink and checks the plates gleaming with drying soap suds, before tucking them away inside the cupboard. She wipes down the counter with some wadded up bathroom tissue, before reaching out over the sill to close the window; glancing one last time out over the drop between the hold-alls and the blonde's apartment and feeling suddenly very cold.

Turning away, she disappears into the bathroom, before coming back with her hands filled with the packets and bottles from the medicine cabinet and tossing them into the hamper, out of which several previously used bits of tissue peek dirtily.

"You clearly weren't using any of that. We'll just throw the whole lot down the chute. You had no garbage bags, that I could see."

"... What are you doing?"

"Well, I doubt the next tenants are going to want to move in to such a prestigious abode with things growing on the crockery and your discarded paraphernalia strewn about the place."

"Next tenants?"
"Mm. I don't imagine your landlord will want this place standing empty, and while I'm sure you have no deposit on this dump or anything so official -"

"-It's paid until the end of next month."

"Well... I suppose you could ask for your money back, but I'm not sure it's worth the hassle. If, that is, it was money you used to pay the rent in the first place."

She shrugs, but she catches the soft hint of implementation in her tone and reprimands herself angrily.

The blonde simply blinks up at her; disorientated and confused.

"But... I don't want any other tenants in here... I..."

"Why not? What's it to you? You don't live here."

Regina answers firmly, before sighing as she takes in the wary look Emma throws her and making her way over to the mattress. Lowering herself down to sit on the edge, she regards the younger woman solemnly; hating the way the latter's bloodshot eyes convey within them a flicker of distrust.

A glimmer of ice.

A barrier.

"You belong in Storybrooke, Emma... Marco found your key... You must have dropped it."

"I didn't drop it."

"... I know..."

"I don't belong there. You made that very clear."

"I made a mistake. I should never have yelled at you like that. Never. I should never have said those things to you... I don't mean them. I meant them when I said them because I was angry, but I don't truly think that way of you."

"... Then why?"

"I... I panicked. I can't explain it. I don't have any defence or explanation. Just an apology. I know that might seem... I know it's a little late. And I know it might not seem like enough..."

"... I thought I did something... I thought... I mean... I upset you somehow, and-"

"-No, dear... No. You didn't. What I was upset about... It was nothing you could have helped. It wasn't your fault."

"But... You knew..."

"Knew?"

"... You knew what I did... This whole time?"

"Yes. I knew."

"But... You were nice to me... You-"
"Of course I was. I enjoy your company, and I told you I was going to help you as and how I could."

"But... What I did... It was a ba-"

"-It wasn't. Emma, it wasn't!... I hate that I used that against you because I understand perfectly well why you did what you did... Remember me telling you I didn't want you coming to find me? How I wanted to avoid you? That was the truth, dear, but then... I saw how things were, and I couldn't. Even though I wanted to. I couldn't leave someone in this mess, Emma... Because I thought the exact same thing as you did... This... It's shit. I hate that word and strive not to use it. It's an ugly word, but, this is an ugly place, and that goes for more than the cracks in the walls. This is shit. And no place for a child... Including one old enough to drive and buy cigarettes, though, I sincerely hope that she doesn't..."

Shaking her head as the blonde responds to this with a look of distress- a look she can read with hateful ease; a look that says 'I want to trust you, but, I've been burnt, I've been horribly burnt and I never even saw it coming, just like always, and don't know if I can handle any more hurt'- she shushes the younger woman quietly and takes control.

"Come on. Get dressed. I'll help you if you need me to... Can you sit up?... Good. Then let's get going. Let's go home."
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

A/N: Hope you enjoy, I promise this will pick up again and appear brighter soon. I think I've probably said this in a bunch of A/Ns, but I never really know what I'm going to write when I sit down. I have a vague plan where this fic is going, but never about each chapter. Sorry if sometimes that means the story drags, as I may sit down planning to write something to move it along and then end up looking into a character's reflection on events- which is often the case- and it means things take a little longer. I don't do it on purpose, I just kind of write what seems right at the time, and I'm sure if I uploaded my fics as finished pieces that wouldn't seem so bad, but I get that it can be annoying reading as I go! I just hope the reflective parts are well written and enjoyable regardless, and make the eventual plot progression more interesting :) As far as this being SQ, no, I wasn't coerced into it or lying that it will be. It will be SQ, but not scene after scene of smut and light-hearted fucking here there and everywhere. I do have fics like that if you like my writing style- shameless self promotion there! sorry!- but this one isn't (clearly haha). A lot of you have used the term 'slow-burn' which I guess is apt, but maybe not what I'd use myself :) It's just a story :) But enough from me! Hope you enjoy! :)

Sighing quietly as the lights of the freeway flicker in the dark pools of her eyes, Regina glances up into the rearview mirror; unable to make out much more than the blonde's shoulder and hip as the younger woman lies curled up across the backseat of her Benz.

She remembers how she had thought back up in the apartment- the apartment to which she now vows she will never return- that there had been a great many similarities between this visit to retrieve the blonde and the last one.

Such romanticisms had been quelled fairly swiftly, however, once she had tried to get them both downstairs and back on the road, and she swallows now as she understands that what she had perceived to be truly awful that first time had been nothing compared to this.

Nothing compared to Emma finally complying- at least enough to try and get dressed and sip silently at a glass of water- and watching her stumble unsteadily on her feet and offering their surroundings her slow, disorientated gaze with an ice cold veil of apathy.

Because, before, she had been the blonde's salvation.

And now, she'd been the reason for Emma being back there.

She shakes her head.

She still can't quite believe the younger woman would return to that hateful place.

Can't quite believe she'd fall so far.

Really? Out of all people, you should understand a little something about suffering a terrible
reaction to being hurt...

True. She frowns- taking a left- as she supposes it has never really occurred to her to compare herself to Emma; having presumed the two of them couldn't be any less similar.

In attitude and mannerisms, perhaps, but being different and misunderstood by the rest?

She sighs, understanding now that both her own and the younger woman's response to pain had been destruction.

They had both fallen.

She herself had sought the destruction of the hateful world around her- the one that named her Queen but treated her just as cruelly as she handed back to those unfortunate enough to find themselves down within the very depths of her castle- while Emma...

Well, Emma's method of choice appears to be simply to self-destruct.

To smash herself into tiny, broken pieces before the culprit that knocked her in the first place has the satisfaction of doing it themselves.

Because- she believes- that they will.

The brunette licks her lips as she conjures up an image of what had seemed to be a very unimportant event at the time. Of a young maiden wandering the halls of a great castle- soon to be wed to a man many years her elder at the simple word of her mother- with her head held high but her heart heavy in her chest.

Stalking the hallways she had found herself stood in a grand bedroom under the watchful eyes of a grand jury of the most beautiful dolls any girl could desire. True, she had been a little old for dolls by that point, but one still recognises something desirable even if it doesn't whet their appetite.

She had taken a step towards those glassy eyes and perfect curls, and had gasped as her elbow brushed against a painstakingly decorated ornate vase; sending the vessel toppling down onto the hard stone floor to crack in two.

That young woman had stared at those two halves for quite some time, before thinning her lips and making a move. It hadn't been hate for Snow- not then- as, with finding herself a stranger in this hateful castle and Daniel still alive, the young Princess had been more of a source of comfort than anything else...

So, no. It hadn't been hate.

Hadn't been hate that had caused her to lift the generous skirts of her gown and bring her foot down once, twice, three times; smashing those fractured pieces that might have been easily fixed into useless, broken shards.

It had simply been satisfying.

She had done it because there were hundreds of other vases in the castle that the Princess could have instead.

Had done it because she'd been hurting.

Had done it because no one would really care.
"I wouldn't have done that to you, Miss Swan..."

She murmurs quietly; wondering if she's telling the truth, and hating that fact.

Not that it matters.

The younger woman hasn't moved or spoken since being coerced into the car.

_Coerced?_

Not quite. Once Emma had been up on her feet- and struggling to stay on them- she had been silently compliant, but the Mayor isn't so foolish as to allow herself to believe that this had been any form of forgiveness or camaraderie. It had simply been obedience. The worst kind. The kind she remembers seeing in the eyes of the soldiers rallied to fight in the Ogre Wars as a child. That glassy-eyed numbness of one too tired to do anything but allow someone else to make decisions for them.

Because their fate no longer mattered.

"No."

No, she doesn't believe things are quite at that point.

Doesn't _want_ to believe it.

There had been a definite flicker of battling emotion behind green glass, and, while Emma had said very little to her, she had seemed at war with herself.

_Not great..._

_But better than being totally resigned._

"I said some terrible things, dear, but I _also_ came back to try and make them right. I'm trying to make amends because however resolutely I had believed I'd never feel something like this again... I _do_ feel guilty. Not for a great many things I probably should- and perhaps that says more about me than you might like to know- but for what happened between you and I, I feel regret.

I thought I'd brought you back to Storybrooke with me because you needed help, and, in some ways- _many_ ways- you did... But you would have survived without it... I've tried to look out for you and make things better for you than you would have been able to make them for yourself because I was telling myself you needed a benefactor.

A guardian.

...I hadn't realised we were _friends._"

She smiles a little sadly as she now knows this to be the case.

"Come to think of it... There's a _lot_ of things I hadn't realised..."

She sighs, as she is aware that things had been anything but simple before Emma had run away. And, it's sad really, thinking back on the way she'd recoiled at the strange advances made in her office and out beneath her tree. That inner turmoil now seems rather unimportant given how things have played out.

"I was confused, dear. That doesn't happen often, but the simple fact of the matter is, it didn't occur to me that your peculiar mannerisms might be some form of infatuation fuelled by _desire_ until your
actions were so obvious looking back now, it's almost comical. I wasn't expecting it, so I didn't see it... You're a fool, Emma. You're most certainly not the first, and you won't be the last to want after my appeal, but I'd hazard a guess that you might be the most interesting. It's funny what the mind will do, though. When we met- when I called you Alice and followed you on your mad chase- I noted your own appeal. Different to mine, but just as obvious.

You're a very pretty girl.

And you're strange. Hard. Interesting.

When I found out more about you, that perception changed. Oh, you were still pretty, you were still strange, and you were certainly still interesting... But you were also fragile. I wanted to help you. I wanted to look after you. I saw you as a troubled young girl, which is a curious thing, as you were older- if only by a few hours- than when we met.

I suppose you've troubled me quite a bit, Miss Swan.

You played your games, and I do believe they might have finally begun to work, but... I believed one of us had to be responsible, dear. One of us had to be the adult.

It's funny I believed that to be me.

I believed your wanting was inappropriate...

But, those things I yelled at you came from a place no more adult than what caused you to run.

In the end, the only thing I was responsible for doing was sending you away.

You could have yelled back. Could have argued. Could have thrown a tantrum at my unfair behaviour.

I don't like what you decided to do. I don't like that you ran. But I understand.

And now I'm not sure which of us is the responsible one."

She shakes her head as she speeds up a little; the town line only another mile or so away, and beckoning her comfortingly. Glancing over her shoulder at the sleeping- that's a kind word for 'passed out', dear!- blonde, she smiles weakly and reaches back to give Emma's limp hand a soft squeeze.

"... Probably not the one that exchanged her body for a bottle of whisky, I'd imagine."

She sighs as she returns her attention to the road, and breathes a sigh of relief as the thick promise of the forest dances in the yellow glow of her headlights.

Blinking large, yellow eyes as she sits regally up on the dresser in the brunette's bedroom, Cass watches The Dark Woman hang her jacket back up on its hanger and slip into her negligee.

She'd come up here as there was too much commotion downstairs. The Dark Woman and the Old Nice Fish Woman struggling with their burden to get her up the stairs. Their burden had been The Girl, but she had smelt of The Concrete Place, and the Slow Poison.

Stank of it.

The Girl has smelt of the Slow Poison several times before- just as Master had done before he died-
but she has never kicked or punched or turned on the hateful, green snake shooting water because of it.

Still, that doesn't mean Cass has to like it.

The Slow Poison is bad.

Why else would The Girl sag as if dead in the Dark Woman's arms? Why else would the Dark Woman stink of concern?

"You speak of this to no one."

The Dark Woman had told the Old Nice Fish Woman, and the latter had nodded her head and accepted these terms; helping her host to get The Girl up the stairs.

She'd watched from the hallway. Watched The Dark Woman disappear into the Empty No One's room and speak softly to The Girl, though her words had gone unheard.

The Girl was in the Dead Sleep.

Else she wouldn't allow herself to be carried like some pathetic, little kitten.

Not Her Girl.

Bustle bustle bustle.

Sharp heels on carpet.

The Dark Woman disappearing downstairs and coming back up with a plate of food and several bottles of water clutched against her stomach.

"Not for you, cat."

And Cass had yawned; knowing this to be the case.

The Girl's stomach hurts.

She knows this.

The Girl hasn't eaten and she needs to and it hurts.

She knows this.

She wonders without any real interest as to why The Girl would be so foolish as to not have stuck around to be given fish, but she knows that The Girl can be rather strange.

Nice.

But strange.

Else she would have come over for fish rather than go back to the Concrete Place.

She imagines that's why the Dark Woman reeks of concern.

Because the Dark Woman doesn't understand why The Girl hadn't come over for fish, either.

"What are you looking at?"
The Dark Woman asks her now, and she cocks her head appreciatively as gentle fingers find her jaw.

"Go on, Cass, go see Emma."

The Dark Woman purrs, and she beckons her from the room and down the hallway to the Empty No One's Room.

Not empty now.

And now it's quiet and still, and Caskett enters willingly.

"Be good."

The Dark Woman warns, and her mood smells of salt, and Cass miaows uncertainly before leaping lightly up onto the bed and stalking over to look down into pale features as the door closes gently behind her; the curtains flickering in the breeze from the open window.

*GirlGirlGirl*

She purrs as she stares yellowly down upon dusky lashes.

She had been sad this morning when the Big Yellow Sky Ball had stained the world pink and The Girl had been missing and her stomach had rumbled.

Annoyed.

But not really.

Humans are strange, but she likes this one just fine.

 Likes her a lot.

Because when it had rained in the night and been hot- so hatefully hot- in the blistering sun in the day, The Girl had owned shelter and shade and she had shared.

And when her coat had been matted with blood and her belly smelt of death and she'd hissed at The Girl to leave her be, The Girl had chased her, and caught her, and though it had hurt, she'd bathed her and cleaned the wound and patched her up and that smell of death had gone away and The Girl had spoken to her softly when it had been bad and scary.

The Girl had smelt of iron and fire when she'd found her, but she'd been kind.

She'd also smelt of uncertainty.

A lot of the time, she'd smelt of uncertainty. Of nervousness.

She'd hidden it with ice and fire and laughter. Hidden it with a sharp tongue and an invisible wall.

She supposes that's why The Girl must like the Dark Woman.

Because the Dark Woman puts on airs of opulence and arrogance and disdain.

Most likely to cover that same smell.

That smell of uncertainty and nervousness.
Groaning as she reenters the land of the living, the blonde squeezes her eyes shut and rolls into a tight, protective ball; pulling the covers up over her head in resistance to waking.

Soft covers.

Covers that smell lightly of jasmine and settle over her thick and plush; stuffed decadently with goose-feathers.

Regina.

Frowning, and pushing the crisp cotton from her face; Emma squints against the orange glow of dawn filtering in through the window and shivers. She doesn't recognise the room she finds herself in, but polished, silver candlesticks and the muted, yet expensive decor leave her in little doubt as to where she is.

It doesn't answer the question of 'why', though.

She knows she'd run away. She remembers that much.

She knows why she ran, too.

Regina had been furious. She'd done something wrong and the Mayor had told her to get out.

Had wanted her gone.

Had hated her, surely.

So why, then, had the brunette come to find her? Why did she bring her back?

She has a hazy recollection of Regina's words back in Boston; her memory pretty reliable, but her brain hurting too much to try and piece things together while her head spins the way it does.

The brunette had said she'd been sorry for yelling at her.

That she'd been sorry for what she'd said.

That she'd not meant it.

That she'd known.

Swallowing, Emma imagines it isn't just the whisky that has her feeling suddenly nauseous.

Very nauseous.

Looking over to the open door in the corner, she can see the corner of a shower and struggles to get up with panicked haste; staggering over and falling down onto her knees in the bathroom just in time.

"Shit..."

She sniffs, and she winces as she recognises the sharp pain in her gut. That shooting pain of having left things past the simple ache and then unhappy cramp of hunger.

Sitting with her back against the icy enamel of the tub, she massages her temples; legs crossed
childishly with her knees bouncing with electric nervousness.

'Disconcerted Butterfly Legs', Neal had called them.

She stops abruptly and shakes her head.

Flushing away liquor, acid and little else, she runs the taps and washes out her mouth before splashing several cupped handfuls of water into her face.

She regards herself in the mirror morosely and runs a hand through the knotted tangles of her hair. Her clothes are creased from wearing them in bed, and she remembers Regina offering to help her get dressed, but she had ignored the darker woman silently as she'd struggled with the buttons to the once crisp shirt and once ironed dress pants given to her by the Mayor.

Regina.

Regina who'd come back to find her.

"Why?"

She asks of her reflection quietly, but her mirrored image offers more questions than it does answers.

Heading back into the small bedroom, she stills as she catches the soft pad of an approach to her right. Looking down, she sighs as Cass sits down patiently and regards her with that calm, feline thoughtfulness that has never quite failed to cause her disquiet.

"Caskett."

She nods with an absurd sort of politeness, before kneeling down onto the carpet and holding out her arms.

"I'm sorry I left you!"

Cass blinks apathetically, before padding stiffly over to accept her embrace with a patent lack of enthusiasm.

"...Things are better here, Cassie. You'd have been better off here..."

And, if the tabby has any ill feelings towards the fact that her mistress had been in too much of a state to have realised she'd forgotten her before coming to this noble decision, she doesn't let on. She merely buries her face into the blonde's chest and purrs loudly as she approves of the fact that Emma's here now.

Sniffing and giving the cat a firm squeeze for good measure, the blonde swallows, imagining her body might not quite be in sync with her mind as the world spins, and she worries momentarily that she might need to revisit the bathroom. Staggering tentatively over to the bed, she gazes down at its soft promise pensively, before slipping stiffly beneath the covers.

She's unsure if she should be here.

Unsure what to do with the fact that everything had fallen apart, and yet she's awoken to find herself in a position where someone has tried to look after her.

Woken up warm and in a clean place- in a safe place- when she'd simply accepted her damp prison back in Boston.
Damp, but soon to be cold...

The thought had occurred to her within the chaotic haze of her misery when making her way back to that old, familiar apartment, that winter would be coming along before too long, and what had seemed bad would likely seem a whole lot worse.

Of course, she could have moved on.

Moved south.

But, she's fairly sure- in some cloudy part of her psyche- that she wouldn't have.

Because she'd already decided that things like that didn't matter any more.

What had happened in Washington didn't matter.

Not really.

Even if she had taken a second to think on it.

To think of the way she'd let out a surprised scream that had sent Neal hurrying into the bedroom of the small apartment they'd broken into in a deserted wreck of a building. The apartment they'd assumed empty, and fit for a night's sleep as the heating in the car had gone bust and the thermostat had plunged down to dangerous numbers as a cruel winter had taken its hold.

"We'll make a fire."

Neal had promised before disappearing into a poky kitchen to hunt for matches.

Thus leaving her to discover the stiff remains of the apartment's previous tenant.

Or perhaps 'occupant' might have been a better term.

Simply some poor soul with the same idea they'd had.

There had been no use in wondering, as they'd never have been able to ask. The old man in his mid-to-late seventies had been cold and stiff, and very much deceased, and they'd decided to sleep in the car after all.

That gruesome discovery had manifested itself as a silent fear for a couple of months, but then winter had passed and she'd found other things to worry about...

But it had remained stuck in the back of her mind like some sort of morbid countdown.

Tallahassee had seemed safer.

Warmer.

But, after what happened in the end with Neal, and what had happened with Regina- the final nail in the coffin of her self worth- that memory hadn't seemed all that important.

Which makes waking up here- knowing that she must have been carried upstairs and put to bed- all the more difficult to understand.

To know what to do with.
After years of fighting and vehemently refusing every insistence that she should climb those fatal, rickety steps, she had finally complied and made her way up to the gallows, only to close her eyes and wait... And have nothing happen.

To have that faceless executioner shrug their terrible shoulders and mutter in a voice that should never be heard 'not today, kid.'

Nibbling her lip nervously, she pets Cass as the tabby comes to lie beside her, before noticing the offering left out on the small table to her left.

A sandwich, some wrapped cookies, a couple of pears and a sealed pint of orange juice. All patiently waiting beside bottled water.

Several bottles.

And, what might seem like a fairly peculiar selection causes the blonde's breath to catch in the throat.

Because she gets it.

It's stuff that will keep.

Stuff that will keep and keep her going until she decides she wants to come out and talk.

Come out and leave.

Come out and argue about what happened.

Because Regina doesn't want to make things any worse.

Doesn't want to force her.

Won't force her.

And, while she knows that she might be clutching and straws and looking into things more deeply than needed- perhaps this is just what the Mayor had in her pantry- she is positive that's not the case.

Because Regina had brought her car over, even though she could in no way pretend it was another gesture of simple charity like the rest of her actions had been.

Regina had kept her drawing.

And Regina had driven to another goddamn state on the off chance she might be there.

Even though she'd known.

She'd known what she'd done.

"What now, Cass?"

"Lunch, Madame Mayor."

"Thank you, please just leave it on the table."

Regina instructs without looking up, and Johanna sighs as she does as she's told, before plucking up her courage and taking a seat opposite the darker woman.
The blonde's seat.
"Regina..."

"Johanna, I really need to finish this."

"I'm sure that's true, Madame Mayor, but I am also sure it can wait five minutes."

Looking up with a disapproving glower- not a woman used to being told what to do- the brunette rolls her eyes and sits back in her chair; raising a brow in a gesture that the older woman should say what she needs to say.

"What do you want?"

"I don't want anything, dear, but I do need to ask you about last night. You told me that I wasn't to speak of it, and I will keep that promise as you well know, but I am an old woman, and we are curious and easily worried by nature. You say that the little chick isn't 'your' girl, but she is.

She's most certainly not anybody else's.

If she belonged to someone, she wouldn't have been in that state."

"... She was in that state due to an argument with myself, Johanna, and it's news to me that Miss Swan's wellbeing is suddenly your concern-"

"-It's not the girl's wellbeing I worry about, dear! Regina, it's you I worry about."

"... Why? I can promise you, I don't require your concern."

"Perhaps not, but you have it. That girl's affected you. That much is obvious. She's affected you, but you are a hard woman to get through to, and I hope you won't mind me thinking so. I merely wonder what you wish to do now. You brought the little sparrow back to the nest, and yet you've refused to go up and see her. I worry that you don't know what to do, and this isn't a position you often find yourself in. I am wary of overstepping any lines, but fear that I might have already, so I simply wish for you to know you have my ear should you need it...

I believe you took in a stray and are now unsure what to do with it, and that's all well and good, my love, but you can't rescue a hungry little bird only to shut it somewhere safe and warm. If you don't see to it, it will still die. Now, I know you don't mean to shut that girl way and leave her to perish, but you also don't seem to know what to do-"

"-Johanna-"

"-Madame Mayor, I am sorry, I did not mean to overstep-"

"-Quiet!... Hush, dear... I know you mean well... I know. It's not up to me, though."

"Regina?"

"It's up to her. Miss Swan needs to make a decision as to what to do. Until she does... I will wait. She knows where to find me. When she wishes to talk, I will be here. If not... Well... She knows well enough that I leave in the mornings to go and fetch myself breakfast. I didn't this morning as I was worried she might want to see me... Clearly, I was mistaken... But I will resume my habits tomorrow morning, and... If it must be so... Emma can slip out without any form of confrontation if it's what she wants..."
"What she wants?"

"I just want her to be happy, Johanna."

"Regina..."

"She's not a sparrow. Not a sparrow, not a starling, not anything so fragile. She is something else. Something hard. Whatever decision she makes, I will allow it, but I hope she will at least hear me out."

"You care for her..."

"I let her cat up on my furniture. I drove willingly into the depths of that hideous concrete jungle... I took on a project, and I wish to see it through. Everyone in this town knows I took the girl on. I would hope I'd not be left with a reason to have them spread gossip should she leave."

"It's more than that."

The older woman frowns, before biting her tongue as she imagines she has overstepped quite dangerously. Regina merely regards her silently, before offering a slow nod; holding Johanna captive with her gaze.

"Yes. It is."
Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

A/N: Sorry for the wait. I'm writing this chapter trying to take in as many points made in reviews as possible- but it's impossible to respect them all!- as I know a lot of you said that you felt SQ would now be impossible and this was a big let down. I don't agree that it isn't possible, and have tried to explain/ portray why here, so am a bit nervous how this might be received! Hopefully it does what it's supposed to do :) Enjoy.

Chewing on a mouthful of chocolate chip cookie, Emma cocks her head to the side as she catches the light pad of footsteps pass outside the bedroom door. Her stomach flips nervously, but she is almost certain that the slow, soft stride that recedes down the hallway isn't that of the Mayor.

"Johanna..."

She muses, and imagines she's most likely correct. Still, she had heard the familiar purr of the brunette's voice a short while earlier when a loud rapping at the front door had awoken her from an uneasy dream- coming round to find that all residual haze of the whisky had finally left her system- and she had listened with a frown to the low murmur of voices downstairs.

Regina... And possibly Graham?

Maybe.

She is unsure; not having come to recognise many tones in this strange town.

"What now, Cass?"

She asks of the cat that sits up on the windowsill, and if the tabby finds the repetition of this question to be tiring, she politely lets such things slide.

What now indeed?

The blonde sighs. She had wondered if Regina might make an appearance at some point and attempt to talk to her. She is unsure exactly how she'd feel about that, but she knows that she would at least hear the darker woman out. Because... Well, because she'd come back.

And that's a curveball that she doesn't exactly know what to do with.

It's not something she had expected.

Nor anything she's ever experienced.

Which seems to be a bit of a theme when it comes to Regina.

She feels a great deal better than she had earlier. The thick bread of the sandwich left for her and the sweetness of the sugar-laced homemade cookies- Johanna, again, most likely- serving to clear her head slightly and put an end to her dizzy shivering.
She feels as though for the first time since leaving the mansion—fleeing... fleeing the mansion—she is able to think straight, and while she struggles to get her head around things, it is somewhat of a blessing not to suffer through the chaos of angry voices duelling for dominance in her head.

It's quiet here.

Peaceful.

And looking around at the simple elegance of the room and the pretty silhouettes of the town's skyline that loom behind perfect landscaping, she understands that what she feels—amongst many other things—is regret. She'd been shocked, scared, even a little bit angry upon leaving town, and all of these things had weighed on her mind without allowing room for any other thoughts on the matter... Now though...

She'd regret it if she were to leave.

The Mayor had been right when describing her town as a little on the peculiar side, but Emma has since come to decide that this is simply part of its charm.

She likes it here.

It feels like ho-

-Careful, Swan.

She recoils from her thoughts as they enter dangerous territory, but that hopeful, small voice that has been bullied almost into nonexistence over the last couple of days seems to have a thirst for revenge, and it repeats back the brunette's words from that dismal hole back in Boston with a defiant disobedience of her better judgement.

"Come on. Let's go home."

The blonde blinks rapidly and clears her throat as her eyes suddenly seem alarmingly, well, wet, and she shakes herself from her thoughts with a guilty grin over at Cass.

"What are you looking at?"

The tabby blinks in response and Emma nods thoughtfully

"I guess I have gotten my head around things rather quickly..."

She agrees with the cat.

And it's odd, as usually, this is something she struggles with terribly. Not so much out of wanting to hold a grudge, but more out of finding it a necessity to do so in order to protect herself from letting painful experiences happen again. As someone so frugal with their trust and giving of themselves, any form of rebuttal has left a mental wound she's always refused to allow to fully heal.

Because scars and bruises and marks are all part of the story—part of life and what it's taught you—just as she had tried to explain to Regina what feels like a lifetime ago when sat chatting down in the darker woman's office.

This is different.

She sighs as she gives up trying to shut that voice out.
Because it speaks the truth; this *is* different.

Regina's anger had terrified her, and the words the brunette had chosen to use had hurt, but the Mayor has since then acknowledged this fact and admitted to spitting them out due to an inexplicable fury.

Not because they'd come from the heart.

She recalls the way she herself had yelled at Neal back on that long ago beach. Yelled at him when he'd had the *audacity* to cross a line he'd not even known existed. When he'd been trying to be good, to be nice, to do the right thing, and she'd bitten back venominously and had chosen her words with cruel intent; selecting the few from the rabble in her mind that she'd known- even through that red haze- would really stick. That would really hit a nerve.

Regina had been *angry*, and the way she'd reacted hadn't been that of a Mayor, of an adult, of an authority figure.

It had been raw. Cruel. From a place of hurt; a place of fear...

And, while Emma muses that she can't fathom for a *second* why in the hell she might have given the brunette a reason to feel *any* of those things, she understands the chaos that can come as a result.

What fear and anger can make you do.

What has happened since has been unfortunate- *bad*- but she understands also that Regina is fully *aware* of this, as the darker woman continues to keep her distance.

A small part of her feels ashamed. Embarrassed. And, she *knows* she shouldn't feel these things- that she should allow herself to accept that she'd been hurt- just as she knows these particular feelings have a lot to do with the sugar and carbs currently working through her system.

Because she feels better. She feels back in control of herself. She feels full.

Because she'll never learn.

Because everything had been black and bleak and broken, and then the Mayor had come back and she'd helped and she'd apologised and fed her and put her to bed.

And, while she is reluctant to put herself in a position where she might once more be a fool setting themselves up for failure, she wants more than *anything* to just let *go* of what happened and make up, because no one's *ever* backed up their 'sorrys' before, and she just wants to believe that sometimes a second chance really *is* just that, and not the act of simply setting the game pieces back on the board only to knock them over carelessly once again.

Because she had expected to feel a whole *bunch* of things about the woman sat in her office downstairs.

But she feels only one.

Hatefully familiar in a way that has her rolling her eyes at her own expense.

She feels gratitude.

It is tentative, weary, nervous... But it's also deep.

"Oh, for *fuck*'s sake."
She grumbles; helping herself to another cookie and contemplating the crescent her teeth leave in the soft dough as she chews thoughtfully.

Things had all hit rock bottom with alarming speed, but she is struck now by the memory of getting out of jail and looking around the sun-scorched lot outside the gates as though searching for someone. As though, maybe, just *maybe*, she'd been stupid enough to believe she might spot a familiar smile and a friendly face out there waiting to explain why things had gone the way they did.

She remembers looking for a similar explanation, apology, *anything* in the envelope housing the keys to the bug.

There'd been nothing.

She stares down at the perfectly baked treat in her hand and smiles.

*I'm glad you came back.*

"I'm glad I came back."

Looking up from a document she isn't really reading, the brunette listens intently as she catches the soft whine of the pipes sound from upstairs indicating use of the shower. Sighing, she places down her pen and casts her gaze thoughtfully out the window.

Out towards the apple tree that stands guard over the two, wooden seats she will ask Graham to drag back into the garage when the weather finally turns.

Out to where the blonde had sat in her flimsy little dress and progressed with her *diabolical* attempt at flirtation.

It had confused her at the time... But now...

Well, now she finds herself adopting a small smile as she reminisces; supposing that she's neglected to acknowledge- hell, *notice*- that one of the younger woman's redeeming features in her own eyes is that she finds her to simply be, well... Sweet.

*Strange.*

*Idiotic!*

*But sweet.*

And she can't help but wonder what might have happened should she have understood the blonde's curious mannerisms for what they were that day.

Yes, she had tried to do the right thing.

The right thing in stepping back when Emma had taken that pointed step forwards.

But...

She remembers the way the colour had flushed across her cheeks when watching bright white and pointed velvet play over melting ice; her reaction born from discomfort in thinking herself *wrong* for looking on with lust and sexualising something she'd perceived to be innocent.

If she'd *known* such a display was being put on for her benefit...
Well...

"I have had a great many obscure and convoluted relationships and exchanges in my life... But I think you might well win the prize, dear."

She smiles, lowering her chin into the cradle of her palm as the water is shut off upstairs.

"Your girl's up and about, then?"

Johanna muses; causing the Mayor to jump when she enters the room with a pot of tea.

"It sounds that way, yes."

She nods, helping herself, and pointing to the chair that stands empty on the other side of the desk.

"You look troubled, dear."

The ageing redhead continues as she takes up the proffered seat and regards her employer pensively.

"I'm merely sorting through my thoughts. Sometimes they have a habit of getting themselves muddled and in the wrong order... Sometimes I don't recognise those that are important from those that simply masquerade as such."

"Then you're not alone, Regina, dear... It may sometimes feel that way, but I assure you, that is true of many people. It can be lonely when you feel you need to keep everything to yourself. Sometimes a gentle reminder that you're not as messed up in your mind as you might believe can be therapeutic."

"You're saying I'm just like everybody else?"

The brunette growls, and Johanna shifts nervously in her seat before catching the faint- and rather surprising- glimmer of a smile dancing within dark eyes.

"I'm saying perspective is a funny thing."

She offers in response, and Regina nods thoughtfully.

"That much is true."

"Well... You have it figured out now, at least."

"Do I?"

"You said you cared for the girl. You're drawn to her."

"I said no such thing."

"It was implied."

"... She's surprised me. She's made me realise several things about myself that I had never thought about before. I am not one to speak candidly of my emotions and my decisions, Johanna, but I will say this much... Things I have discovered about myself in the past have most often been less than pleasant... It has been curious to have someone bring out sides of myself that I am finding agreeable... You came with me once to my father's crypt, do you recall?"

"Yes, dearest."
"He was a good man, my father."

"You have said so, and I am sure that it's true."

"As a girl, I believe I made him quite proud... I'm not sure that would have been the case with some of my later decisions."

"Madame Mayor?"

"Just... Just a feeling... I believe that some of the things the Swan girl has brought out in me would make my father proud. That is an important thing for me-"

"-of course! I-"

"-but it is also an acclamation for the girl."

"... It soothes the soul to find a friend."

"Indeed... But I hadn't actually been looking for one."

The brunette finishes with a small shake of her head, and Johanna chuckles amiably.

"Perhaps you just didn't realise."

"Perhaps... Miss Swan is a rather obscure choice, however."

"How so? Regina, dear, I believe that may be the problem with many a relationship... Too much time is spent analysing the situation. Analysing the whys and the hows. So, the girl isn't what you'd been expecting in a companion? Can't you just enjoy her company?"

"Right now, I only hope I still have her as a companion at all."

The brunette sighs melancholily, and the older woman takes her cue to leave when thick lashes lower back down to the papers spread out on the desk.

"I will see to Henry and then make my way home, dear."

Johanna advises quietly, and she slips from the room with a polite nod of her head.

Running her finger over her bottom lip and glancing back out at the chairs beneath the tree, Regina sighs and pushes herself from her desk; making her way up the stairs and coming to a halt outside the spare room. Reaching out her hand, she lets it hover over the doorknob uncertainly, before closing her eyes with a shake of her head and retreating to her bedroom.

Standing with her arms crossed over her chest and her bottom lip caught between her teeth, the blonde frowns at the moon.

She is uncertain.

Nervous.

Hours ago, when she had finished the last of the sweet treats left beside the bed, she had made her way timidly over to the door and stood indecisively with her hand rested against painted wood.

Her breath had caught in her throat when light footsteps had sounded down the hall, and a shadow
had fallen across the dim light bleeding through beneath the door.

She'd retracted her hand swiftly but remained where she was.

Waiting.

Wondering.

Only letting herself breathe when that shadow had disappeared and the soft creaking of floorboards had let her know her guest had decided against begging entrance.

"I can't keep on like this..."

She mutters at the moon, and her attention falls on the shadowed silhouette of the Mayor's apple tree and the chairs beneath.

She'd been foolish to wear the dress.

She knows this now.

But... She isn't so sure she really regrets it anymore.

Isn't sure about anything anymore.

She wants to see Regina.

Wants to put an end to the hateful tension that they've both accepted due to how terribly things had gone wrong.

Wants to put an end to the questions between them in general.

Because she is still grateful.

Perhaps more so now than ever.

Now that she's been brought back here without giving the brunette anything in return as of yet.

She's worried. Worried that without a display of her thankfulness Regina might get bored and ask her to move on.

So, what to do with the fact that the darker woman has taken her kindness that one step further?...

She doesn't know.

Doesn't know.

Just knows she wants things to be okay again between them.

Knows she wants to make the darker woman happy.

Not because she believes Regina demands it from her, no, not anymore.

But, because... She wants to.

Wants to put an end to their stupid, goddamn dance.

Because she wants to pay what she feels she owes.
Because that will make it all okay again, surely?

Hopefully.

And also, just... Well, because for once, she wants to try asking for what she herself wants, too.

The brunette lies dozing an inch away from sleep when her bedroom door opens and closes softly. Dark eyes fluttering open in response to the noise, she rolls over onto her side; regarding her visitor by the hazy glow of the moon.

"Emma?"

The blonde stares back at her and nods, before swallowing audibly and letting the soft robe she'd borrowed from the back of the guest room door fall open and flutter to her feet.

"Emma, what on earth are you-"

But the younger woman interrupts the Mayor's shocked query as the latter pushes herself nervously up into a seated position and frowns at pale, exposed flesh with an expression of weary incomprehension

"-I can't keep doing this! I tried to thank you. I tried to make it even. I've realised a lot of things over the last couple of weeks, and even more in the last couple of days, and do you know what I've come away with? I like you, okay? I like you. And I missed you, even though I kept telling myself otherwise, because like it or not, Madame Mayor, we were getting on pretty damn well, and I'm not usually one to jump into that kind of thing, and I'd hazard a guess that you aren't either, but it happened, ok? It happened! And I liked it! I liked how things were, even though you drove me crazy and I never knew where I stood with you. I liked you. And I know I fucked up, but I just want to be friends again. I want to be your friend again. And you know what? When I was being weird with you and everything, I was getting so frustrated because you weren't getting it! I just wanted to give you something, and I don't have a whole lot I can offer, but I can give you me- and maybe I've read things totally wrong and you don't want that, and that's fine, but I'm not sure that I have, and I don't want to keep on just guessing and owing and guessing and owing, because-"

"-Emma, please-"

"-because I just want to make you happy. I just want to be friends. I don't want to keep feeling like I owe you everything and have given you nothing, because that's not how friendship works. I tried to figure you out, I really did! I tried and I tried and I tried, and it got me nowhere. I like you Madame Mayor, and I think you like me too, but I'm tired. I can't keep doing this. You came back for me... I owe you. So, please... For god's sake just tell me what it is you want from me...

Tell me what you want!

...How can I make you happy?"

Silence.

The blonde's frantic speech coming to an end, and she stands breathing shallowly with her fists clenched as she waits for an answer.

Struggling to find her voice as she keeps her attention carefully trained on the younger woman's face, Regina shakes her head as she runs a harried hand through her hair.
"Emma... You need to put the robe back on..."

"But-

"-Please! Please, dear... Listen to me."

"I just... I just thought you wanted... I... Y-you don't?"

Frowning as green eyes widen with dismayed embarrassment, she waits for Emma to do as she's told, and swallows uncomfortably; shaking her head once more and speaking softly.

"I didn't say that. But what I want right now?... Emma, what I want is for you to talk to me. You say you owe me, so I would ask for you to do that much. But I owe you that much, too... Please... Put the robe back on and come here.

Sit with me.

Talk to me.

That would make me happy."
Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

A/N: Really, REALLY need to learn to stop writing directly onto fanfic *sigh*. Sorry this took a while, it logged me out when I tried saving it, so about 1000 words of my original chapter, and it's always such a depressing exercise to try and remember what was going on and write something similar. Still, it had been a while! So hopefully version 2.0 is ok too :) 

"Sit with me.

Talk to me.

That would make me happy."

Regina pats the empty space to her side earnestly, watching as Emma pulls the fallen robe back on with her lip caught between her teeth and her hands shaking nervously. Swallowing with relief when the blonde finally pads over and takes a tentative seat on the very edge of the mattress, she fusses the soft material of the robe more firmly into place, before opening up her arms and pulling the younger woman into her.

"Stop with that quaking, you idiot. I like you too, dear. I like you very much, Emma."

She murmurs into soft curls that carry the delicate scent of the jasmine shampoo used in both the guest room and her own bathroom, as her lashes fail to keep several of her tears from falling into tangled gold.

Sniffing as the blonde shakes against her, she tightens her hold and strokes long hair gently in a way she hopes is soothing.

But, then, what would she know?

It is a curious thing.

She had been surprised when Emma had embraced her before things had gone so wrong, not so much out of a distaste for the act, but more because... She's out of practice.

And, really, save for her father, her mother and Daniel- all dead, all long gone and leaving her alone in this world- who else has she ever held- or allowed to hold her- in such a way? For this is something entirely different from a lover's embrace while tasting one another with the anticipation of simple pleasure.

This is deep.

"I'm sorry for what I just said."

Emma sighs as she finally pulls away and pushes her hair from her face; her eyes pink and her lashes wet.
"Why? Was it not true?"

"No, it's just... I kind of expected only a couple of words to come out, and then it just wouldn't stop... I-if I've made things worse somehow, or awkward, or-"

"-Worse!? Oh, my dear, don't give yourself such credit!"

Regina shakes her head with a watery chuckle and wipes away an errant tear from the younger woman's jaw.

"I didn't mean... I just mean... With the robe, and-"

"-Shh. Enough. Any awkwardness due to you dropping that robe is currently very low on my list of concerns. Am I worried you felt the need to do such a thing? Yes. But, you know, it takes some guts doing what you just did, dear. It takes courage to say 'enough is enough' and call an end to the mind's idle wandering when it's causing us pain. It takes someone who has even just a streak of self-worth, and my concerns about you dropping your robe are quietened somewhat by all those words you couldn't keep in just now... I want to apologize. For several things, but firstly because I was aware of the fact you were struggling with how you were feeling about me. It took me some time to come to that realisation, but when I did, I had no idea what to do with that discovery... I was also wary of the idea that I might be mistaken. I couldn't allow you to make me look like a fool. I should have called you out on it, Miss Swan. I should have pushed the matter when you tried to kiss me... You did try, didn't you? That day in my office?"

Green eyes lower to the plush covers of the brunette's bed, and the younger woman nods- just once- with her lips forming an unhappy line.

"I'm sorry, dear. I thought... I thought if I just ignored it..."

"I'd go away."

Emma shrugs with a hint of bitterness to her tone, and Regina sighs as she shakes her head and leans back against the headboard.

"...That was a terrible realisation, you know?"

She whispers.

"That I tried to kiss you?"

"That you'd gone. That you'd gone away."

"But you said-"

"-I said many things, Emma. Many things I should never have said. Oh, I accompanied those things with a great deal of later explanation, but of course, that counts for nothing when I was merely consoling myself... What use is it me trying to back up what I'd done when speaking only to the walls and the ghosts?"

"Sometimes the walls are good at listening. They can't tell you you're wrong. Can't judge you."

"No. But they offer little consolation, either."

"That's still preferable."

"Is it?"
"I'd rather not be demanded of anything than be consoled. You can't fail at being miserable."

Sighing, Regina purses her lips and steeples her fingers beneath her chin, studying the blonde pensively with a morose expression.

"Is that what you are, Emma? Honestly now, in front of any deity or force you adhere to... Are you miserable? Will you tell me that much?"

"Well, I-"

"-Please. I don't want an explanation. Not yet. Just the answer. Because, I think I know what it might be, but I have my doubts as to whether you'll admit to what I believe to be the truth."

"That doesn't really leave me any room for another answer."

"Of course it does. Tell me I'm wrong. Please."

Emma shrugs, before averting her gaze out towards the yellow orb of the moon casting a dull haze through the open window.

"I'm not miserable, Regina. Not really. That's too big a word for what I am... I'm tired."

She muses, and the brunette's eyes flash in the shadows as she is reminded of her dream, and she shivers.

"Tired?"

"Yes. It's tiring sometimes. This life business. 'Miserable' would imply I sit around crying into my pillow and feeling sad. I don't. Most of the time, I guess I don't really feel much of anything. When I came here to Storybrooke that changed- I like it here- but usually? No. Not since... Not since Neal, anyway."

"Neal. He was the one with the watches?"

"Yeah."

"I still-"

"-He was my friend. A good friend I suppose you'd say."

"... More than just a friend, I suppose I'd say. Am I right?"

"Yeah. He's the one... The... Well, you know."

"I see... Did he know?"

"No."

"Then-"

"-How come you didn't say anything?"

"What would you have had me say on the matter, dear?"

The brunette enquires with her chest feeling uncomfortably tight and her throat suddenly dry. Hating this. Hating this hypocritical situation she finds herself in, where she is unable- unwilling- to do the
very thing she requests of the younger woman. Because she wants Emma to talk to her. Wants the blonde to open up and let out some of the poison she carries with her. Wants to help. Wants to tell her that it's all going to be okay.

Because... It could be. She believes it really could.

Not only that... There are other things she wants as they sit and talk bathed in the hazy light of the moon. She has described Emma as 'pretty' on several occasions, and heard others opine much the same, but, it's more than that. The girl is beautiful, and her offering is not quite as troubling as Regina has first believed. The idea of Emma wanting to provide her with some form of payment is one she finds highly unpalatable, and this surprises her a little, as she has been haunted by her thoughts from times long gone recently, and in those days it was not at all like her to worry about such things. But, the blonde had repeated herself over and over just now. Had been very clear on what she believed to be the heart of the matter.

I like you.

And, she knows Emma means this in more ways than one.

The feeling is mutual.

And she wants to embrace the younger woman. Wants to tell her it will all be ok. Wants to help her. Wants to be her friend. Wants to lean forwards now and brush her lips against the blonde's.

But would it be right?

Would it be right when Henry sleeps down the hall?

"Well, you made some pretty strange statements given that you knew..."

Emma muses and Regina frowns, before remembering that she had asked the younger woman a question. Incredibly, the blonde's response causes her to smile. She is unsure if she knows precisely why, but, she imagines part of it might have to do with what she'd told Johanna about Emma bringing out a better side of her. Something to do with her declaration that the blonde isn't some poor, broken little bird; fragile and needy.

Because Emma's not stupid. She might claim not to feel much of anything, and might have reacted to several situations in a rather obscure and frightening way, but there is plenty going on beneath those messy curls.

She listens.

She retains.

She's alert.

She's all these things so that she can protect herself.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. It was kind of like you wanted me to crack and tell you about it. They were leading questions, Madame Mayor."

"I suppose they were."

She agrees; seeing no sense in denying it now.
"Why?"

"Well, perhaps you might not have wanted to talk about it. It didn't seem right that I broach such a subject."

The brunette explains, and she finds herself surprised once more as she realises this sentiment to be mostly true. Maybe not for the first couple of days of knowing the girl, but she remembers standing out on the docks when things had all been fantastically pleasant and fine, and finding herself saddened by her private knowledge rather than bitter.

"Oh."

"And I- what? What's so amusing?"

"No, nothing, nothing."

Emma sighs as she shakes her head, and her low chuckle is replaced by a solemn smile as she regards the brunette.

"Nothing's funny, sorry. It's just... This isn't at all how I imagined this was going to go. All this talking. I thought I had it all figured out. I hadn't thought we'd be talking about what happened, or ever talking about stuff like this. I-I hadn't really planned on much talking at all!"

The younger woman blushes lightly in the moonlight, and to her surprise, Regina laughs quietly, before enquiring gently

"Are you disappointed?"

Emma looks down at her hands but offers a sheepish grin.

"...Yeah."

Nodding, Regina sighs as she smooths her finger over a crease in the bed linen and explains softly

"Emma, it would be a very bad thing for me to do to ask you now to crawl into bed with me."

"But I'm the one that-"

"-Please. Hear me out. I told you that I know it took courage for you to come in here and that I find myself taking some encouragement from the fact that you did so. But, I worry about you. You were in a bad state when I came to find you, dear, and that's still all rather fresh. I don't want anything from you, Emma, and I never did. I wanted to help you, which is why I brought you back with me the first time. The second time? Because I never meant to send you away, and... You're my friend."

_Do you like me, Emma_?

_Wh-what?_

_Well?_

_Yes... I mean, is that not... Is that not alright?_

_"I am."

"Surprising, I know, but yes. You're my friend... But, I apologised before for not addressing the way you were feeling and leaving you unfairly confused, so I will tell you a secret, dear; I like you, also. I
mean that the same way as you do when you say it."

"But, then, why can't we-"

"-Because."

The brunette sighs, and she finds herself smiling in spite of herself as she ponders on the fact that it's probably not a regular thing for one to find themselves sat in bed with someone so attractive, and, well, eager, and decline the offer. After all, they now play on more even footing, and Emma clearly wants what she proposes, and is probably of as sound mind as she's apt to ever get... But, even though Regina finds she wants it too- she really wants it too, now that she's allowed herself to think about it- she can't, because

"Because I have more than just the one secret, and it wouldn't be right for me to allow you in. As I said; I like you... That is no way to go about such things with someone you like. Not when you place value on your relationship. Not when there are things you are unable to share."

"You don't trust me."

Emma sighs; looking both a little disappointed and ultimately understanding, and the Mayor shakes her head with a small smile as she supposes it's things like this that have her liking the blonde so much in the first place. She can be a handful, but she understands. Not many people she has met over the years have understood.

Very few bother to try.

"Actually, I do. More so than I do most of the others here in town. It's nothing to do with my trust in you, dear. It's... Just something I can't... I can't say. I can't share."

She sighs, unhappily, and Emma frowns as she studies her pensively.

"Do you want to, though?"

Regina raises a brow; never having given it any thought.

"No... No, I don't, but it does make me sad sometimes."

"Oh... You know, I'm probably the worst person to give you this advice, but Neal used to say that sometimes things seem much better once you've shared them with someone. When it's not all festering in your head... Of course, neither he nor I ever took that advice, but, it seemed pretty reasonable, and maybe good for someone who's not as, you know, fucked in the head."

She grins self-deprecatingly, and Regina chuckles quietly with a warning glower at the blonde's use of language.

"Oh, my dear, it's not my head you need to worry about."

"It's my heart."

"I would say that's probably fair advice, but not the sort I am able to utilise, I'm afraid."

"Okay... Can I ask, though... Is it... Is it about my mom?"

Regina blinks in surprise, holding the younger woman's gaze thoughtfully through the indigo haze-drinking in tousled hair and the disconcerting resemblance here and there to the hateful woman whom she has given little thought since inviting Emma to town- before shaking her head slowly.
"No, Emma. It's not about that."

"Okay."

The blonde nods, before splaying her hands and arguing

"But what if I don't care that you have secrets? I have plenty of them, but-

"-I care."

Regina smiles sadly.

"Fine... Is it because of my age? Because I'm not a kid, you know, and-"

"-Oh, I know."

The brunette chuckles, and she casts her gaze out the window, and continues softly

"I know that. I like you very much, Emma, but I don't believe you would be so uninvested in the truth should you somehow uncover it. I suppose in a way I've now dangled a carrot, and that was not my intention at all. What I'm trying to do, is the right thing. If I could put that intention aside- and, believe me, it is not something I often endeavour to do, this is remarkably out of character, but then so much has been since you came here- I would. If I could put it aside and finish this evening the way you'd intended for it to go... I would. With great pleasure."

"I."

"-But, I can't, Emma. I can't tell you. I can't say what I would need to say, so-"

But she stops- shocked- as soft lips press against her cheek. Close to the corner of her mouth, but avoiding that forbidden curve by the smallest fraction of an inch. Breathing in the scent of jasmine and closing her eyes as messy tresses brush against her cheek, Regina lets out a shuddering breath, before tilting her jaw just a little to bring her lips to Emma's; the blonde touching her tongue lightly to the Mayor's top lip before pulling away with a smile.

"...I'll probably leave before you're up. I'm going to go back to sleep- or try to, anyway- and then I'll head off with Cass in the morning to get to the Diner for seven. I would leave earlier, but I don't have my key, and it looks like it might rain."

Emma muses calmly; returning the Mayor's dark gaze easily, and keeping her tone level and friendly.

"I suppose I'll see you at breakfast, and then I'll try and make sure I'm on time for work."

Pushing herself from the bed, she smiles pleasantly at the older woman before padding for the door. Standing with her fingers resting on the handle, she speaks quietly.

"You know, sometimes, if I can't figure out how to say something... I write it down."

"I."

"-Just an idea. But, I'd really like it if you did... I won't wear that dress again, though, don't worry."

She offers as an afterthought, before slipping from the room, leaving Regina alone with her thoughts; the darker woman a little stunned, as she runs her finger pensively over her lips where Emma's kiss still lingers.
Hurrying up Main Street with Caskett clutched to her chest, Emma bows her head against the light haze of morning rain dusting the sleep-serene town.

It's quiet- a far cry from Boston- and the rain doesn't bother her one bit.

She'd woken up just before six just as she'd known she would; not usually a morning person, but possessing a fairly infallible internal clock ready to rouse her when needed. She hadn't really expected to get any sleep after her conversation with Regina, but talking things through can be tiring, and she'd been out cold almost as soon as she'd slipped back beneath the covers of the spare bed.

A couple of her dreams had featured the Mayor pressed up against her and panting in her ear.

Some hadn't. They'd simply taken her through a lazy maze of scenes and events with no order or meaning.

Occasionally the two would merge.

At one point she'd been rubbing sand from her knees and squinting up beneath a floppy, ill-cut fringe to find the darker woman sat out on the dunes beside her, holding out an ice cream with a small smile.

"I like you, Emma."

At another, she'd been running- screaming with laughter- through the distorted delirium of a carnival mirror maze in her best tight jeans and a top the boy from a few houses down had bought her because it showed her navel, and she'd found herself almost bowling the curious brunette over. She'd apologised- handing over an ice cream she'd not realised she'd been holding- and popped her gum, and the strange, beautiful woman had nodded in acceptance, and backed her gently up against the glass; a million copies of copies of strangers trapped within maddening silver.

"I like you, Emma."

For the most part, she'd busied herself wandering the dreamscapes unfolding before her alone, but content.

When she'd awoken, there had been no sound of shuddering exhausts and dawn-angry arguments. No baby screaming or neighbours yelling.

She'd pushed herself from the bed and slipped into creased, but useable clothes, and washed her face in the bathroom.

As she'd been padding quietly down the hall for the stairs, a low murmur had heralded her from
behind the brunette's bedroom door, and she imagines Regina may not have slept as soundly as she herself had.

That's ok, though.

She doesn't think the brunette is angry at her or irritated.

Just confused.

*And hell knows, she's not alone, there!*

It had been an *amiable* call, at least.

"It's raining, dear. Do you want me to drive you over?"

She'd shaken her head, before realising how foolish this was given the door between them, and had replied softly

"No, that's ok. I'd like to walk... I'll see you later."

"

"... Make sure you're on time."

A forced response. A *familiar* response. And she imagines that's a good thing. After all, of course she'd been worried about facing Regina due to their falling out and the subsequent mess of events, but in all honesty, she'd been worried *also* about facing her following whatever outcome there might have been to her decision to 'show her hand' so to speak.

But it had been okay.

Regina had said 'no' but the world hadn't gone up in flames and the pope is still- so far as she is aware- catholic.

It hadn't been a cruel rejection. Nor one she's altogether sure will last...

She's *still* confused.

But it's okay.

Talking about things had actually... Well, it had actually *helped*!

She feels lighter than she ever has done since arriving in town, and this thought has her breaking into a grin as she suspects that this might be the case *physically* also, and hopes that Granny might have a fresh batch of brownies waiting in the back.

Yawning as she makes her way between the booths and deposits the appropriate cutlery on spotless tables, Ruby glances up, startled, as she is interrupted by a sharp rap at the door.

Peculiar, as *everyone* knows that the Diner doesn't open for another half hour at least, but... Doesn't that look like...

"*Emma*!"

Hurrying to the door and wrestling with the keys, she pulls back misted glass and lets the blonde and her scrawny old cat in from the rain.
"Emma!"

She cries again, throwing her arms around the younger woman- who has just enough time to allow Cass to leap down and scurry off- before slapping her smartly across the face.

"What the hell is wrong with you!?"

She demands of the rather dazed looking blonde who massages the red mark colouring her cheek, before pulling her back into a tight embrace.

"Shit, Ruby, I can't breathe."

Emma grumbles, but she squeezes the young waitress back fondly and feels a warm flush of happiness when the latter kisses her sweetly on the cheek before stepping away.

"Where the hell did you go?! What happened?! We were worried sick about you!"

"It was no big deal!"

The younger woman assures awkwardly, but Ruby adopts an interrogation style stance so close to Granny's- hands on hips and eyebrow expectantly cocked- that she finds herself grinning.

"No big deal!? I practically have a heart attack running around this damn place on my own with no backup-"

"-Ruby, I'm sorry I didn't-"

"-Only to have the goddamn Mayor come in, asking if anyone had seen you! Top that off with Marco coming by with your key, and Regina's face when she came in, and Granny was convinced you were lying in some ditch somewhere. She was ready to organise some kind of candlelit vigil!"

"I'm touched."

Emma jokes- a little croakily, as the waitress's words hit home and she catches the ill-hidden glint of relief in Ruby's eyes- but the brunette is having none of it.

"Emma, what happened? Regina said you two argued- didn't even call you any names or try and place the blame!- and then next thing we hear, she's off, too. Sydney was supposed to have a meeting with her, and all that old housekeeper lady of hers would say was that she was 'gone for now'... So, what? Did you split? What did you do?!

"... I went back to Boston. Regina and I argued, and I guess I freaked, so I went back."

"What kind of argument would have done that?! And why would you take off without even coming to say goodbye?!"

Ruby growls this last part, but her lip trembles and the blonde does something she's never done before. She takes a hold of the waitress's hands, and, finally, she sees why the dumb emotional wrecks in the movies feel the need to do this to their even dumber emotional wreck screen-mates. Because sometimes- sometimes- it's not about being pathetic, or grossly over the top. Sometimes, it's just the right thing to do; to hold someone and tell them it's all fine.

"I know, and I'm sorry. Please don't take it personally... I'll totally make sure I swing by next time I run away."

She grins- squeezing the brunette's hands- and Ruby shakes her head and informs her seriously
"Oh no, you won't. If I even catch wind that you're planning to run again, I will damn well tie you to that great big deepfreeze in the cellar!"

"Kinky."

Emma grins as she feels several tears collecting in her lashes, and she hopes they won't fall down to introduce themselves.

"Always. But, seriously, doll... Are you okay? What was the deal? What did Regina do or say that had you deciding to take off in the middle of the night?"

"It was more like nine..."

"Emma."

"It was... It was just an argument."

The blonde shrugs, and Ruby regards her seriously for a moment longer, before shrugging with a sigh.

"Well, okay then. So long as you're okay. You better go up and get changed. I have Molly coming in to help later because you were gone, but breakfast is just me, and I could use-"

"-I'll be five minutes."

Emma smiles, and the brunette returns the gesture before going back to work. Watching her pensively, the blonde thinks back on the previous evening and how it had felt actually talking to Regina. She thinks back to the night when the waitress had crawled into her bed and asked her about a whole number of things she’d usually never share.

Thinks about how it had been okay.

How it had actually helped to make her feel better to talk about things, because Neal had been right when claiming that sharing made things so that they weren’t quite so bad. A hard theory to test when you don't have anybody around you’d trust to help you cross the street let alone with the fragile thoughts and memories inside your head.

But here, she trusts Regina.

She trusts Regina, and she trusts

"Ruby?"

"Yes, princess?"

"I'll tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"About what happened."

Eyes widening momentarily, Ruby swiftly recognises the need to tread with care and offers a brisk nod and goes back to folding napkins.

"After work tonight, I'll come find you when I finish up... Now go get changed."
"Your girl's gone."

Johanna frowns as she makes her way into the Mayor's kitchen with an armful of laundry to find Regina stood by the window, cutting an apple into slices.

"Yes. She left this morning."

"Did she allow you a chance to talk with her? It's very early."

"She came to talk to me last night."

"Did she now?"

"She did. Progress, I would say."

"I hardly know the girl, Madame Mayor."

"It's progress, Johanna. Most certainly."

Regina nods, and points over to a freshly brewed pot of coffee.

"Help yourself when you're done with that, dear."

She offers, watching thoughtfully as the ageing redhead busies herself with feeding white sheets into the washing machine. She is tired. She hadn't slept well once Emma had disappeared back to her room, but she is relieved that the blonde had done so either way. Pleased? No. The younger woman had tasted sweet, and the hand that had come to rest- innocently enough- on the blonde's thigh had found the skin there to be invitingly smooth, but... No. She is relieved Emma had pulled away and taken her leave.

When she had slept, she'd occasionally dreamt of the oblivious Saviour. Every now and then tasting soft flesh as the younger woman moved beneath her.

Many of her dreams had been without a point, and without purpose.

Occasionally the two would merge.

She recalls finding herself sat out on a sand dune watching the waves rolling into shore, as a vibrant red sun started its descent over the horizon, and finding herself in the company of a young girl of perhaps four or five. She'd known, though. Of course she'd known.

Known who the little blonde in the large shirt hanging down to her knees had been.

She'd given her an ice cream- though she doesn't recall obtaining such a thing- and the girl had smiled.

"I like you, Regina."

She has no idea where on earth that beach might be- certainly not anywhere she's been while awake- but has the strangest idea- though of course she knows it to be crazy- that Emma might if she were to describe the scenery and ask her if some adult who'd shown just a bit of care, had ever dressed her in a white shirt with a red dog on the front to keep her from getting sunburnt.

She could also ask about the curious mirror maze.

Though, what had been innocent and sweet on the beach had been wanting and raw in that giddy
scene. She could ask, though. Could ask if the blonde had once visited a carnival at, oh, say, fifteen, and run around through halls of distorted glass.

She won't though.

Because she knows that even if Emma had visited the fair or the circus as a teenager, she certainly won't have run into Storybrooke's Mayor. Nor the Evil Queen.

Wouldn't have given her an ice cream.

And won't have whispered in her ear while allowing the flimsy cotton of her top to be pushed up.

"I like you, Regina."

No.

Best not ask.

And really, Emma's fleeting appearances in her dreams are neither anything new nor of any real concern. What concerns her is... She likes the blonde.

Of course, for what she feels, she would perhaps word it differently.

She enjoys her.

Cares for her.

Wants her.

But, she will use Emma's appropriated term, as it works just as well.

She does like her. And, the burden this comes with is...

Well.

Until that word had been thrown into the mix, she had been unsure of her standing. When Emma had first started behaving strangely, she had been too surprised to give such things much thought. Now, though... It had been a soft kiss, and a gentle kiss, but she remembers the flicker of pointed velvet against her lip, and that undesired thought playing darkly in her head of how easily she could have inched her hand up beneath the shadows of the younger woman's robe. Remembers wanting to.

But, well... She likes her.

That's the problem.

As she has no way of telling her the secret she keeps.

The secret that seems to be becoming heavier by the day.

It hurts.

But it had helped.

Had helped a little to at least talk to Emma.

To talk to someone.
"Johanna... I'm not going to go to the Diner for breakfast. I would like you to join me here instead. I'd appreciate your ear on a matter."
Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

A/N: Phew. Well, Emma's explanation went on a lot longer than I had originally planned it to as it covers mostly what we all know as viewers and several points that have been brought up in this fic before. However, I kind of really wanted to do it from her point of view, rather than speculations and the odd mumbling to a cat. But, now it's all more or less out in the open :) Not entirely!- That'd be much too easy- but, getting there :) Enjoy! And please review!

"The girl is Henry's mother?!

Johanna gasps; sitting opposite the Mayor, who purses her lips and nods.

"But, how did you... What happened? Why did you bring her here?"

"You already know why I brought her here. I had little choice. I couldn't leave her there, Johanna. That place, it wasn't... It wasn't right."

"But why seek her out in the first place, dear? I had been under the impression you had requested a closed adoption?"

"Correct."

"Then..."

The redhead frowns in confusion, and Regina sighs as she pours herself another cup of coffee; telling herself that this had better be her last or she's apt to start shaking with all of the caffeine swallowed this morning.

"When I was worried that Henry might be sick- when he kept fretting and crying- Dr Whale assured me it was nothing. Just a baby fussing. I was unwilling to take that explanation as the absolute truth, as I have never heard an infant cry in such a way, and it concerned me. Whale advised me that if there really was anything wrong with Henry, it would be hard to discern without any medical history pertaining to his parents. His birth parents.

I had Sydney contact the adoption agency and find out what he could about the mother. Strictly under the table, mind you. He obtained a name, and I found an address. I went to find her- this 'mother'- to see if I could find out more about what was ailing Henry. In the end, that seems not to have been necessary."

Regina explains, and this last part is the first lie she has told since the two of them sat down together about twenty minutes ago.

It had been true that she'd been worried.

True that Sydney had coerced the agency into sending over Emma's information.

But, after that?
After that, she had become 'The Saviour', rather than simply some uncaring, unimportant nameless woman.

She had become a threat.

And visiting her had had little to do with obtaining any relevant medical information.

"Oh, my lord... That is quite a twist, dear."

Johanna sighs, and the brunette nods in weary agreement.

"Yes. And now I am rather stuck as to what to do."

"In what way?"

"Well... Do I tell her? I am unsure what good it would do her to know such a thing, or whether it's even as important as I'm making it out to be. I mean-"

"-Regina. It's important, dearest."

The older woman interrupts gently, before continuing carefully; aware of whom she speaks to.

"At least, it's important depending on what you foresee happening from here on out."

"How so?"

The brunette asks, her chest tightening with an insinuation she knows doesn't truly exist in Johanna's words.

"Well, it depends on whether or not you want to keep the girl around. I would presume you do, given the length to which you went in order to find her after your altercation. I would also assume-given what you explained to me was said to send her running in the first place- the fact that she's come back and has initiated some form of dialogue between the two of you is a sign that she is similarly invested in this friendship you've both found. If you plan on remaining friends with Emma, you would do well to tell her the truth. Not only for her benefit, but for yours, dear. That is a rather overwhelming secret to keep to yourself."

"But, Johanna... What if she hates me?"

Regina whispers, and, Johanna regards her employer with a troubled expression; the brunette's enquiry unusually childlike with worry. In all honesty, hate- or, perhaps that's too strong a word, but dislike, most certainly- is not anything that she would have presumed might bother the Mayor. After all, Regina is kind enough within the comfort of her own home, but she has never been known to spare the feelings of any in town when it comes to the sharpness of her tongue. The idea of being 'disliked' is not one that has ever seemed to be of any great importance before.

"Well... Then, I suppose you take it from there if that should happen to be the case. But, you have no way of knowing how she might react, dear."

No.

The brunette muses.

And I'm not sure it's even worth my while to guess when it comes to Emma.
The Mayor breathes a sigh of relief when she catches the telling click of the front door opening and closing. Not because she had worried Emma might not show up, but because waiting around nervously for her to do so has been troubling. Regardless, she appropriates a neutral smile and nods when the younger woman slips into the room with a quiet greeting.

"Hey, Regina."

"You can leave your jacket by the door, dear."

It is the first day that the weather has really turned—rain pattering soothingly against the windows—and Regina takes in the dark sweater and casual jeans the blonde wears with private appreciation. The neck of the deep emerald sweater falls in a low V, but Emma has paired it with a plain, white shirt underneath that shows little more than the delicate bow of her collarbones. It is an appealing outfit, but not in the least bit demanding of any attention. Still, having been the one to have purchased the garments the younger woman now owns, the brunette finds herself inwardly glad that Emma has chosen to wear the sweater she does now, and not the woollen polo-neck she could have chosen instead. The sweater doesn't make a statement. Doesn't force her to think about last night, and whether the girl might suffer any regrets about anything shared or disclosed.

Not that she has been able to help herself from worrying about such things either way.

"You didn't come by for breakfast."

Emma broaches quietly, and the Mayor offers a small smile as she catches a hint of shyness in the younger woman's tone.

"No. I had things to discuss with Johanna. I'm sorry, I hadn't meant to worry you."

"It's okay; you didn't."

"No?"

"Well... Maybe a little."

Emma grins up at her, and dark eyes glitter knowingly as Regina nods at this altogether more believable answer.

"It crossed my mind to call in, but... I decided it was a little dramatic to give Miss Lucas a call to apologise for my absence from a public place, even for me."

"Maybe a little."

The blonde chuckles, and Regina sighs as she watches Emma tuck long hair behind her ear and lick her lips nervously. There is a thick tension between them, but it is not wholly unpleasant, and she can completely understand the younger woman's awkwardness following their discussion the previous evening. For her own part, she finds herself studying golden curls and sharp features with new intrigue, and is troubled to find that she feels quite a substantial amount of 'pull' towards her companion.

More worrying still, is the sudden thought that crops up in her mind that accompanies this new realisation of 'I want'.

It is the thought of 'I want this'.

This version of the blonde.
Pretty, and casual in her sweater and jeans- not exactly bought for the workplace, but she'll let it slide- and she struggles with the sudden notion that she no longer wishes to fantasise about the girl dressed in the rags her servants had once worn. Doesn't want to see her that way. She wants her as she sees her now.

And it hurts.

It hurts because she knows full well- Emma has made it quite clear, after all- that all she would need to do is ask, and she could have exactly what she wants.

_Sometimes, if I can't figure out how to say something... I write it down._

But how _can_ she?

And where would she draw the _line_?

With Henry? With Snow? With the Curse?

_Henry._

She tells herself.

Yes, Henry. Henry is what stands between herself and Emma.

But, is it wrong to tell her one thing and not the rest?

_How could you?! The boy is one thing, dearest. The boy has had a huge impact on her life, and she needs to know about him if you wish to have this fanciful infatuation go anywhere. The rest? You can't tell her! Even if you did- even if you told her the stone cold truth- she wouldn't believe you! If you were to tell her about magic, about her mother, about Charming. If you were to introduce yourself as the Evil Queen... She would think you were insane!_ 

_Quite._

And, really, the rest- the curse- is not something that needs to be addressed in her mind for her to feel comfortable in taking Emma up on her offer.

She can make her peace with the fact that there will still be _some_ lies between them. She has done so before, and she will do so again.

But Henry.

Her son?

No. That needs to be addressed before she will allow Emma to give what she had claimed was all that she _has_ to give.

Because, while she doesn't _demand_ it- of _course_ not, doesn't _demand_ payment for what she's done- she knows that, in a curious sense, Emma is still offering her something with the intention that she then 'take' it.

_Not her body- to the blonde, that isn't the thing of value, here- but her trust._

And she doesn't want to take what she shouldn't, however much she might _like_ to when she looks up to find cool green regarding her curiously from beneath sooty lashes.
Emma catches her gaze and offers a shy smile.

She reciprocates, remembering the soft touch of the younger woman's lips.

Remembering the smell of her hair.

Remembering the feel of the blonde giving in and allowing herself to be held- and of holding someone- and how she'd been a little overwhelmed by several of her resultant emotions.

"How did it go?"

She enquires kindly, and Emma frowns in confusion.

"How did what go?"

"Well... I presume Miss Lucas might have had a few things to say about your brief disappearance? I didn't want to ask you if you were nervous this morning and stoke the fire, but I had a feeling you might be?"

"I was, kind of-"

Emma nods, genuinely surprised that somebody else might have picked up on this, or bothered to give it any thought at all.

"-It was okay... Ruby had about a dozen things to say, and Granny had plenty to add, but... It wasn't so bad. It was a piece of cake compared to how nervous I was talking to you, so, I just kept trying to focus on that. It's funny, though. I was nervous because I didn't know if they were going to be angry with me. I never even thought about the fact that they might have been angry with me because they cared."

Emma mumbles this last word shyly, and Regina offers a much wider smile as she pulls her pen from its pot and slides her diary across to the blonde.

"Friendship is a funny thing, isn't it, dear? All of these people growling and nagging at you... You must be feeling very popular."

"Kind of. It's a bit weird. I feel like I'm apologising a lot more than I ever have done, but for things I never even thought to think twice about before. I knew I was sorry for leaving in Ruby's case because she didn't have cover for my shifts. I never thought to be sorry for anything else. But, when I spoke with her, she didn't seem to give two shits about the shifts. More just-"

"-She cares for you. You worried her when you left. Granny, too. When you become close to people, you have to consider how your actions will affect them, also. It is funny though, you're right. You end up with people being angry with you or irritated with you much more often when they like you, then when they don't. You do understand though, that it is not a cruel anger, I hope? People feel hurt, or pain, or fear when they see the people they love or care about behaving in a reckless or unwise fashion, and that can often be projected as anger. Not because what that reckless person is doing even always effects them directly, but because they react to their fears and concerns. You're apologising a lot, Miss Swan, because people care about you a lot. It's okay. In time, they will come to apologise to you, too."

"I care."

"Yes, I don't doubt that. Given, well... Given certain circumstances, it's an admirable trait."
Regina shrugs, and she lowers her eyes as Emma blushes prettily and clears her throat.

"Shit... I don't much know what to say to that, Regina."

"Well, you're not really here to chat, Miss Swan, you're here to work, so I wouldn't worry about it too much, dear."

The brunette informs the younger woman silkily, but she offers the latter a quick smirk, and Emma grins, before opening up the diary Regina glances at pointedly.

"Let's get to it, then."

"Yes... Let's."

The Mayor agrees, but she finds her attention wandering every so often as she studies the blonde going about her work.

"Can I come in?"

Ruby enquires, despite already having her head poked around the blonde's bedroom door. The latter nods with a smile and closes her book; beckoning the waitress into her room and offering up a small roll of her eyes as Cass makes herself scarce.

"I always feel so cherished when I come in here."

The brunette jokes and Emma chuckles, before answering simply

"You are."

Snorting with laughter, Ruby helps herself to a seat on the bed and wags her finger at the younger woman.

"Oh, Swan, don't you get all gushy on me!"

She smirks in appreciation as Emma flips her the bird, before pulling a bottle and two glasses from her bag.

"Granny would kill me if she knew I was giving you this, but... To celebrate you coming back."

She smiles as she pours them both a healthy glass of merlot and leaves the imminent- and most likely difficult- conversation ahead of them unmentioned. Handing the blonde her glass, she motions over at the light switch and jokes

"Can we leave the lights on this time?"

Emma shrugs and takes a sip of her wine, seeming suddenly engrossed in the carpet.

"Do what you want."

"I'll leave them on for now... Look, we don't have to get right into things. We can chat, and-"

"-No. Please. I'd rather just..."

"Get it done?"

"Yeah."
"That's fine. That's totally cool."

"I just don't really know where to start." 

"The beginning?"

"No, I think this makes more sense from the end."

Emma sighs, and the brunette smiles indulgently and gestures that it doesn't matter.

"Do it any way you want, babe."

"Well, if I was doing it how I wanted, I wouldn't be telling you at all, it's just... I talked with Regina last night. I talked to her about things I've not talked to anyone about. We didn't go deeply into anything, but... It was still talking. And it was okay, you know?"

"Sure."

Ruby smiles, though she's not entirely sure that she does know.

"I didn't come to say goodbye to you. I didn't even come and collect Caskett. I didn't remember her, can you buy that? How shitty of me, right?"

"Well, I-"

"-I didn't even remember my shoes."

Emma interrupts in a low voice, and the brunette stills as she understands that the younger woman's questions are rhetorical. They're part of her thought process, and that seems to be the way she finds it easiest to communicate. Realising this, she simply sips her wine and nods that the blonde should continue.

"Earlier, I worded it that I 'left', but that's not really right. I ran. Regina and I argued, and I ran away... Only, 'argued' isn't really right either."

She frowns, aware that she's not doing a great job of getting her point across, but telling herself that it's okay. That she just needs to breathe. Telling herself to just get through this- no matter how jumbled up her process might be- and trust Ruby to be patient. Trust that she will be given the audience she needs for finally getting things off her chest.

Trust in general.

"No, it wasn't an argument. She yelled at me. Screamed at me, really..."

I went there, to the mansion, after going round to Mary Margaret's. It was nice spending time with Mary Margaret, but I went round for a mean reason. She was nice to me that day, and she chatted with me after I helped her sort out the photos at the school. She mentioned having some gin and it's like... It's like there was this lightbulb flashing in my head. It just said 'Regina!'. I'd tried flirting. I'd tried all sorts. It sucked, and at the time I couldn't figure out why, but when I'd gone to talk to Graham, he'd mentioned she liked gin, and I just thought... Hell, I don't know what I thought. I just figured it was worth a shot. So, I went over with the idea that I'd steal Mary Margaret's gin to then bring over to Regina's. Stupid, right? But... That was the plan.

I got to Regina's- gin in my bag- and, another numb-fuck idea; I let myself in when she didn't answer the door. She was in the shower, and I could hear her little boy fussing, and I just figured 'what the
hell, I'll go see what he wants'. I should have probably realised I was crossing the line sneaking around her house like that, only I didn't really consider it sneaking. I just felt bad that the kid was up there screaming to himself. I just wanted to go make him stop crying. That's all."

"...Regina's funny with Henry. Regina's funny with a lot of stuff."

"I know, and I should have realised I was crossing a line. I just... I was so pumped about what was going to happen afterwards- what was going to happen later- that I didn't really think. I just went in and picked the kid up; just to soothe him, you know? Anyway, Regina came in, and she lost it. Properly lost it. I don't think... I don't think she even really knew she was going to say some of the things she said. I don't think she even realised some of the things she said 'til they were out of her mouth and she couldn't swallow them back down.

She said a bunch of stuff.

Yelled.

Yelled a bunch of stuff.

And it hurt. She knew just what to say... She knew... She knew about what I'd done. About the bad thing I-I'd done."

The younger woman's breath hitches, and Ruby swallows; wishing she had asked the blonde to sit on the bed with her before starting her tale, but knowing that Emma probably finds her perch on her armchair to be preferable. Still, she has always been one to try and offer comfort, and it hurts her heart to sit and watch her friend begin to fret.

"What happened, Emma?"

She asks.

"I was in jail, you know. Before coming here."

Emma states blandly after a long period of silence.

"Jail?"

The waitress's eyes widen in disbelief, and the blonde nods as she speaks down to the carpet.

"Yeah. I-I ran away when I was fifteen. I'd run a few times before, too, but social services always managed to pick me up. This time was different. I got out of town- out of the state- and kept my head down. I'd learnt from the past, you see. I'd learnt that when you let other people in, they get in the way, so this time I didn't make that mistake. I kept to myself."

"But how did you eat? Where did you sleep?"

"... That's not part of this story."

Emma shakes her head, and Ruby swallows uncomfortably as this is hardly a reassuring answer. Glancing up at the brunette when she senses the latter's discomfort, the blonde sighs, and appeals quietly.

"Please. I'm not good at this. I can't do it all at once. I can't... I can't do it all now. Maybe one day, but not now. This is hard enough for me."

Nodding her understanding, the waitress clears her throat.
"It's okay. It's okay, hon, just tell me what you can..."

"I kept to myself. I kept to myself for a long time, but then it was starting to get cold, and I wanted to get out of town because... Well, for a bunch of reasons. I knew if I wanted to get away, I needed a ride, so I figured I'd steal a car."

"Emma!"

"Ruby, please!"

The younger woman's voice cracks as she responds to the brunette's cry, and the latter shakes her head apologetically, before getting up and shakily flicking off the light.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I didn't mean it to sound angry or anything, I just... I don't like this story. I want to hear it, and I want you to tell it, but I don't like it. I-I don't want... If I look at you telling it, I might cry, so... Go on, doll, please, but... I'm sorry. I'm..."

"It's okay."

Emma assures her softly in the darkness; pupils blowing out slowly to allow each woman to make out the other shrouded in shadows and moonlight.

"It's not."

Ruby whispers back, and Emma supposes she doesn't really have an argument for this miserable answer.

"Anyway, the car I decided to break into was already stolen. Irony loves a fool. It was almost funny, that part. I was driving along, and suddenly this dude pops up from beneath the crap in the backseat. I mean, he scared me half to death, but it was pretty amusing once my heart was back on track. His name was Neal, and he let me come along for the ride I needed out of town. After that... I just stayed on riding with him."

"You lived in the car with this guy?"

"Yep. In my bug."

"In the bug?! What- What happened to Neal? And wait! Why were you in jail?! Because of the car?"

"No, not because of the car. What happened with Neal was... I was dumb. He fed me a whole lot of crap, and I swallowed it and begged for more. I thought we were gonna figure a way out of a life that wasn't even all that bad compared to what it had been and live in some idealistic little impossibility I'd created in my mind."

"You loved him."

It's not a question. Just a statement.

"I was seventeen. Of course, I did."

The blonde laments as if she speaks of events from long ago.

"You guys didn't work out?"

"He had this plan. This plan to sell off a whole bunch of expensive watches he'd stolen before we
met. They were still hot, but we were sure we'd get away with it. I'm not sure which of us was the bigger idiot. I'd like to believe Neal was. Not out of any sense of pride, but because... If Neal simply believed that sending me to go and collect them like I suggested was a good idea, then he'd just be an idiot. If he'd known it was a foolish plan and sent me anyway..."

"It's nicer to believe he's an idiot."

Ruby agrees hoarsely.

"Yeah. Either way, the cops showed up and I got time. Low security, but still time."

"Shit, Emma..."

"And... Yeah... What Regina yelled at me... She told me I'd ruined everything. And that I'd continue to ruin everything. That I'd messed up in life."

"Because she knew about your time in jail?"

"She knew... I knew that, though. She asked me about it pretty early on. I told her what happened-about the watches- and she was pretty nice about it. I think... I think she just knew it'd hurt me to bring it up, and she was angry. She knew it would hurt me to remind me of where I'd come from, and... And what I'd done in there. She didn't want me near her son. She said I'd already had my chance with that kind of thing, and I'd messed it up."

"You-"

"-I didn't know she knew about that. I didn't know anyone knew about that. About the kid."

"What kid?"

"My kid."

"Emma?"

Ruby asks, looking up and finding familiar lines of shadowed features and long curls in the darkness.

"I'd been there for about three weeks when I found out."

"Em, I-"

"-And for a long time, I refused to accept that it was true. It just wasn't fair. It was just too much... Time went on, and I couldn't pretend any longer. It was real, and I had to figure out what to do. I actually found that decision pretty easy at first."

"Babe, you-"

"-I mean, of course, I was going to keep it. I knew all about being on the shitty end of that bargain. It wasn't even a question!... I was 'sure' for about three weeks after accepting that four tests and two doctors couldn't be wrong. Then, one day, I was sitting at the table eating this crappy portioned tray of food and thinking how irritating the whir of the air-con was while I was just trying to eat in peace... And it hit me. It hit me that while I was in there, I hadn't even thought about food or warmth or shade or sleeping someplace safe.

But I wasn't going to be in jail forever.
And when I got out... *Then* what? Things had been okay in the car, but things had been pretty bad at times, too. I knew what it was like to be hungry, and what it was like to be cold, and what it was like to be scared, and suddenly I'm sat there eating a pot of strawberry fucking yoghurt, and just thinking... What the hell do *I* know about babies?

What did *I* know?

Apart from that I didn't want a kid to have the same life I'd had growing up...

So, I did a bad thing. I did what my mom did to me, but... I didn't have a *choice*. Do you understand me? I didn't have any other fucking *choice*!

The blonde's words are salted, and the silence following her final statement is heavy with uneven breathing on both sides of the room. Shaking her head, Ruby pushes herself from the bed and makes her way over to the chair. It's an awkward fit, but she manages to squeeze in next to the younger woman, and she moves around to hug her tightly; stroking long hair as she buries her face into the blonde's shoulder.

"Emma, I'm so sorry."

Her words are muffled as she whispers into the sharp ridge of the younger woman's collarbone, and Emma sighs and asks gently

"Why? You didn't do anything."

"No. But I still am. That's an awful thing to have to go through... That's why you got so mad at me when we were in here with Billy, isn't it?"

"I didn't mean to... It was just a difficult subject for me."

"Oh, fuck. You should have smacked me one. I deserve it for being such an asshole about that."

"Why? You didn't *know*."

"I know, but... I feel like a royal bitch now."

The brunette sniffs as she leans back a little and wipes her eyes; regarding Emma through the shadows miserably.

"Eh, you're alright... At a pinch."

Emma chuckles hoarsely, and Ruby lets out a sound somewhere between a giggle and a sob as she laces her arm around slim shoulders and rests her head against the blonde's.

"D-don't get all gushy on me, Swan."

She scolds, and the younger woman laughs lightly as she closes her eyes; feeling both exhausted, but monumentally relieved to have told her story. It had been a huge step finding out Regina had known the truth- and still wanted her around, even so!- but actually telling the tale in her own words has been therapeutic also.

"So, Regina called you *out* on something like that? She really used *that* to make you feel bad?"

Ruby asks with open disgust, and Emma sighs.

"She was mad at me..."
"Still!"

"Still, she's apologised. And, you know, I didn't know anyone knew, and it shocked me to find out that they did, and what she said killed me... But... She's also the first person to ever have told me that I'm not... I'm not bad. She told me she understands why I did it, and I believe her. Which is funny, as I didn't even think it was something that could be understood! That could ever be forgiven... It wasn't the best experience of my life having her rip me apart like that, but her telling me that what I did wasn't this terrible, awful thing... That was a big deal for me."

"Oh, Emma, you idiot... What you did wasn't bad! It wasn't! I just... God. If you ever run off again... I swear!"

Ruby growls, but her voice wavers as fresh tears fall down her cheeks, and she merely shakes her head, squeezing the younger woman tightly.

"I think I'm probably done for the time being."

Emma smiles, and the brunette scoffs lightly before pushing herself from their rather squashed embrace and padding back to the bed.

"Get up here, you fool, and help me finish this bottle. And tell me something funny. Hell knows I need something to make me laugh after that."
Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

A/N: This was a fun one to write :) Hopefully fun to read, too! Please review :)

"You look good today."

Regina muses as she drizzles balsamic dressing over her salad, and she swallows as she catches the light blush that colours the blonde's cheeks.

"Makes a nice change, I guess?"

Emma jokes, and the brunette sighs as she elaborates

"I just meant... I don't know. You look different."

"I feel different."

"Oh yes?"

"Yeah. I talked to Ruby last night... About, you know, stuff."

"Stuff."

Regina repeats, and she finds herself ruminating over the word unpleasantly; not quite sure what Emma might be referring to, nor whether it will be anything she'd like discussed with anyone else. Least of all the ditzy waitress, known around town for getting herself just a little too drunk and a little too rowdy once a month or so. Once a month whenever there happens to be a full moon to be exact. Not that the Mayor imagines anyone else will have noticed this rather obscure coincidence.

"Yeah."

Emma nods, but she catches the slight pull to full lips and smiles.

"About me. About how I winded up here and about before and about what we spoke about in bed."

What was a delicate blush deepens at this last part, and Regina smirks in amusement as the blonde hastily goes back to concentrating on her bagel.

"Well, it looks like it did you some good. You look well-rested."

She shrugs, inwardly wishing she could say the same for herself.

"Thank you."

Emma mumbles through a mouthful of cream cheese, and she sighs as she watches Regina sip at her iced tea pensively. She wants to ask the older woman if she's given any more thought to letting her in on this great big secret she's mentioned. Wants to ask her if she'd perhaps like a couple of pointers on where to start. She considers telling her that she knows thoughts can sometimes seem jumbled and messed up when in the mind, but that it's okay, because she's been through this struggle just last
night, and she doesn't mind the order in which they come out, just so long as they do.

Because the Mayor looks disarmingly beautiful in light, burgundy wool, and she just wishes she could express how that makes her feel. She supposes she could simply compliment her—tell her—but... She can think of plenty of more fun ways to go about letting the brunette know how appealing she looks right now.

She behaves, though.

She doesn't ask Regina to tell her what's on her mind. She doesn't want to be seen as pester ing the darker woman, and she had felt in the slow kiss and light weight of the brunette's hand resting on her thigh—and oh, how that had felt good—that Regina really had wanted to take it further. That she really was—is—conflicted about whatever darkness troubles her mind, and that perhaps she's not quite ready.

Which is fine. She'll wait. She's finally realised that she doesn't have to keep worrying about whether or not she's coming or going and entering each day as if it's been set to some destructive, idiot timer.

She's not going anywhere, and she can wait.

"Regina, I actually had a favour to ask you."

She admits quietly, deciding to find a new subject to break the silence, and the Mayor raises a brow as she doesn't find it to be much like Emma to ask for things.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah... It's actually a little embarrassing, but I didn't want to ask Ruby because she might have a conflict of interests."

"Okay?"

"I need you to... Well, I need you to buy me a bottle of gin. I'll pay you back when I get money from Granny, of course, it's just I can't buy it myself."

"Gin?... You wish for me to buy you a bottle of gin? I hardly think that's appropriate."

The brunette frowns; uneasy with Emma's request, but also slightly perplexed as to why the blonde has come to her when she must know she's going to be told 'no'. Not when she herself has witnessed how far Emma can take her dance with the bottle.

"Oh, it's not for me!"

The younger woman assures her hastily, and to Regina's surprise, Emma chuckles at the disbelieving look she offers in response.

"No, no, seriously! That stuff is majorly gross! And come on! I'm not an idiot! I know you're not about to go buying me liquor given... Stuff that's happened."

She pulls a face as she reiterates Regina's own thoughts, and the brunette sighs and motions with her hand that Emma should explain herself.

"It's not for me, it's for Mary Margaret."

"For Mary Margaret? Why on earth would you need to buy Mary Margaret gin?! Her birthday isn't for another, hm, fifteen days."
"Is it? Well, okay, if you say so. No, I meant because... Well, this is where it gets a bit embarrassing..."

Emma grins sheepishly, and the brunette pulls a well-practised expression of boredom to hide her intrigue.

"I stole a bottle of gin from Mary Margaret, because when I went to talk to Graham to try and find out how to get you to, you know, notice me or whatever, one of the things he said you liked was gin, and I thought it was worth a shot."

Emma rambles without taking in a breath, and she looks down at her hands and wets her lips with her tongue before continuing with a shy smile.

"Oh, and yeah, I know about you and Graham... I just... I know it was a stupid plan! I just don't want to ask Ruby, because Mary Margaret's her friend, and although I'm sure if I asked her not to tell her that she wouldn't, I don't really want to have to put her in that position... I also figured maybe I should come clean about why I was creeping around your house that night. I never meant to annoy you by going up into Henry's room. I came over to offer you a drink, and -"

"-You came to my house, and let yourself in unannounced-"

"-Well, I did announce myself, you were just in the shower is all-"

"-To try and ply me with gin, stolen from Mary Margaret's personal supply-?"

Regina asks incredulously, rubbing at her temples as she strives to get her head around this rather strange behaviour.

As she strives to block out all thought altogether when she is suddenly met with a hateful notion. A terrible sense of wishing. Of wondering. Of wondering what would have happened if Emma had just stayed downstairs and waited for her to come down. If she'd made herself known and they'd found themselves in the kitchen, or in the study. Wondering what would have happened if Emma had offered her a drink and had continued with her peculiar ploy of seduction.

Wondering what would have happened if she'd come down to find the blonde waiting for her with very little pretence after the scenes her own mind had conjured in the shower.

She glances down at her desk and is met with the rather vivid image of laying the younger woman down upon its surface and toying with her.

Of knowing of Emma's expressed intentions and desires, and of teasing her, tasting her, fucking her.

Swallowing audibly, she looks up to find the blonde studying her awkwardly.

"Well, I never said it was the best idea I've ever had!"

Emma mumbles, and Regina keeps the fact that this might be true but that she has the rather reproachful feeling it might well have worked to herself.

"No. Despite the fact that you are seemingly quite talented when it comes to bad ideas, that is still one of your most flawed to date."
Because it would have worked.

And then where would we be?

Well, she imagines she would now be feeling guilty. Perhaps. She hopes so.

But it doesn't change the fact that now that her mind has entertained the idea, she wants nothing more than to see what they might be like together. Wants nothing more than to kiss the younger woman again, and this time take a little more time perfecting the act.

I have to tell her.

I want this, so I have to tell her.

And she knows that Emma had been right in suggesting that she should write everything down, because she knows she'll only be given one chance. Knows that the blonde has changed, and she is remarkably relieved- pleased- that their time spent together at work following the conversation up in her bedroom has been surprisingly relaxed. They have each found themselves chuckling at the other's expense; sharing small snippets of information and anecdotes. Yes, there have been some rather heated, meaningful glances, but in a way, she is almost glad about that. Because they both know the deal, and she is encouraged to find that they are both mature enough to handle their strange situation graciously.

In this last respect, she is as surprised in herself as she is in Emma.

There is a chance- a very small one- but a chance, that things might all work out alright.

But she knows that she only has one shot at this.

And she supposes that's fair.

It's painful, as of all the things she's ever done- and she knows well enough that she's done some terrible things- what this all comes down to isn't even her fault.

It's painful, and it's irritating, but she also knows that if their positions were reversed, she would only allow one chance at an explanation, too.

Because she's had time. She's had time now to come clean. And, while it had seemed impossible- hell, she'd felt no reason to!- at the first, it would have been the right thing to do to tell Emma the truth back in Boston. Back when they first arrived in Storybrooke. Back when she'd stood out by the docks with the younger woman and had felt a pang of regret as she'd realised she was hurting. When she'd realised she cared.

She's had time, so her explanation needs to be good.

She'll write it down.

Then things will be out of her hands.

"Fine."

She breaks the tension between them with a disdainful roll of her eyes.

"I'll buy you some gin to give to Mary Margaret, but only because your reason for needing me to do so is so ridiculous that I owe you for amusing me so much."
"Oh, I don't know. Personally, I can't think of anything more alluring than someone breaking into your house with a three-quarter full bottle of gin stolen from a school teacher's pantry, after having been repeatedly rejected in their previous attempts at seduction."

Emma points out with an overly sincere expression, and Regina chokes on her tea as she struggles both to keep from laughing, and to banish the uninvited image of licking a trail of devilishly bitter gin downwards as it spills from the blonde's navel.

"Really, dear."

She admonishes irritably, and Emma blushes as she supposes she should perhaps refrain from speaking in such a way to the Mayor.

*Regina's probably inwardly terrified of what might have happened if you hadn't gone into Henry's room! She's a good kisser, but I doubt she's thinking about anything more than how she needs to remember to lock her front door!*

The blonde smirks to herself as her own mind takes her somewhere decidedly dirtier than anti-break-in devices.

"Sorry."

She sighs, as she supposes she might not mind the taste of gin quite so much if sampled from various valleys along the darker woman's svelte frame.

"Please remember where you are, Miss Swan."

Regina sniffs, wondering if the younger woman likes being bitten.

"Yeah, yeah, okay."

Emma laughs, and the brunette purses her lips as she places her knife and fork down on her finished plate and advises with an air of finality.

"Yes, Miss Swan. How many times do I have to tell you? Yes, not 'yeah'."

"Yeah, you have told me that a bunch of times, haven't you?"

Emma nods earnestly with a grin playing at the corners of her mouth, and the brunette wonders if she should abstain from her uncharacteristic moral high ground long enough to wipe the smirk from the younger woman's face.

*Write her the letter.*

*Then take what she's still willing to give you.*
Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

A/N: Not a super christmassy/ merry chapter, but, happy holidays anyway! Not a huge fan of this chapter, but needed to set the scene for the next :) Hopefully there's some parallels in here that work well though :) Please review, and thanks for all your reading and comments :D

Closing the door to the dishwasher and waiting for the telling noise of the pipes to kick in, Regina sighs as she leans against the countertop and casts her gaze out at the slow reddening sky. Having spent a fair amount of the afternoon indulging Emma with tales of some of the town's lore- Miner's Day looming, and whatever else her mind could conjure- it had been on the tip of her tongue to ask the blonde if she might like to stay for dinner, before she'd caught herself in the act. She'd even opened her mouth to voice her proposition- Emma still chuckling over the conclusion to a rather unfortunate tale relating to last Halloween- when husky laughter had died down and become a shy smile, and she'd found herself licking her lips and shaking herself from such a foolish notion.

"Besides, she has work, what was I thinking?"

She mutters, but she knows in her heart that the blonde's responsibilities at the Diner have little to do with anything. It doesn't matter. What matters is she'd been dangerously close to asking Emma to spend time with her in a setting where things might have swiftly come out from under her control. She has been extremely grateful that the blonde has seemingly accepted her need to see to matters in her own time, but she also knows that the younger woman can be wily when she wants, and perilously charming in her own way.

"No. Not charming. There must be another word."

She sighs, rubbing her temples, but she allows a small smile in spite of her irritation.

Her frustration.

She has discovered a newfound sympathy for the blonde if Emma's desires have been anything like the ones she has suffered today. They are something she'd struggled to keep in check earlier when the younger woman had offered her a friendly grin and tied back long hair with a careless flick of her wrist, exposing pale skin just begging to be tasted. She'd thankfully managed to stop herself from barking irritably at the girl- fairly certain it hadn't been an act of malice- but she had remained tense and restless for the best part of the day as her mind had continued to churn and wander.

Finally, she'd known when Emma had taken her leave this afternoon- waving amiably and telling her to have a nice evening- that she'd have to do it tonight. Have to write the goddamn letter tonight, because while she feels sympathetic towards the younger woman now that she's been given her own taste of the peculiar undertow to their relationship, she is also a creature of habit- a woman who has her ways- and something she has grown particularly used to over these last few years is getting what she wants. She is not used to being denied her pleasure... And she is wary of how long it might be before she bows down to old habits and fails in her irksome struggle to do the right thing.

It's funny, in a way. Only yesterday, she'd have baulked at the idea; wounds still fresh from the
younger woman's brief departure, and generally accepting she just wants what's best for one of the few people she can stand to be around.

But her talk that night with Emma- and Ruby's talk with Emma- seem to have done the blonde some good, and what had seemed like a certainty only a day ago now causes her concern, as cheerful laughter and meaningful glances have served to leave her flustered and uncomfortable. She knows her own heart and knows that even the best of intentions can give way to impulse and need.

She needs to write the letter.

"Well... No time like the present."

A knock at the front door pulls Regina from her thoughts as she sits with her head bowed, studying the delicate cursive of her handwriting. A single page. That's all. A single page to tell Emma the truth. It doesn't seem like enough. It doesn't-

Another knock, and she sighs and covers her confession with several documents pulled from her drawer before making her way over to the front door and opening it curiously.

"Graham?"

She frowns, and the Sheriff smiles expectantly.

"What are you doing here?"

"Madame Mayor?"

His brow furrows in confusion, and he checks his watch to make sure that he's come calling on the brunette at the right time. The regular time.

Coming to the slow realisation of what business Graham might have, standing out on her porch with the sun setting behind him, the Mayor feels an uncharacteristic wave of discomfort. She is torn. She's not given the Sheriff any real thought over the last couple of days and is undecided now on whether she really desires his company. Her time spent with Emma has left her feeling both aroused and frustrated, and there is something appealing in the idea of being offered swift release.

It's not really what she wants, though.

He's not really what she wants.

Clearing her throat and offering a wry smile when she realises she's been stood frowning at her guest and barring the door, she shakes her head and steps aside.

"Sorry, Sheriff. I didn't realise the time. I'm afraid you'll have to forgive me though, I have rather a lot to do. I'm not sure I, um, wish to go ahead with our general arrangement."

"Oh."

Graham frowns. He is not about to argue with the Mayor, and is happy enough to give her space if it's what she wants, but her inviting him across the threshold makes him nervous; Regina is not known for her hospitality and conversation.

Well, until recently.

He had been surprised when Emma had come to find him to ask after the brunette, and even more
surprised to learn of Regina's trip to bring the girl back to town following the troubling events a couple of days ago. Emma, it seems, is rather fond of the formidable Mayor, and from what he's seen and pieced together, the two of them appear to get on remarkably well. Twice now, he has popped by the Diner to pick up his morning coffee and spied the younger woman clad in her little waitress' uniform and chatting amiably with Regina, who had even smiled back and laughed prettily in response to whatever was being said.

"Cider?"

Regina turns to ask him now, and he smiles indulgently and nods.

"That sounds nice... Is everything alright, Regina?"

Studying the Sheriff thoughtfully, the brunette eventually offers a small shrug of her shoulders and bends down to fetch a couple of crystal glasses from the drinks cabinet.

"Everything's fine, Sheriff."

_For the time being... Tomorrow? Well, that depends on if I can bring myself to give Emma what I need to give her._

"Coffee before you go?"

"Always!"

Emma grins, before calling the brunette back as she stalks for the door to head to the kitchen.

"Regina?"

"Yes, dear?"

"...Is everything ok? You didn't look very well when you came by the Diner for breakfast, and you've been really quiet all day..."

Sharp teeth nip at a soft bottom lip with nervous concern, and the darker woman sighs as she regards the blonde morosely.

She is tired, having spent the night tossing and turning and fretting about the words painstakingly selected to tell a truth she doesn't want to tell. She'd sat down to write the accursed letter knowing it had to be done– and done without any further _delay_. Now, though? Well, it is almost time for the younger woman to leave for her shift at the Diner, and she has yet to make a move. She is unsure whether she _can_.

"I'm fine, Emma."

She assures quietly, and the blonde offers her a knowing look that suggests she is not about to be so easily fooled.

No, not so easily persuaded as the Sheriff had been.

"...Okay."

Emma frowns, and the brunette applies a strained smile, before slipping from the room to make them both coffee. She is aware of the fact that her rather tense behaviour today has served to put the younger woman on edge also- presumably worried that she's done something wrong- but she has
been unable to help herself from injecting her discomfort into her tone.

Hence the coffee.

The last thing she really wants to be doing is sharing a coffee with the blonde, but she has caught the nervous glances in response to her rather curt dismissals of attempted conversation, and she doesn't wish for Emma to feel bad. Doesn't want her to feel the way she's feeling herself.

Just give it to her!

"No. No... I can't. I can't lose her."

And she bites her own lip in a way she hasn't since she was a little girl as twin droplets of salt spill out onto her cheeks.

Bouncing her foot nervously as she waits for Regina to come back with their coffee, Emma plays with her hair distractedly; not understanding the sudden change in the brunette's mannerisms, but smart enough to imagine it might have something to do with whatever it is the Mayor wants -needs- to tell her.

She just wishes Regina would get on with it already.

And not only because of the way she feels her cheeks flush with colour and her stomach clench whenever the brunette looks at her.

No.

She wants Regina to get on with it because she can see that the darker woman is beginning to hurt. Beginning to beat herself up about whatever it is that's weighing on her mind. It is a chain of emotion she is entirely familiar with, but to see those unhappy signs in someone as well put together as Regina worries her.

She doesn't want the brunette to be unhappy.

That's more important to her than anything.

She wants Regina.

But she also wants Regina to be happy.

"Maybe I should-"

But she trails off as her incessant fidgeting- drumming her fingers on the desk, plaiting her hair and rifling through papers while clicking her pen- uncovers a sheet of paper baring delicate scripture.

Emma,

Glancing up at the door, she bites her lip and scans the neat cursive beneath her name.

You suggested I write you a letter, and I have decided to do so, but please believe me when I begin this confession by telling you that this is the hardest letter I have ever had to write. I-

"-I don't have milk, just cream, I-"

Regina frowns as she reenters her office; Emma jumping as if burnt and hastily repositioning herself
in her chair.

"-Everything alright?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine."

Emma smiles, pushing her hair back, and the Mayor frowns as she takes a seat.

"Alright..."

She sighs, and they drink their coffee in awkward silence.

"I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

Regina muses as Emma places down her mug; having all but wolfed down the scalding liquid, and the blonde nods, and offers a more genuine smile.

"Yup. Granny's making turnovers today, so maybe you should take a break from your muffin tradition tomorrow morning. They're good! She made Ruby and me some when I first got here."

"I'll take your word for it."

The brunette smiles, and she raises her hand in farewell as she watches Emma take her leave a little defeatedly.

*You fool.*

*You should have done it.*

*Should have given it to her.*

*What use is it you sitting here torturing yourself?*

She shakes her head in despair and flicks through the various documents on her desk, supposing it can't hurt to at least reread her words and assess whether they need to be rewritten.

Not that she imagines she will be able to make them any less devastating.

"What the..."

Shuffling through the papers littering the desk once more, she feels her heart begin to race as she searches for the letter with growing alarm.

"No... no no no..."

But what had started out as shocked disbelief is swiftly becoming terrified realisation, and she begins to shake as several official documents spill onto the floor in her panic.

"*No!*"

She slams her fists down onto the desk- eyes wide- before letting out a sob and lowering her head onto lacquered wood.

"Fuck..."

Not a word she condones, nor usually uses.
But one that suits this situation just fine.
A/N (post-completion): Several more recent reviews since have commented on the fact that we know Regina had to adopt as she can't have children of her own due to reasons explored in the show. This was written a while before that episode, so I know my reasons are slightly different, but I couldn't change them without risking it conflicting in other parts of this story, so I guess that aspect is mildly AU :)

Knocking softly on the blonde's bedroom door, Ruby gives in to habit and lets herself in without waiting for a response. She'd been slightly confused by Emma's behaviour during their evening shift; the younger woman chatting with her amiably enough, while nodding dutifully to a tale imparted by Leroy, but seeming ultimately distracted. It had not gone unnoticed by the brunette that green eyes had darted up again and again towards the clock hanging above the counter, as though Emma might have somewhere to be.

Curious, then, that she should be sat up in her room alone.

"Hey, I-

But she falls silent with a concerned frown, letting herself into the younger woman's room fully, and approaching the bed warily where the latter sits with her head bent and gaze cast down at floral sheets.

"Emma?"

The blonde jerks as Ruby reaches out to touch her shoulder, before glancing up with wide eyes and her teeth clamped over her bottom lip.

"Hey, what's up? Are you okay?"

Ruby perches on the edge of the bed and leans forward to tuck long hair behind the younger woman's ear gently.

"Emma?"

Swallowing audibly, Emma shrugs, before holding out a page of neat, black cursive.

"I don't know."

"What's this?"

Ruby frowns, recognising the handwriting after a moment of wracking her brain as she finally places it as belonging to the Mayor; having received a Christmas card sent to the Diner every year for as long as she can remember addressed and signed in that same, delicate cursive.

She glances back up at Emma, but the younger woman simply nods her head as though encouraging her, and she looks back down at the letter curiously.
Emma,

You suggested I write you a letter, and I have decided to do so, but please believe me when I begin this confession by telling you that this is the hardest letter I have ever had to write.

Looking up at the blonde with a frown, she clears her throat before continuing with a mixed sense of fascination and discomfort.

I only ask that you read this with the knowledge that I mean every word when I tell you, as I have done so many times now, that I want what's best for you. I am doing this because I value our friendship, and I have not been given the opportunity to say that many times in life before now. I believe that you need to know the truth imparted on this page before I can ask you to let me in any further than you already have done, and I only hope that you are able to understand why I have gone about things the way that I have done.

You asked me when we met why I should fear you coming to find me, and I told you it had to do with your mother. That was a lie. Not that I knew your mother- I knew her well, and I was indeed there the day she made the devastating choice she made, and we have not spoken to one another since- but this was not the reason I feared your company.

I feared you would want something of mine.

Your mother? That really is just a case of fate playing a cruel hand. Coincidence of the absolute worst variety.

You asked me how I was able to find you, and I avoided the question with mention of official documents. Again, this was a slight a bending of the truth. I knew you had been incarcerated as I implied, but I also knew what happened to you before your release. I knew this because it was the papers relating to the boy that led me to you in the first place.

I doubt this would surprise you, Emma, but I am not an easy woman to get along with. Before I brought you back with me, I felt quite alone in this town. In this world. I know that this much you do understand, as you once worded my feelings perfectly yourself. You told me that you see strangers wherever you go, and I know exactly what you mean by that. At the time, I'm not sure you understood why I might have felt so melancholy given my standing in the town I oversee, but I wonder if now, perhaps, you might understand me a little more. That may be wishful thinking on my part, but I believe you to be deceptively intuitive, and I will allow myself to hope.

I feel less alone with you here in town.

Before you came here, I had a great abundance of importance and a dismaying lack of purpose.

I had no one.

Please understand that.

You asked me out by the docks if I was married, and the idea struck me as absurd. Married? To whom!? No, Emma, I have never even considered the act. Never found anyone here in town that I would wish to be with in such a way. Troubling then, when wishing for companionship.

I wished for a child.

I wished for a child while not even entertaining the idea of baring it myself, due to a lack of empathy which bordered almost on revulsion for so many here in town. I know that you have found your peace here, Emma, and I am honestly very happy for you, but that is not me, and I have never found
comfort in the arms of any here, despite what you might have deduced to be the case between myself and the Sheriff.

Perhaps by now, you have started to put the pieces together. If so, I beg of you to continue reading, if only because I would hope I have earned that much from you by now.

Swallowing nervously and glancing up at Emma-a knot of slow, rotten understanding building in her gut- Ruby sniffs and finishes the last few paragraphs on the page.

I asked for a closed adoption. I wanted to believe that the child was mine, and he is. I had no interest in the parents. In the mother. Not until Henry grew sick, and it seemed vital that I track her down for medical reasons... I trust you understand that I have kept you around for more than just medical reasons, Emma. When I took Henry in, I took him in as my son. I swore to love him as though he were my own blood, and I do. He is mine. He is mine, and having you here has been terrifying. I have done right by him, and I will continue to do so as long as I live. I promised to give him everything that his mother did not. I wanted to hate you- I was so ready to hate you- but I couldn't. Not after seeing the way things were in Boston. Not after actually meeting you.

I understand why you did it, Emma. I understand now that what I wanted to hate you for, I should commend you for. What you did was selfless, not selfish. I understand that now. I only hope that you can find it within yourself to understand why I couldn't tell you the truth. I love him. With all my heart, I love him. I like you very much, and I care for you, Emma, but I love Henry, and I don't know what to do. Since bringing you here, I haven't known what to do. Because this isn't a fairytale. I didn't ask you here to reunite the two of you; I tried my hardest to avoid such a thing! But, you deserve better than what you were able to provide for yourself. I couldn't leave you to rot. You've been better to me than a great many people have been in my past, when you had no obligation to be, nor any real means to be. I haven't forgotten that you pulled me out of the way of that car, nor that you made us breakfast despite the risk you were taking (of course, I knew!) doing so. There are good people and bad people in this world, and you are of the former variety without question. Countless people would have once proclaimed to be just as certain about my own standing. Not you, though. You called me good, Emma, and I ask of you to remember that. Please.

I tried to protect myself, and to protect Henry. I never meant to hurt you in that process.

Yours truly,

"She hasn't signed it."

Ruby croaks, not sure what else to say, and Emma finally looks up at her and shakes her head.

"No... I'm not sure she felt she could."

She frowns, before sighing deeply and leaning back against the headboard. Letting out a low whistle, the brunette places her hand on the younger woman's knee and studies the letter in her lap uncomfortably.

"That's some pretty heavy stuff... I mean... I don't know what to say. Just, I mean, are you alright? Like, really, are you okay right now? I feel like I need to do something, or give you something, or-"

"-Ruby. I'm okay."

Emma sighs, before astounding the waitress when she laughs softly.

"I mean, I could maybe do with a drink or something, but... I'm technically okay. Just... I don't know what it was I'd been expecting, but it sure as hell wasn't that!"
"I just can't believe she didn't tell you! I can't believe she's done this! I mean, I always knew Regina was a bit... There's a reason people don't trust her. I know you thought she was nice, and I'm sorry you've had to find out this way, but everyone in town knows she's a bit... Well..."

"A bit what?"

"I can't think of the right word... But just look at what she's done to you! That's-

"What has she done to me?"

Emma asks quietly, and the brunette frowns as she shakes the letter in her hand angrily.

"What do you mean?! She-

"Adopted a child, and was scared I would try and take back what I agreed to when signing his papers."

The blonde finishes gently, and Ruby gapes at her incredulously; not understanding why in the hell Emma isn't joining her in her outrage.

"You aren't angry!"

"No."

The younger woman shakes her head, before catching the look of pure confusion that masks the anger twisting ordinarily friendly features and continuing on with a sigh

"I was. I really was. But, why?... I read that letter and I reacted pretty much how you just did... Then I read it again. And again. And again. I read what it actually said, and what it actually meant, and... I can't bring myself to be angry about it. I feel a hell of a lot of other stuff about it- nauseous, for one- but... Okay. She didn't tell me the truth when she should have. That's the only part of that letter that I would have any reasonable right to get pissed about."

"But Henry's your-

"He's not. He's not mine. Ruby, I signed enough papers to murder a pack of ballpoints to make sure of that."

"Yes, but, Regina's-

"Regina's what? Well adjusted? Well-off? Generous? Regina was in a position to do a good thing- something I wasn't and couldn't- and decided to take it. From what I know, she's done well. Do you know what I remember from going up into that nursery? I remember that the walls were painted blue, and there were prints of tiny hands and tiny feet mounted by the door. There was a crib, and a dresser, and a changing table, and toys, and a closet probably full of little, dinky clothes. You know what I don't remember? Any fucking signs that that little boy wasn't Regina's own child. I also don't remember any damp patches, or cracks in the paint, or signs of forced entry and quick flight, which is what that kid should be the lucky witness of by birthright... He's Regina's. That's not up for debate."

"...But, you wanted to keep him."

Ruby argues miserably; unsure why Emma seems to be looking at the hateful contents of the Mayor's letter so calmly. She knows that she herself isn't invested in what it contains, but she likes the blonde, and her conversation with Emma a couple of nights ago had been horrifying in her eyes. She has complained loudly and often about being kept cooped up by Granny, but the morning following
Emma's retelling of events, she'd proceeded to sneak into her grandmother's bed and cuddle up with the old woman with her face buried into the soothing comfort of her nightdress. She supposes she is naive, and she'll accept this fact, but she also feels protective of the blonde as she doesn't feel enough people have tried to look out for the younger woman and thinks this is rather telling in itself... Not that she would ever dare to disclose such assumptions to Emma.

"Yes. I wanted to keep him. I also want to eat ice cream for breakfast... Some things just aren't a good idea. I made a decision that really hurt, I'm not belittling that. It really hurt, and that's why I ran when Regina yelled at me. Because it's painful and it's fresh and it's a terrible thing. It was an awful, horrible decision to have to make. But that's not Regina's fault.

I read that letter the first time and I was pissed as hell. Then I was sad, then I was confused. Now, though... I just keep thinking about the fact she didn't sign her name. I suppose I might have taken it before she had time to finish it, but I don't think so. That letter says pretty much all I think it needs to say. I think... I think she was afraid. Those smudges there where the ink's been wet? I didn't cry, Ruby. I got mad and sad and confused, but I didn't cry. Those smudges aren't my doing.

She was afraid."

Ruby licks her lips nervously as the blonde holds out her hand for the letter in her lap; handing it back to her and moving so that she sits shoulder to shoulder with Emma against the headboard.

"...You've forgiven her, haven't you?"

"No."

"No?"

"There's not really anything to forgive. She could have told me, fine, yes, that's true. Then what? How would I have benefited from knowing the truth back in Boston? I suppose I could have analysed the way she was dressed and the way she acted and assumed at least the kid was in good hands, but then what? She might have been a bitch. Might have been a nut-job. Might have been anybody! All I would have been left with is some woman coming to me and telling me she knew me and had my child. I wouldn't have come back with her- no way!- I would have just sat there in that flat, wondering. I'm not going to forgive her for bringing me here in spite of her fears and trying to help, even though she must have known it was a convoluted as fuck situation; I don't need to!"

"I suppose not."

The waitress nods, before frowning when Emma suddenly sits up straight and studies the letter thoughtfully with a look of growing concern.

"Ruby. I know Regina pretty well."

"Well, yeah, I-"

"-And I'd bet you anything she's noticed this is missing."

"Maybe."

"I'm not mad at her."

The blonde looks up and states earnestly, and Ruby furrows her brow in confusion as she nods once more.
"Yeah, I know; you said."

"Ruby, I don't want her sat fretting about this. Look at these smudges. Look at that space at the bottom of the page... I don't want that. That's not fair. I... Well, shit... Do you think I could borrow your car?"

"What?"

"Please? I know I'm not insured or anything, but it's not far, and I-"

"-Emma, what are you planning to do? You want to go over there?! Now?!"

"Yes. Now. Now, before Regina spends the entire night worrying about this!"

"But... What are you even going to say to her?"

"I don't know. I have no fucking clue... But... I'm not sure that what I say matters. She's asked me to understand, and I do. She'll know that. She'll know that if I go and see her... Even if I can't say it as nicely and eloquently as she's written things here. She didn't wait around when I ran away, and I'm not going to wait around now just so I can rock up in the sunshine. I'm not sure what the protocol is for these things, but I'm pretty sure she's not going to go yelling at me for waking her up from a peaceful dream. This needs to be addressed, and it needs to be addressed now. Regina said once that one of us had to be the grown up. This time that's got to be me."

"... I'll go get my keys."

Sitting stiffly in her chair, Regina blinks as the yellow splash of a set of headlights cloaks the kitchen in a brief swatch of light; the dull sound of an engine idling and then coming to rest out in her driveway.

"Sydney..."

She guesses morosely; not in the mood to speak to anyone, let alone listen to whatever that jabbering idiot has come to seek her out for. She is almost certain it will be Sydney, as she doesn't think Graham would be quite so foolish as to seek her out so late at night without having been requested to do so.

Lowering her forehead onto the table miserably and waiting to bark irritably at the imminent knock on her front door, she frowns when it doesn't come. Counting to one hundred, she murmurs agitatedly beneath her breath when she is met only by silence. Pushing herself up and stalking to the front door, she peers through the peephole to try and place the car she can see looming in the shadows at the end of her drive, but she is unable to make out more than just a dull shape. Brow furrowing deeper, she glances out the window to her side in search of any signs of her visitor, before pulling open the front door curiously, and taking a step back in surprise.

"Emma?!!"

"...Hey."

The blonde offers awkwardly from her perch on the front steps. Swallowing as she is struck by a sudden surge of emotion, Regina strives to pull herself together as her heart beats fast with fear and her fingers tremble behind her back.

"What... What are you doing out here?"
"I don't know... I hadn't really decided whether to knock or not yet."

Emma explains truthfully, before pulling crumpled paper from her pocket and addressing the Mayor's feet.

"I read this."

"... Yes?"

"Yeah."

"But... I didn't think... I mean, you came here? You read it, but you came here?"

"Well... Yeah."

The blonde shrugs awkwardly, and Regina closes her eyes- her lashes wet- before stepping aside and beckoning with an absurd sense of shyness.

"I think you should probably come in, dear... That is, I mean if you'd like to."

"I would."

Emma smiles eventually, and it is a tentative, troubled smile, but it is one Regina reciprocates gladly as tears roll down her cheeks.
Leading the blonde into the drawing room, Regina flicks on the lights, before turning round to her guest and gesturing towards the sofa awkwardly.

"I'm not sure whether you want to sit, or if you actually wanted to stay, or-"

"-Regina. I read the letter, and now I'm here. I'm not planning on going anywhere... Besides, I tend to do that without my shoes and in as undignified a fashion as possible."

The younger woman jokes lamely, and she is surprised to find that her own lashes are wet.

The brunette scowls at her irritably, but Emma isn't fooled for a second and she smiles back shyly; nervous, but, now that she's crossed the threshold to the Mayor's home, she is glad that she'd decided to come here.

"Don't make fun of what happened, Emma. It was a terrible thing."

Regina scolds, and the blonde nods with a small shrug and agrees quietly

"I guess it kind of was... Makes more sense now, though."

"I'm sorry, dear."

"It's okay."

Emma offers with a sigh, before continuing uncomfortably

"At least I get why you were so freaked out, now... It's okay. You said you didn't mean to yell that stuff at me, and I believe you. I didn't mean to upset you! I just... I just wanted him to stop crying. I never meant to scare you, or anything like that. I can see how that might have looked to you. I'm not really sure exactly how I feel about it yet, but I can see how it would look from your perspective... And, I'm sorry I took the letter. I'm not exactly sure why I figured it was a good idea. I just wanted to know what you were trying to tell me. I guess because I wanted to move things along-

She blushing

"-But I also just had this feeling like you might never tell me. I'm sorry I took it without asking you, Regina, but I'm also glad that I did."

"Yes?"

"Yeah."

Emma nods, and the brunette sighs as she takes a step towards the younger woman and reaches out her hand tentatively, as if to cup the blonde's cheek, but not quite daring to.
"Yes, not 'yeah'...How many times do I have to tell you?"

She whispers, and Emma gives a watery chuckle before stepping forwards to close the gap between outstretched fingers and her own skin.

"Couple more times, at least, it looks like."

She grins, and Regina laughs throatily as she allows her fingers to slip into thick curls and gives the younger woman a meaningful look as she brings her other hand up to rest on a skinny shoulder.

"You could have come and discussed things with me in the morning, Miss Swan."

"I could have."

Emma agrees.

"...Thank you."

The Mayor chokes out while trying to force a smile through her uncharacteristic urge to start sobbing, and the blonde laughs quietly, before brushing her lips gently against Regina's. The brunette tenses in surprise; remaining carefully still as the younger woman's hands find her waist tentatively.

"You're sure about this, Emma?"

She whispers—imagining she knows the answer, but terrified of making the wrong move— and the younger woman nods silently with a shy, yet pointed step forward to press herself softly against the brunette's quivering frame.

Kissing her slowly, Regina moves her hand from Emma's shoulder to cup her cheek, before respectfully begging entrance with her tongue as she strokes her thumb against the blonde's temple. The younger woman reciprocates her advance without hesitation, and for the first time this evening, Regina begins to feel something other than unhappiness.

Eventually, she is forced to pull back for air, and she studies the blonde intently as the latter gazes back at her with a dangerous spark of fire alighting ordinarily cool green.

"This isn't exactly what I'd envisaged happening this evening..."

She admits, and Emma shrugs with a shy grin and drops her hands from the darker woman's waist.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"No—"

Regina answers thoughtfully

"-not bad. Just surprising. It's a good surprise, dear, don't get me wrong, but a surprise just the same... I... I'm not so sure what you imagine might happen now."

She swallows thickly as her eyes convey her meaning, and Emma offers her a cheeky smirk which slowly becomes a more truthful representation of her nerves as she smiles uncertainly.

"I guess that depends on what you want."

"Not just what I want."
Regina shakes her head, and the blonde ponders this for a moment before nodding in agreement.

"No, that's fair. I... Well, I just assumed we wanted the same thing?... I mean, when we talked about it, I just, from what you said, I kind of-"

"I stand by what I said. I'm merely asking you if it's still what you want, dear?"

Regina interrupts firmly, and Emma nips at her bottom lip timidly, before linking her arms loosely behind the Mayor's neck.

"Very much."

She replies honestly, and the brunette swallows, as what had been a feeling of pure dread not ten minutes ago has now been replaced by a warm, intoxicating sensation of tentative desire.

"So do I."

She murmurs; pressing her lips back to Emma's with a little more force and finding her waist to pull her closer still.

This time- catching her breath and studying tellingly blown pupils- it's the younger woman's turn to pull away, blushing delicately.

"This isn't exactly what I'd planned either."

She murmurs, and the brunette's brow furrows with incomprehension. Explaining herself hastily, Emma giggles uncomfortably as she mumbles in her awkwardness

"Not your fault! Just... This is, uh... I'm not totally sure what to do. I... I mean, in my head, I've kind of... Ha... Yeah... And last time, I was all set to just rip my clothes off- and rip your clothes off- and let you fucking take me... Which, I mean, that'd still be nice... I just, um, I mean, this is a bit heavier than I'd imagined, and I'm not so sure what to-"

Regina shuts her up swiftly- kissing her deeply- before offering a slow smile.

"That'd be 'nice'?"

She teases sultrily; mimicking Emma's way of wording things, and the younger woman scowls at her with humour glittering impishly in her eyes as she mutters at her to shut up.

Regina chuckles darkly, before licking her lips and studying the younger woman earnestly.

"...I'm not expecting anything from you, Emma. Just relax. If you don't want to do this now, we don't have to."

She reassures the blonde, who in turn shows her teeth, before moving in once more and grabbing the brunette's hand to bring it pointedly to her side where it slips beneath her shirt.

"We do have to do this now, and we both know it. It's not going to be how either of us pictured it, but I think that's okay! It's not going to be like it's ever been for either one of us before. It's not going to be selfish, and it's not going to be carefree. Not going to be rough and sweaty like I'd imagined it would be... But it has to be now... Surely you can feel that the same way I can?"

Sensing that this is Emma's version of a request to go ahead, Regina nips at the younger woman's tongue gently and glides her palm up over warm flesh to rest against skinny ribs beneath the soft swell of the blonde's breast.
"I've waited long enough."

Emma informs her, and it is not said with irritation or hurt, but simply as a fact, and she follows it up with a gentle kiss and quiet murmur against beautifully full, parted lips

"Please?"

"Well... That's always a good start."

Regina smirks playfully, but when her mind flashes her familiar images of the blonde begging and panting- sobbing that same, intoxicating, simple word up at her- while she fucks her roughly in a way she would so enjoy to do, she pushes such fancies swiftly aside and pulls Emma into her; tasting her with extreme tenderness.

"I believe you know where my bedroom is."
Chapter 56

Chapter Notes

A/N: Well, I just hope this is what you all wanted! :) please review!

Closing the door to her bedroom behind them, Regina ponders momentarily on the way the blonde's eyes had flickered over to Henry's door at the opposite end of the hallway, and she swallows uncomfortably. She wonders if she should bring up the contents of her letter and discuss things in a little more depth, but she imagines that she has covered everything there is to be said. At least on her behalf. Emma might have any number of opinions on what she has read, but the brunette supposes that it lies with the blonde to bring those things up for debate.

She imagines that in the coming weeks, they might find themselves enduring several tense conversations.

But not tonight.

Tonight, Emma came back, and she's not angry- not mad- and she's smiling at her in that awkward yet sweet manner, and she's not about to run away or scream at her spitting words of hate, and everything might just be okay.

Please.

"One more time, Emma; are you sure this is what you want?"

She asks softly as she pads across the carpet to stand in front of the blonde who hesitates uncertainly between her bed and the dresser in the corner.

"My answer's not going to change, so quit teasing."

Emma sighs, and the brunette can practically taste the nervousness emanating from her companion and imagines the younger woman's heart might just be beating as sickeningly fast as her own.

"I need to hear you say it, dear. You're young, and you've mentioned several times now that you feel some sense of debt or expectation. I, in turn, have done my best to make it as clear as I can that I don't expect anything from you, and that whatever debt you feel you might owe me can be repaid by working for me and by simply being my friend. You're a beautiful girl, Emma, and however disastrous your fanciful ploy for seduction might have been, you must have done something right. I like you very much, and I want this, but I'm both older, and arguably wiser than you are, and for my own peace of mind, I need you to say it. I need you to tell me that you want this. No joking around, no snide comments. Just a simple 'yes' or 'no'. Because, I may like you, dear, but I care about you a great deal also, and this is not happening if you have mixed feelings. A lot has happened between us, Miss Swan- Emma- but my wanting this is very simple. I need to know you see it the same way. That- pushing everything aside- this is a simple, carnal desire. That you-"

"-Regina. I get it. It's alright. You've made things clear, and it's not your fault that I read things the way that I did. I don't want to make amends. I don't want to repay you."
She speaks quietly, without any waver to her voice, and the brunette closes her eyes as this last part causes her stomach to tighten.

"Very well, then."

She whispers, and, the younger woman laughs lightly at this rather businesslike response, but that's okay because they both know where they stand. Closing the distance between them, Emma finds the Mayor's lips hungrily, and the latter loses her hands within thick gold as she allows herself to let go of her strict self-control and enjoy the moment; kissing the blonde back breathlessly until the steadily dampening lace between her legs calls its need for attention.

Slipping her hands down between them, she begins to fiddle apart the buttons to the younger woman's shirt- Emma still clad in her uniform- before catching the rapid increase in the blonde's breathing and the way the latter's slim frame trembles against her own. Stepping back, she regards Emma intently; studying the light blush creeping across pale cheeks and the way the latter bites at her lip.

"Are you okay?"

"Uhuh."

Tangled gold cascades over the front of the younger woman's shirt as she nods earnestly and steps back towards the Mayor; fumbling slightly as she starts to reciprocate the darker woman's attempts to undress her in a way that strikes Regina as almost manic. Shaking her head as Emma runs a shaking hand down to play over the soft linen of her dress-pants, the Mayor forces the younger woman back once again and meets her wide-eyed gaze pensively.

"You've not done this before..."

She murmurs quietly, and it's more of a statement than a question. The blush to the blonde's cheeks darkens visibly, but Regina doesn't pay this any mind.

"Well, no, not really-"

Emma mutters with a small shrug, looking decidedly uncomfortable

"-To be honest, I didn't think you would have, either."

She growls, and she seems both frustrated and impressed. The brunette's brow furrows before it dawns on her that Emma speaks of the sapphic element to their little tryst. She, in turn, finds herself mildly surprised at the younger woman's admission that this is a first for her- though, she supposes, she has little to base this presumption on- and wonders if she should explain that this is not what she'd meant.

That she'd not been referring to sexuality.

Rather this breed of sex in general. The younger woman's mannerisms are frantic and tense, and it had surprised her that Emma would so swiftly attempt to stimulate her need. She imagines this is somewhat telling of the way the blonde is used to doing this.


None of these are necessarily bad things in her eyes- and heaven knows she's fantasied about just,
well, fucking the girl in just such a manner- but it is not the only way she herself has experienced love making. The way it had been with Daniel had been gentle and meaningful. He'd taken care of her... She'd never found any need to quake nervously in his arms or exhibit the kind of frantic desperation she reads in the blonde's tension. They'd made love. He hadn't just fucked her.

Similarly, the way that her maids had tended to her had been careful and with respect.

She hadn't been asking Emma just now if she'd enjoyed any previous experience with the fairer sex...

She'd been asking if the younger woman has ever made love. If she's ever had someone tend to her- make her feel special- or if it's always been that kind of rough, dirty need for release that can feel so good, but means so little.

She thinks back to the state in which she'd found the blonde back in Boston. Liquored up and naked, with the events leading up to this conclusion only too obvious. Her lip curls slightly as she imagines how it must have been; the kind of sex shared between someone broken and beyond caring and the sort of person that would take advantage of that. From Emma's apathetic response to mentions of such activities, she has a feeling the blonde is used to being treated... Well... That she is used to being treated the way she allows herself to be treated.

Glancing from shaking hands to the nervous yet adamantly defiant fire dancing in green eyes, she thinks back to the way things had been in her Palace and the care shown to her by her subjects, and she offers the younger woman a slow smile.

She has always been the one to receive the attention and reverence of others, and she imagines there will be plenty of time to allow Emma to even the score, but for now...

Well, for now, she has a deep desire to pass on the favour.

"Do you trust me?"

She asks, and Emma frowns in confusion before stepping forward with a restless sigh and trying to reclaim her lips once more.

"Sure, why? What are you-"

"-Shh..."

Regina scolds, and she chuckles quietly at the expression of impatience that doesn't quite mask the shy nervousness playing across the blonde's sharp features.

"Relax, Emma."

She murmurs as she allows the girl to brush soft lips against her own, and she cups warm cheeks gently.

"This is so annoying..."

Emma grumbles, and the darker woman smiles as she closes her eyes and speaks quietly; playing soft curls through her fingers.

"What is?"

"Just, like... The other day this was easy, and I just came into your room and got naked... Now... I don't really... I dunno... I'm not sure what to do... This isn't how I usually do things, and I don't know
what to do."

The younger woman sighs- confirming the Mayor's assumptions- and the brunette can feel the heat of the blonde's embarrassment burning against her flesh. Finding Emma's jaw and guiding her back so that she can look into green eyes levelly, she licks her lips and addresses her gently.

"It's alright. I do."

And with that, she kisses the younger woman sweetly while continuing to work open her shirt. Pulling crisp cotton from pale limbs, Regina lets the blonde's top fall to the floor and runs a hand down to rest at her waist. Caressing smooth skin with her thumb, she inches her other hand around to the back of Emma's skirt and pulls the zipper down slowly; allowing short pleats to flutter down slender legs to leave the blonde in just her underwear and sneakers.

"Take those off."

She murmurs into cornsilk curls; swallowing audibly as she drinks in pale flesh.

Emma nods shyly, and toes off her shoes; bending down to pick them up and place them neatly by the door. Regina watches on hungrily as she unbuttons her own shirt and removes expensive fabric; offering the younger woman a pointed look when the latter turns back to face her. Smiling darkly at the girl, the brunette slips out of her dress pants and tosses her hair as she allows wide eyes to wander over her soft curves and the intricate design of her lingerie.

"Still interested?"

She teases huskily, and Emma nods a little dazedly, before clearing her throat and adopting a sheepish grin.

"I guess. Only a little bit, mind."

Smirking, Regina shakes her head at this blatant lie and points to the bed.

"Make yourself comfortable."

The blonde frowns; used to winding up being pushed down onto swiftly crumpling covers in a haze of heat and need. It has never been a position that has been asked of her so politely before.

"Uh..."

But Regina stalks over to the bed and waits for her to do as she's told; reaching behind herself to unhook her bra, and hesitating patiently as she watches Emma crawl up onto the silken throw before removing expensive satin with a smile.

"Good girl..."

She muses huskily as she watches the blonde lie back tentatively with her hair tumbling over the pillows; Emma's lip caught between her teeth as she drinks in newly exposed flesh with a quiet, involuntary groan. Pulling herself up onto the bed and leaning down over the younger woman, Regina holds her intense gaze heatedly, before claiming her lips and lowering herself down to lie flush with pale skin; running her hand over delicate ribs to stroke her thumb against softly globed cotton. Emma glides her own palm up soft flesh to find the brunette's breast, and the latter allows her to apply sweet torture with her touch, before gently catching the blonde's wrist and guiding it to rest up above her head. Coaxing Emma to bring up her other arm too, she smiles down and brushes her lips against the fragile bow of the girl's collarbone.
"Let me make this good..."

She breathes quietly into lightly salted flesh, and Emma closes her eyes with a shiver as the gentle warmth in the Mayor's tone affects her in a way she hadn't known it was possible to be affected.

Running a wet trail down the younger woman's sternum, Regina slips her hand beneath the blonde and fiddles apart the small catch of her bra. Pulling away cheap cotton with minimal difficulty, she kisses the younger woman hungrily when Emma offers her a tentative smile.

"Pretty little thing."

Regina purrs into the delicate shell of her ear, and Emma kisses her deeply as she muses on the fact that no one has ever spoken to her in such a manner when in this intimate situation. It's always been highly sexualised compliments growled into slick flesh while struggling for breath. Words spoken without any real meaning.

She is sure Regina means what she says, and she hisses pleasurably as the darker woman trails her attention down to taste the sensitive bud of her nipple.

"You're beautiful."

She murmurs with her eyes clamped shut, and Regina smiles as she presses her lips over the younger woman's heart; not having expected any response, but flattered just the same. Of course, she knows that she's beautiful, but it still causes her stomach to clench to hear the blonde say so.

Propping herself up to study the younger woman, she thinks back on the pretty, redhead maid-Delilah... Or perhaps Delia?- that had served out the majority of her duties up in the palace chambers. She had been an attractive young woman; sordidly skilled, but sweet and nurturing. It had been a terrible thing when she had been slaughtered in one of Midas's attacks. Nothing that the Queen would have been seen to mourn openly, but she had been fond of the talented seductress. And she had been her first.

She remembers lying on her back much as Emma does now and arching up as sweet, rose-petal lips had brushed where she'd previously believed they oughtn't; crying out and shaking as that first time, that touch had been new and overwhelming, and so much more intimate than she could have anticipated. The maid had been good to her and understanding, and, while the pretty redhead would later find herself strung up or stripped roughly down on many an occasion, Regina had never forgotten how sweet that first time had been. She'd been the recipient, and from then on, she had always demanded what she'd wanted- she had been Queen, after all- but she understands what it is to give rather than take, and, as she trails her tongue slowly down the blonde's stomach now, she means to share that feeling of warmth and pleasure that has nothing to do with hard, meaningless fucking.

"Regina..."

Emma chokes, and the brunette smiles warmly as she reads the needy desire in the younger woman's eyes.

"Shh..."

She scolds quietly, before slipping her fingers into tight, black cotton and sliding the blonde's underwear slowly down her legs. Leaning across the bed to brush her lips gently against Emma's, she nips lightly at the younger woman's tongue, before moving back down and spreading shaking legs slowly.
Running her fingers lightly across the inside of the blonde's thigh, she strokes softly against her sex, and whispers for Emma to look at her.

"You're ok?"

The younger woman nods with an audible click as she swallows; thinking distractedly on her conversation with Ruby, where she had informed the Waitress of her brief and fleeting escapades with the fairer sex. Thinks of sex in general... And about how this is nothing like what she's encountered before. She almost wants to laugh, as she has the strange idea that, if not for the almost sickeningly intense lust and arousal knotting in her stomach and causing her sex to clench, such sweetness and care would have her wanting to cry.

Chestnut tresses brush against the inside of her legs as warm velvet teases her tentatively, and she closes her eyes with a bitten back moan; her hands moving instinctively down to find dark waves before she lowers them obediently to her sides as she catches a short pause down below at the movement.

Running her hand firmly over the taut flesh of the younger woman's stomach in approval of her compliance, Regina brings the fingers of her other hand up to enter the blonde gently; smiling against wet flesh as this heralds a low cry from above.

"Fuck..."

Emma manages through clenched teeth, and the Mayor simply increases the intensity of her ministrations rather than scolding the younger woman for her language; catching movement to her side and glancing briefly over to see pale hands fisting at her sheets. She nips gently at the blonde's most sensitive spot, causing the latter to jerk with a guttural moan that leaves little doubt as to whether or not this small touch of playfulness has been well received. Nipping a little harder, she moves her fingers with more speed, before pushing herself back up the bed as she feels the younger woman's core muscles flutter tellingly and Emma begins to buck against her; capturing the blonde's lips and swallowing her cry as her body shakes with her release.

"...Sh-shit..."

Emma breathes huskily into the brunette's hair when she trusts herself to speak. She moves her hand down between them shakily and pulls gently at Regina's wrist in a silent request that she remove the fingers still curled sweetly up and massaging her softly. Panting quietly, she returns the darker woman's gaze, before pulling her swiftly down into a hard, open-mouthed kiss.

"I... I didn't know..."

She stammers, but that's all she manages to get out before she gives up and continues to crash her lips against the brunette's. She doesn't imagine it really matters whether or not Regina is let in on the fact that she had never known sex could be like this. That it could be meaningful and overwhelming and, strangest of all, kind.

If she had seen it fit to disclose such sentiments, Regina would have simply nodded in her understanding. She knows, even if Emma hasn't found the words to express herself. It is apparent in every tentative caress and soft touch the younger woman offers her as she kisses her needily.

Allowing Emma to roll her onto her side so that she lies facing the young blonde, she gasps as the younger woman's fingers trail gingerly down her stomach to slip into her underwear. She had been content to have tonight be just about Emma, but when the blonde whispers against her lips shyly as her free hand cups at her cheek, she represses a shudder of lust
"Can I?"

It is soft request, strangely timid, but there is a hopefulness in the younger woman's tone as she presses her fingers patiently just above forbidden sweetness, and Regina gives a small nod as she kisses the younger woman gently. She lets out a shaky sigh as the blonde enters her slowly; Emma moving with a shy carefulness that greatly resembles her own actions this evening.

"God..."

The brunette groans as Emma becomes a little braver with her delicious ministrations, and, while it remains clear that this is new to the younger woman, and that the angle isn’t what she’s used to when using her fingers in such a manner, she kisses the Mayor deeply, and the latter moves her hips with small moans into the blonde’s mouth as she realises just how aroused serving the girl has left her; her muscles clenching and stomach fluttering as the soft, wet noises from below the covers seem to quell any further fear on Emma’s part that she might not be performing as desired.

Groaning encouragingly when the blonde leans into her pointedly, she pulls the younger woman onto her with a choked cry as Emma grinds her palm hard against her need, before biting down at a skinny shoulder as her thighs twitch and her sex clenches around busy fingers. Emma seems to understand enough to slow down her torturous teasing, and she pushes herself up slowly to regard the brunette with a shy, questioning expression, as though waiting for either a scolding or praise.

Regina can only find room for the latter.

"Emma..."

She sighs the blonde's name, before pulling her back down to offer her an absurdly gentle kiss on the cheek.

"That was good."

Emma whispers matter-of-factly, and the brunette laughs quietly as she nods her agreement.

"Yes, I believe it was."

"I wanted to do that so badly..."

The blonde confides, and Regina smiles as she finds something inexplicably refreshing in the simple honesty of the younger woman’s admission.

"As did I, dear. I know things were complicated, but... I wanted to do that very much."

Her smile widens when Emma grins sheepishly with an expression of ill-hidden glee, before letting out a sigh and studying the soft gold that she plays pensively through her fingers.

"What happens now, though, dear?"
Chapter 57

Chapter Notes

A/N: Sorry for the wait. Hope you guys are all good! More to come much sooner next time, I promise! :)

"What happens now though, dear?"

The brunette sighs, and she pulls an apologetic expression when the blonde tenses above her immediately; the shy grin Emma had been favouring falling swiftly from kiss-swollen lips. A flash of nervousness finds wide eyes, and the Mayor swallows as she knows that- however much she might hate being the cause of such a look- she has earned this much at least.

Has earned tentative disquiet, rather than the immediate shutdown and icy walls the blonde is so adept at raising. Offering a kind smile, she cups the younger woman's cheek and consoles her quietly "I'm only asking, Emma. Only musing aloud. I merely wonder what happens tomorrow when you show up for work... Do we mention this? Do we-"

"-Why?"

The younger woman shrugs, and it's the brunette's turn to look uneasy, and suddenly Emma's breaks into a much more favourable grin as she remains lying flush on top of the Mayor.

"We both know what happened, Regina. Why would we need to talk about it? Didn't we do enough of that before?"

"Well, yes, dear, but-

"-But nothing. You asked me if I wanted to do it, and I said yes. I asked you the same thing. There's nothing more to it..."

Emma shrugs, before raising a brow and enquiring thoughtfully

"I mean... Can't we just take tonight as a sign that it was clearly a wonderful idea on my part?"

She grins, and the brunette rolls her eyes as she adjusts them slightly to stop bony hips digging into her stomach. Sighing, Regina raises her head to brush her lips against Emma's before falling back into the plush depths of her pillows and regarding the blonde pensively.

"You have to understand that I've witnessed some of your other 'wonderful ideas', Emma. I'm not saying that to be cruel, nor am I bringing it up because I wish to argue. That's the last thing I want. But you came here clutching a letter that took me a great deal of courage to write. I am thankful that you did- just so we're clear!- but, I also don't know where that leaves us... I knew I liked you, but it still surprised me how much I... How much I needed this to happen once it seemed inevitable.

But, you blushed at me downstairs, Emma, saying you'd played things differently in your head, and don't fool yourself into thinking that I don't know what you mean by that. I may be the Mayor, dear, but don't go thinking that means I don't have fancies that surpass gentle lovemaking in bed-"
"-Madame Mayor!"

"-Hush!"

The brunette scolds, but she smirks kittenishly as she plays along; reading Emma's silent plea to let uncomfortable topics lie dormant and undiscussed easily.

Sadly, she knows they can't ignore the truth.

But, what she goes on to purr into loose curls is also the truth, and she imagines it is just as important to vocalise the good as it is to tentatively broach the bad.

"Don't look at me like that. Do you really believe that a woman in a position of power doesn't take that role with her to the bedroom? What just happened needed to go a certain way, which I imagine we both know... But, don't you go getting it into that pretty little head of yours that I haven't fantasised about fucking you, Miss Swan.

Hard.

Fast.

Wet.

Fucking."

She lets the words roll off of her tongue purposefully- the blonde shivering above her as she swallows- and the brunette flashes her a debauched smile as she feels ever so slightly- and, she'll admit to herself, deliciously- depraved speaking in such a manner.

However, when green eyes glitter back with dark promise, she shakes her head and carries on with a slight note of regret infiltrating her words.

"In my head, I might have done so, but in reality... It wasn't me that placed those bruises on your thighs, dear. It wasn't me that got quite so careless."

"Regina..."

"I'm not lecturing you. I'm not going to lie here and bring up a whole mountain of things I know you don't want to discuss- and, incidentally, please refrain from clenching like that, dear, it is most distracting- I just wish to clear the air.

You will always be the young girl I foolishly brought back to town.

Always.

And, while I would never force you to discuss anything you are uncomfortable with, I need you to know that things moving on the way that they have does not mean that I am comfortable with some of the things I know about you.

What happened between us tonight was the culmination of a great many things.

Of confusion, of lust, of tension, and also- I believe- of irritation.

...I do not think it would be unfair to say that you and I frustrate one another in more ways than one?"
"... I dunno..."

"Don't be polite."

Regina smiles wearily, and the younger woman shrugs uncomfortably, before muttering with her eyes cast down to deliciously full lips.

"Sometimes you annoy me a bit... But only 'cos suddenly someone's constantly looking out for me. I appreciate it- I do- but, I'm a bit old to suddenly be lumbered with a guardian of sorts. I know why you do it, don't get me wrong, just... Sometimes it's a bit much."

She finishes awkwardly, and, to her surprise, Regina chuckles quietly.

"I feel much the same way about having suddenly become an unwilling mentor. Back in the En- in the days when I was young, some of the older girls I was friendly with took up positions as nursery maids for nobility."

"-Shit! Where the hell are you even from? 'Nobility'?!"

"... I don't originally come from around here. I-"

"-Where do you come from?"

"...As I was saying... They took up positions as nursery maids. I myself considered such a role ghastly. Many of those young burdens were brats, and I never much cared for helping the wayward overcome their despicable life choices."

"-Yes, I can see how maybe it wasn't the job for you, then-"

"-And yet... Here we are."

Regina sighs, but she smiles to take the bite out of her words, and Emma studies her amiably before offering a wry grin.

"Well, at least I'm this way legitimately, and not secretly of noble birth or anything. I'm just a plain old fuck up; born and bred."

"... Quite."

The brunette breathes, and the younger woman frowns as she imagines there to be something curious to the Mayor's tone. Shaking such fancies away, she offers a much broader grin and pushes herself up so that she sits splayed across the darker woman's hips; long hair covering her breasts and feathering lightly over skinny ribs.

"You don't have to worry about me so much, you know? I'm all grown up, same as you."

"... Barely."

"I'm eighteen. I'm an adult. Sure, a wayward adult maybe, but an adult just the same. We could have much more fun if you didn't worry about me, Regina."

She flashes her teeth promisingly, and the older woman rolls her eyes as she tries to concentrate on the matter at hand rather than the soft weight of the blonde's bare flesh pressed against her own.

"Desist. You and I both know that's a front."
"What is?"

"That. That sudden nonchalance. You say you're an adult, and that's fine; we would hardly be lying here like this if you weren't... But don't tell me not to worry about you."

"I just meant-"

"Stop."

"Do you... Do you regret what just happened?"

The younger woman asks quietly with her lip nipped between her teeth, and Regina shakes her head swiftly as she strives to keep her eyes locked with Emma's rather than wandering pale limbs as they'd prefer.

"No, dear. Of course not. I've just had a rough week, and have seen first hand what can happen when we miscommunicate. I worry about tomorrow. I don't regret what we did, but I worry that it wasn't the smartest plan."

"But it was good!"

"It was. But so's the entirety of a bottle of wine as it slips down your throat..."

"Well, sure, and I'll bet crack's great too, but that's not the same thing, and you know it. It was good. Next time, it'll be different, but it'll still be good. And the next time, and the one after that. It's good because we work well together. It's simple."

"Nothing about this is simple..."

Regina sighs reluctantly, though she struggles with the urge as her fingers seem intent to travel up silken flesh of their own accord.

"It can be."

Emma shrugs, glancing down at the Mayor's hand as the darker woman teases her inner thigh gently.

"Tomorrow, I'll come do my work just like always. Then, we can-"

"-It's not that simple!"

"It is."

"But... Henry... He-"

"-I'm not talking about that."

The blonde growls, and Regina notes that playful defiance becomes steely and laced with stone. Whispering, as her dark eyes flash to the thin imperfections lining the taut flesh at the younger woman's stomach, the Mayor shakes her head sorrowfully

"We have to."

"No. Not now."

The blonde hisses, but when she catches the brittleness that begins to cloak the Mayor's own delicate features, she dips her head to brush her lips against the brunette's gently.
"Tomorrow doesn't have anything to do with your letter. This... What's happened... Don't make it about the kid..."

"But, Emma-"

"-Please? That's a big thing for me. A huge thing. And I don't know what to do with it yet... And that's not because I'm too young, or too fragile, or too wayward..."

She leans back and grins, but her expression is wrought with unease

"It's because I'm human. Only an idiot would start finding a solution before completely comprehending the components they face. I'm not an idiot. I do idiotic stuff sometimes- a lot of the time- but I'm not an idiot. I need to get my head around the kid...H-henry... But, before I read that letter, Regina, I had another matter to address which finally has begun to fall into place. You're asking me about tomorrow, and you're asking me because I'm sat naked in your bed and that's not really something either of us planned when you asked me to play secretary. You're not asking me about tomorrow because of the kid. If you're uncomfortable about what's happened tonight, I'm sorry... But I'm not."

"I'm not uncomfortable, just... You're quite a piece of work, do you know that, dear? I don't blame you for that, please don't misread me! Just... I can't just put things into boxes the way you are now. The topic of Henry weighs on my mind hugely, but so does the topic of the two of us. Like I said; what I've fantasized about since coming to terms with my attraction to you has been fairly far removed from what just happened!"

"But why is that a problem? You think I mind that you want to fuck me?!

Emma laughs as her eyes glitter with amusement, but Regina shakes her head and offers an uneasy frown.

"You may not, but I'm not sure if I do... Don't you see? That's the problem. The problem is that I can't make up my mind how to see you and what you mean to me. I don't know what I want."

"Well, that's okay."

The blonde nods as she assures her quietly and Regina raises a brow as she finds herself both perplexed and surprised by this calm and understanding answer.

"It is?"

"Sure."

"Forgive me, Emma, but I hadn't thought your answer to my dilemma would be so... well..."

"Uncaring?"

"Well..."

"I'm not. I care a lot. But... I can't help you. I know how I feel. I can't tell you how to feel. I'd like for what just happened to happen again. And I'd like for it to happen roughly and passionately and slowly and viciously and bent over your goddamn desk! I'd like it if you decided you'd wish to fuck me frequently, and I'd like it if I had a chance to learn how to make you scream. But, that's what I want. What I'd like. For me, it's not a hard choice, but... That's me."

"I..."
Regina croaks; not used to finding herself speechless.

Nor is she used to having someone speak to her the way Emma does now, and she struggles to control her more basic needs as the younger woman's words wash over her with beautiful promise.

"... I built this town, Emma. I built myself and this town and I worked so hard! I can't... I can't make a mistake, here... I-"

"-So think on it."

"Think on it?"

"Sure. I'm not going anywhere. You have my answer. You know what I want... I'll head home now, and I'll see you in the morning, same as always... Nothing has to change... I won't bother you, or pester you, or mention anything. I'll do my job and behave just like I always do."

"You'll."

"-But I'm not going to be fucked around, okay? I don't think you'll mean to do it, but I need to make it clear just the same. I can bide my time, one way or the other, but I can't carry on indefinitely like it was before. I like you, and I can't go on and on without an answer."

"No, I-"

"-A week."

"A week?"

"A week."

Emma nods.

"I'll give you a week. I'll come in just like always tomorrow and won't say a word about this. I'll give you space to think things through... But, when I come to you next Friday after my shift at the Diner, you need to tell me what you want. No hard feelings, just... No more wondering. I can't do it anymore."

"You're giving me an ultimatum?"

Regina asks, and she feels a most peculiar mixture of unease, surprise, irritation and amusement.

"Yes."

Emma shrugs, but she runs her thumb down the brunette's cheek sweetly.

"If you need it... If, in the meantime, you find yourself sure of your answer- one way or the other- then you know where to find me... I'll be the hot girl behind the bar."

She winks, before pushing herself from the bed and slipping neatly back into her uniform. Raising her hand amiably, she bids the Mayor goodnight.

"Think on it, Regina... But, please... Please do believe me when I say we'd have more fun if you'd quit worrying about me. It could be good, you know; you and me."

"I don't doubt it..."
The brunette breathes as the younger woman disappears in a wisp of golden curls.

"I don't doubt it at all..."

She murmurs to herself, feeling entirely stunned. It is a first for her that the tables have been turned in such a way, and she finds that what leaves her feeling *most* disconcerted is that everything Emma has said to her seems to make perfect sense.

It seems fair.

But it *also* seems like a hell of a lot of pressure.

She thinks back to the pleasured yet pleading cries of one of her young maids as she'd ridden her roughly back in her castle; delighting in the power coursing through her lithe form.

Thinks on the deadly serious way Emma had told her she'd have no qualms with being bent over the stately desk they work behind day in, day out.

Thinks on the way she has sat fretting *countless* nights over the young woman's wellbeing.

Emma's right.

She needs to think about this.

Because the last thing - the absolute *last* thing - she wants to do is to make a mistake.

She's worked too hard to put her success in jeopardy.

And, she knows that - just like with the letter - Emma will only allow her this one chance.

*I could be good, you know; you and me...*

Running her tongue over her bottom lip as she detects just the faintest lingering scent of honey, she wills herself to go to sleep. To rest. To clear her head.

Knowing full well Emma won't be anywhere *near* as willing to leave her be in her dreams.

And not sure if she cares.

Falling back onto her bed and allowing Cass to clamber up her slim frame, Emma pets the old tabby gently.

"I hope I'm not going to regret this, Caskett. I really hope I don't."

Cass purrs soothingly, and the blonde hugs her tightly, closing her eyes and adopting a small grin as sleep claims her; vaguely aware of the fact she's neglected to put her underwear back on beneath her skirt.
"Here you go, one black coffee, two sugars, and I took the liberty of adding an apple turnover to your order on the house."

The blonde grins as she slides the Sheriff a plate bearing a delectable looking pastry and a steaming mug of freshly ground coffee.

"Thanks, Emma."

Graham smiles, and he nods appreciatively as he takes a bite.

"This is really good! Did you make it?"

"Granny did... Ruby helped."

She adds slyly as she points over at the brunette who flashes them a glance and looks swiftly away with a delicate blush colouring her cheeks, and Emma chuckles quietly.

"Well, Ruby, it's delicious."

The Sheriff calls over, and the waitress offers a small, timid smile that Emma doubts is as genuinely bashful as Ruby might like to believe.

"So, are you doing okay? You gave everyone quite a scare disappearing the way you did."

Graham informs the grinning blonde amiably, and she feels her expression harden as she shrugs indifferently and mumbles that she's sorry to have caused any fuss. Raising an eyebrow, the Sheriff shakes his head and reassures her earnestly that she hadn't put anybody out, but rather that they had simply been concerned about her. She regards him pensively as she sips from her own coffee—kept hidden neatly behind the cash register—and deems his words to be genuine.

He'd been worried.

She'd given him a 'scare'.

Just as she'd concerned Ruby and Granny and anyone else involved in that little altercation.

*People care about you.*

Sighing, and offering a kinder smile, she shakes her head and tells him everything's fine and that she's just glad to be back. He nods in return, and scolds himself for the vague- and less kind- thought that he is somehow *certain* Emma has something to do with Regina's sudden disinterest in their long-standing arrangement. A part of him is unsure whether or not he is all too upset about this fact—never quite able to remember how it had come to be in the first place, as, while devastatingly attractive, he finds himself ever so slightly wary of the silken tongued brunette— but he shakes the thought away dismissively.

And, after all.

He knows it's all in his head, as what on *earth* might the Swan girl have to do with Regina's carnal urges all of a sudden?

"Well, I'm sure Granny's thrilled to have you helping out here again. Not to mention the Mayor."
"Oh, yeah, I guess so."

She shrugs noncommittally; wondering just what Graham might say if she were to lean across the counter, look him dead in the eye, and inform him huskily that Regina sure had seemed pleased when she was fucking her.

Not that that's really how it had happened... But, the thought amuses her nonetheless, and she just hopes the heat she can feel creeping across her cheeks as she returns the Sheriff's friendly grin with a sweet smile of her own isn't obvious.

"Speak of the devil."

Graham interrupts her inner musing, and she jumps with a start as she glances over towards the door to spy the Mayor pulling off her light, autumn jacket and stalking over to the bar.

"Good morning, Sheriff. Good morning, Miss Swan."

Regina smiles pleasantly, and Emma grins back a little sheepishly, as she imagines she and Graham wear matching looks of unease as it is unlike the brunette to bother herself with such pleasantries.

"Hey."

Emma raises her hand awkwardly, but she flashes sharp, white teeth as Regina seems to measure her up with a hint of a smirk before pointing over to a small booth in the corner and informing the younger woman airily that she plans to take her breakfast inside.

"Uh, cool, let me just set up the table then, I only just cleared it."

The blonde smiles, and she skirts around the counter with a handful of cutlery and a napkin. Throwing the younger woman a characteristic look of impatience as she steps aside to let Emma set up her place at the table, Regina finds her attention lingering on the fluttering shadow cast by short, neat pleats as Emma reaches across to the far side of the booth to snatch up a fallen sachet of sugar.

She tells herself not to think on the blonde's declaration that she would like to be played with- fucked, she'd said- while bent over in just such a manner, and is unsuccessful.

"There you go."

Emma smiles, and Regina hastily banishes the mental image of slipping the cruel toe of her shoe between the younger woman's ankles and kicking pale legs roughly apart.

"Thank you, dear."

She nods, as she studies pretty, golden curls and wonders whether or not Emma might mind having them yanked in her fist.

Wonders if Emma might ever let her style those unruly tresses gently into submission.

Wonders if she wants to hear the younger woman beg, or simply discuss the weather.

Whether she wants to offer her kindness or to tease her.

Nurture or sweet, sweet torture.

Whether-
"-Just skip that part?"

"I'm sorry?"

She blinks as Emma smirks at her knowingly.

"Something on your mind, Madame Mayor? I was asking if you needed me to ask you what you wanted to order, or if we might be able to just skip that part."

The blonde grins, as- while she has no idea as to the specifics of what Regina might have been daydreaming about- she's fairly certain she might be the reason behind the brunette's rather uncharacteristic absentmindedness. The long-suffering sigh the Mayor offers her in response to her teasing suggests she might be on to something, and Emma flashes the tip of her tongue in amusement before remembering her promise that she'd not pester the brunette and swapping sharp velvet for a more amiable smile.

In all honesty, she's mildly surprised Regina has shown up at the Diner this morning.

Not to mention a little relieved.

"You promised me a turnover if I remember correctly."

Regina smiles back as she can almost see the battle of good and bad behaviour playing across the younger woman's face.

"Oh, yeah! Cool, well, one cappuccino and a turnover coming up, then."

The blonde grins as she turns for the bar, and the Mayor sighs with a roll of her eyes that harbours more affection than she might like to admit.

"Before I forget, this is for you."

Regina calls over to the younger woman as she makes her way to the kitchen with empty coffee cups in her hand. Smiling when Emma glances back at her curiously, she points to a bottle of gin resting on her desk, before lowering her attention back down to her notes.

"Thanks."

"I should think so, too. I'm afraid I wasn't sure what brand you snuck from Miss Blanchard's private stash, but I imagine she'll have noticed its absence and put two and two together, anyway. One would hope so at least, else her suitability as a teacher might be brought into question."

The brunette sniffs disdainfully, but Emma pays this no real concern; having come to the conclusion that- for whatever reason- there is little love lost between the Mayor and Mary Margaret.

"Yeah. Probably. It's gonna be awkward either way, I guess."

The younger woman shrugs, before slipping from the room to wash up their mugs.

Regina smirks to herself once she hears the door close.

There is something fascinatingly obscure in her eyes in the fact that Emma wishes to address her mistake and make amends in such an unabashed way with the school teacher, and it amuses her greatly.
Not that she has any clue what sort of explanation the younger woman will have to offer as to why she'd taken the teacher's liquor to begin with; the truth not really an option when addressing Mary Margaret.

"I wonder what Snow might have made of that, though..."

She muses with a private chuckle.

"Oh dear, do you need to be sectioned?"

Emma asks as she strolls back in, and the Mayor throws her a withering look before sitting back in her chair and pointing out loftily

"Of anyone to comment on one's musing to oneself, the girl that has long and involved conversations with her cat is not someone I would think had much of a leg to stand on."

"You're just jealous. You need more pu-"

"-Don't you dare say it."

Regina warns with a stern glance, and the blonde snaps her mouth shut guiltily but doesn't quite miss the amusement glittering in the darker woman's eyes.

"I was just going to suggest that maybe you might like a bit more cat in your life, Madame Mayor."

"I'm sure you were."

The brunette sighs with a rather unconvinced expression, but she leaves the matter be as Emma goes about tidying up.

In all honesty, she has found their interactions today to be favourable for the most part. She'd fretted about heading to the Diner this morning, but had told herself that the only thing worse than going and facing the matter head on would be not going at all. Not that she'd been spared the unsavoury experience of feeling horribly ill at ease once back at her mansion and waiting for the blonde to show up for work.

But, as luck would have it, she'd received a message about ten minutes before Emma had arrived with the final details listed for Miner's day, and as such, when the younger woman had come knocking, there had been plenty to do, and no real opportunity to suffer each others' awkwardness. She herself has spent the best part of the day making arrangements, while Emma has spent her time sat sprawled out on the floor making up posters. They have chatted a little, but she has yet to decide how she feels about the fact that doing so had seemed perfectly easy and natural given what happened last night.

It is a favourable turn of events.

But one that causes her to think deeply.

Because somehow, for some reason, things seem to be just, well, fine between them.

"Thank you for doing that, dear, they look great."

"Are you kidding? I got to spend the day colouring in and doodling and call it work! No thanks needed!"

The blonde grins as she places the pens she's collected on the Mayor's desk and plays with a loose
curl idly.

"You're the one that needs thanking... I really appreciate you getting the gin for me, especially with minimal teasing at my expense."

"Yes, well... Some things are too idiotic to even be worth the effort, Miss Swan."

The brunette smirks; not mentioning that she is about as inclined to broach the dangerous subject of Emma's attempts at seduction as she is to nail her hands to the desk.

"Ah, but if only we could both be perfect, Regina."

"If only... Now go on. Go find that irritating young woman and give her back her liquor."

"Mary Margaret's alright."

"If you say so. Let's see how you feel about her once you bring up the fact you stole from her when invited as a guest to her home."

Regina quips primly as she goes back to her work, negating to point out that she doesn't believe the schoolteacher would have it in her to even raise her voice, let alone greet Emma's imminent apology with anger.

It's just more fun this way.

"Uh, hi."

Emma mumbles as Mary Margaret opens her front door and peers at her curiously.

"Emma..."

"Do you have a minute?"

"I do... I was wondering when I might see you."

The raven-headed woman sighs as she turns around and walks back into the apartment; the blonde following behind with her lip caught nervously between her teeth.
"So... Look-
"

Emma begins as she hovers awkwardly in the middle of the older woman's kitchen; not quite sure what to do with herself.

"-I know what I did was kind of... I know it was bad.-"

"-Well, I suppose at least you know that. I-
"

"-I do! I really do! I just, well... Look, I don't know if I can even give you a good explanation, it's just-
"

"-I don't need one, Emma, I'm just glad you're okay, and that you realise that what you did was foolish!"

"Well, I-... Wait. Why wouldn't I be ok?"

"I don't know... You ran off, and I just got the feeling things weren't great. I mean, when Ruby came to ask me what time you'd left here that evening and told me how worried she was, I-
"

"-Wait, what? I'm not... I'm not talking about that..."

Emma frowns, and for the second time today she finds herself rather disconcerted as someone she hardly knows expresses an element of care for her that sits awkwardly in her chest. Especially coming from Mary Margaret. With Graham, it had just seemed a little strange, but now, she is immediately accosted yet again with that peculiar tension that seems to exist between herself and the schoolteacher, and she shakes her head slowly.

"I meant I was bad because of... Because of the gin."

She mumbles as she pulls a face, and Mary Margaret raises a brow as her eyes widen with understanding. Biting her lip nervously, Emma reaches into her bag and pulls out the bottle of Hendrick's bought for her by Regina, and she holds it out with a nervous shrug of her shoulders.

"The gin..."

The schoolteacher sighs, as she accepts the younger woman's offering, and the blonde nods as she speaks down to the schoolteacher's knees.

"I know it's not the right type, but, I got a... A friend to get it for me, and I didn't specify. If there's a difference in price or anything, I can pay it when I get my wages, I promise, but the one I took from you is all gone, and this is all I have for you right now."
She explains, and she bites at the inside of her cheek when kind eyes flash with fire.

"It's gone? You drank it all?!!"

"I'm sorry! I-"

"-Oh my god! Are you sure you're okay?! Oh, Emma, that was an awful lot! What were you thinking?! Were you very ill?"

The schoolteacher asks; her face alight with concern, and the younger woman frowns in confusion as she mutters awkwardly

"Yeah, I'm fine, just... I just wanted to say I was sorry and repay you..."

She nods towards the bottle in Mary Margaret's hand; wishing the older woman would just get angry with her already and get it over with.

"Well, as long as you're okay..."

The schoolteacher sighs as she walks over to her drinks cabinet and places the bottle of Hendrick’s on the shelf. Furrowing her brow as she watches on, Emma shoves her hands in her pockets uncomfortably; not understanding why the older woman isn't keen to get round to scolding her.

After all, to just leave her waiting and worrying like this seems rather cruel!

"You're not... You're not going to get angry?"

She prompts, and Mary Margaret turns round to face her in surprise, before utterly perplexing the younger woman when she laughs with an amused shake of her head.

"No, Emma. I mean, you said yourself that you know what you did was wrong, and you've made it up to me. I'm not about to stand here and scold you. I'm not your mother!"

The schoolteacher chuckles, before rethinking her words and offering the blonde a kind smile.

"I don't know what possessed you to feel the need to consume an entire bottle of gin, but I'm willing to let it go if you are. It can be our little secret... Maybe next time I don't offer you hard liquor, though."

She grins apologetically, and Emma shrugs with a small, self-deprecating smirk as she confesses

"I actually don't even like gin; it's gross... And, another secret; I could quite happily never touch that stuff again."

She shudders dramatically, and Mary Margaret rolls her eyes as she enquires curiously

"Well, if you don't like it, why on earth did you drink a whole bottle?"

"... Sometimes my mouth does stuff before my brain can tell it not to."

Emma shrugs, and the schoolteacher laughs as she keeps the fact that- even with only the little she knows about the younger woman- she images there might have been more to it to herself. Certainly, when Ruby had come knocking at her door looking distressed and even paler than usual, she’d gotten the distinct feeling that something bad had happened to the strange girl so recently brought to their sleepy town. The notion had bothered her more than she imagines could be considered 'normal', and she had come to the obscure realisation that she would have been devastated should something
have happened to the Swan girl, though *what* might have befallen Emma, and *why*, she'd had no idea.

"Well, I guess I'm pretty certain you won't steal from me again."

She jokes, and the younger woman offers her a look of childlike sincerity and shakes her head vehemently

"Of course not!"

"Well, then, now that's out the way... Would you like some tea? I have cookies."

"I... Uh...Sure."

Emma shrugs, as she tries to get her mind around the fact that she'd come here expecting to get scolded, and is instead getting fed.

Smirking as she notes the tentative way the blonde holds herself, Mary Margaret points to one of the bar stools that surround her kitchen island as she fetches the kettle.

"Sit. We're okay, I promise."

"...Cool."

Emma shrugs in a rather flawed attempt to look as though she doesn't much care either way, and the schoolteacher laughs quietly as she pulls a tin of home-baked gingerbread men down from on top of the fridge.

"I'm surprised you're around, actually. Did the Mayor let you go early again?"

"Yeah... Actually, Regina's the one that bought the gin when I asked her to. I told her why I wanted to come here and asked if I could speak to you before my shift at the Diner."

"You told Regina you did something like that? Well, then I imagine you've been scolded plenty!"

And, it's Emma's turn to throw off such certainty as she laughs and shakes her head.

"It was more mocking than it was scolding. I think she was kind of amused by the whole thing."

The blonde grins; leaving out the rest of the story as she sips at her tea and challenges Mary Margaret's surprised expression with a raised brow.

"Gosh, well, you must be magic or something, then, Emma! I've known Mayor Mills for as long as I can remember, and I believe you must be just about the only person to have won her sincere favour. I imagine if it had anyone else coming to her with such a dilemma, she'd have reduced them to ash just with that glower of hers!"

"She's really not so bad, you know...

The younger woman appeals, feeling inwardly rather pleased with herself. It's true, though; the Regina she knows isn't anything like the Regina the rest of the people around town seem to fear. She recalls the way the darker woman had pulled her in to hold her tightly- completely throwing her off, as she has never in her life been embraced in such a way- and the gentle way she had treated her last night. This memory serves to have her clearing her throat and surreptitiously crossing her legs, and she smiles over the rim of her mug while silently reprimanding her imagination as it takes her somewhere else entirely.
"She's really nice!"

"Why do you think they call me Evil, dear?"

The Queen purrs as she leans down to address the young woman clad in a peculiar, crisp, white outfit as the latter strives to peer over her shoulder in order to glower back at her. No easy feat, as she kneels with her wrists bound over an old barrel on the cold, stone cobbles; the hay that has been tracked across the floor offering little reprieve.

Laughing as she watches the blonde tug uselessly at her restraints, the darker woman sends a hard surge of power coursing through shaking limbs and smirks as her ward cries out loudly; the girl's voice thick with pleasure and startling several of the ponies that share the darkened stable.

"Let me go!"

The younger woman demands

"Let me go, or I swear you'll regret it!"

And the brunette throws back her head and emits a gale of cruel laughter as she knows full well that the blonde's threat- while beautiful in its vicious promise- is entirely empty. They both know that this is anything but a fair encounter, and that all decisions and dominance fall to the Queen.

As of yet, she hasn't made it her business to cause the waif any pain, but she could, and she wonders just how aware of this younger woman is.

It is how these things generally end.

She has her fun, and then she tires of the activity and becomes mean in her boredom.

It is by no means always the way these things go, but it is most certainly somewhat of a habit, and she muses upon this as her fingers brush pensively over the worn leather wrapped around the hilt of the riding crop in her hand.

"Let you go, dear? Why? Aren't you having fun?"

She enquires silkily; running the crop up pale thighs to flip the blonde's pleated skirt up over her back.

"I know what happens to people you have 'fun' with, Your Majesty."

The girl growls, and the darker woman tuts mockingly as she taps the crop lightly against rounded flesh, before slipping it between splayed legs and playing it slowly back and forth as she speaks.

"Is that so, little one? Well, fear not; perhaps with you, things might be different..."

She smirks, and she takes a step forward as she offers a sharp slap of leather against wet flesh before withdrawing it and studying the glistening end curiously.

"Yes... Perhaps you might be special to me..."

She purrs, and she hangs the crop back up as she replaces its recent position with her fingertips.

"Hmm?"
She wets her lips as the blonde makes a low, pleading sound, and allows her other hand to travel down her own lithe frame to find her heat as she casts an eery, pale silhouette in the moonlit stable.

"So... Special to me..."

She groans as she slips her fingers where she needs them, and feels the younger woman quiver against her other hand. She-

"-God..."

The brunette blinks up at her bedroom ceiling as her heart hammers in her chest and her sex clenches with spent pleasure. Unlike before, the scene slowly dissipating from her mind had been simple in a sense, and without the usual helping of riddles and obscurities that so frequently seem to accompany Emma visiting her while she slumbers.

She supposes- in a way- this is a good thing.

Imagines it means she is no longer stranded out in some intangible no-man's-land where her entire emotional spectrum is open to attack from the pleasant young blonde who had earlier explained to her that "it's not that I don't like dinosaurs, I'm just saying I would wait for security control to reach the absolute max before booking my Jurassic Park tickets."

No.

She has accepted that she likes Emma. Accepted that she likes her in a carnal, physical sense, as well as simply to sigh at in order to pass the time.

Her subconscious no longer frets over whether she should be seeing what it is that she's seeing and touching what she so- so- enjoys touching. There had been no curious dancing through multiple scenes with the younger woman teasing her and testing her this time. This new dream had been somehow solid- real- and she supposes that makes sense, as she's seen the slender limbs her mind had conjured in the flesh.

Has crossed that line.

What worries her now, though...

Well, what worries her is the whimpered response Dream Emma had given her before her pleasure had pulled her back to this world.

*I also know what happens to people who are 'special' to you..."

"They get hurt..."

She whispers in the darkness.

And, that's really the issue here, she supposes.

This is where she and Emma differ in reality; the reason why Emma doesn't seem to have the reservations that she has herself.

She has shown her hand in kindness on several occasions before now, and has been offered a great many chances...

But, in the end, she has always grown tired. Bored. Mean.
She has always been a Queen, even before legally accepting the title.

In her adult life, she has always had things her way and been ruthless whilst getting it.

...She wants to think things will be different this time.

Wants to think she's right when her mind argues back vehemently that she would never, ever hurt the young girl that has caused her countless evenings of distress.

But those who ignore history are foolish...

What her subconscious has just conjured is a woman she fears may still reside within her.

A woman that likes to be in charge. To demand. To take what they want.

And she's terrified that she might not be able to stop once she's started.

True... It might well be the case that Emma could find pleasure in being dominated in such a way; she has read enough and encountered enough to know that such a thing is possible, however unsavoury the position might seem to herself.

But they had called her the Evil Queen for a reason.

Last night had been beautiful. Sweet. Kind.

But how long before the spell breaks?

Before she gets annoyed or angry and takes it out on the girl?

Both she and Emma have vocalised just how 'fine' they might be with her taking the blonde roughly and somewhat selfishly, but now, she recalls the lash marks that never faded from one of her favoured maid's backs, just as she remembers the way the pretty, little cook had cried. She'd later spared what little regret she could muster on both occasions- having simply gotten carried away, and seeing no earthly reason why she shouldn't carry on with her ministrations if she was enjoying them- but it had changed nothing.

The maid had still been left with scars.

The cook had never again looked her in the eye.

"I've changed..."

She consoles herself; wishing she could know it to be true.

And, to be honest, she doesn't think that it's very likely that she would ever hurt Emma in such a way.

After all, she had never once hurt Daniel.

... But nor had she fucked him.

There had been passion there, and a great deal of love, but never that sense of rough brutality and vicious need that enters the fray of her thoughts when it comes to Emma.

She is undeniably fond of the young woman, and she would very much like to ask her over for an evening meal one of these days to share in some amiable conversation.
She would also very much like to tie her down and torture her mercilessly until the mischievous little blonde blacks out.

... She just doesn't think she can have both.

Grumbling irritably in the darkness, she rolls onto her side and turns her pillow over; hoping the cool cotton will soothe her mind. Frowning as she glimpses something lying in the shadows cast by her bed, she reaches down to inspect the curious item.

Holding scant fabric between her thumb and forefinger, she purses her lips, before placing the blonde's forgotten underwear on her nightstand and turning to face the other way with a loud sigh of frustration.

"This is going to be a long week!"
"This is going to be a long week..."

The Mayor sighs once more as she makes her way from her bathroom to her wardrobe and drops her towel from around her slim frame. She casts a dubious glance over at crumpled black cotton; hesitating for a moment, before stalking over to her nightstand and snagging up the scant wisp of the blonde's lingerie.

She remembers coming across similar items when delving through the younger woman's hamper back in Boston, and how- at the time- she had found herself rather surprised by the simplicity and chasteness of the blonde's underwear; having expected lace and silk and being met instead by plain cotton, occasionally coming unravelled at the seam.

"Could probably have done with some more of that, too..."

She muses, but the subject of intimate wear hadn't come up when she had taken Emma out into town to buy her more suitable clothes. This doesn't wholly surprise her, as despite her interest in the fairer sex when back in the Enchanted forest, since coming to Storybrooke it is something she has given no real thought. Still, the idea of taking the younger woman into the changing area at the back of the little clothes shop by the Station and offering up her expert opinion on several less modest ensembles now sends a sultry smile spreading across her full lips.

"Maybe I might treat Miss Swan to just that... I suppose that all depends on what I decide to do."

She muses, though she is struck by the notion that she imagines Emma might find such a scene to be hellishly awkward, and that the blonde would likely react with anything but the teasing grace she manages in the Mayor's mind...

The thought causes Regina to smirk affectionately, before this tangent of crass amusement begs the question once more of what decision she should make, and she sighs.

Fingering scant fabric, she strives to block out the image of delicate hipbones and pale flesh as the blonde had lifted her hips in order for the soft cotton in her hand to be removed and reveal intimate pink.

"A long week, indeed."

She sighs, and, she briefly contemplates returning the younger woman's underwear, before opening the drawer of her nightstand and slipping it out of sight. She feels a peculiar sense of guilt as she does so; not the sort she imagines they- the hateful 'they'- had said she should feel for all of the terrible things she had done back in that other world, but the sort she had felt the first time she'd allowed Daniel to unlace her corset. The former type of guilt has been forever lost on her, but that latter, naughtier guilt had sent butterflies fluttering in her stomach- and a little lower!- in a way she has
always found secretly pleasant.

"Oh, for heaven's sake! You're not a young girl anymore!"

No, but that feeling of perversion still affects her in the same way as it had as a girl- still makes her feel inexplicably good while her heart races- and it is a type of excitement she discovers she has sorely missed only now.

After all, the adrenalin she feels when thinking about Emma is a far cry from the monotony of her life since arriving in Storybrooke all those years ago. The blonde offers her something new. A giddiness she hasn't felt while living here before.

"Yes, well... What would I do with Graham's underwear?"

She sniffs, while cordially blocking out her mind's reply of

*And what exactly do you plan to do with Emma's?!

Nothing.

Just...

It would simply be awkward to hand the ruined garment back to the girl now.

Surely?

*Oh, this is going to be a very long week...*

"And it's going to be a very long week, as I gave her an extra day!"

Emma grumbles as she sits with her back against the radiator and chats to Caskett amiably. Since moving to Storybrooke, she has found herself realising slowly but surely that benefits exist in talking to other people rather than relaying all woes and concerns unto a battle-scarred feline, but she is still grateful that Cass is willing to lend an ear.

Besides, despite having told Ruby more than she imagines she has ever told anyone- with the exception of Neal maybe, but she doesn't really want to think about him right now- she hasn't yet shared with the waitress what went on when visiting Regina after receiving the brunette's letter. Ruby had asked- of course, she had- and Emma had told her the truth; that she'd let the Mayor know that she understands her side of things, but that they hadn't discussed anything in any great detail as she'd not felt ready to... But that had been all.

She'd said nothing about kissing the darker woman, and nothing about what had gone on between them in the Mayor's bedroom.

It just hadn't seemed right.

When it had simply been a yearning- a crush- she's pleased now that she'd spoken with the waitress; imagining in hindsight that she would have likely gone mad at the mercy of unfamiliar emotions and done something stupid.

*Oh, what, like stealing from a schoolteacher and breaking and entering?*

"And that was with Ruby's empathetic support..."
She chuckles as she scratches the old tabby behind the ear.

Yes, Ruby had been helpful to her in some obscure sense, but she understands that there is a difference between girlish chatter and sharing private experiences. What had happened that night with Regina is a secret she shares with the darker woman alone, and she likes that fact. It had been intimate- almost frighteningly so- and to talk about it might ruin it.

*Never mind the fact that Madame Mayor might flip her goddamn biscuit if she knew such a thing was being discussed...*

No. What happened with Regina is private and she wants to keep it that way, and when Ruby had asked her jokingly if she still had dewy eyes for the Mayor, she'd simply smiled and shrugged, repeating what she feels has become a bit of a catchphrase of late:

"*She's nice.*"

*More* than nice, she had later shared with Cass, and she stands by that notion two days later, as- even now- the memory of the brunette's kiss causes her to swallow thickly with a shiver.

It worries her, though...

Worries her a great deal that Regina might turn around and tell her 'sorry'- and, she really *does* think the darker woman will mean it if it comes down to that- 'but I can't do this. It can't happen again.'

She knows that if this *is* the case, she shouldn't take it to heart. She knows Regina's reasoning all hangs on what she believes is 'right', and that if the Mayor turns her down for any further carnal exploration, it's simply because she cares about her and isn't comfortable taking that kind of risk. This thought serves to make her feel a bit funny. Not quite *uncomfortable*- not anymore- but a little dizzy and curiously both full and empty at the same time. The type of love- not that she imagines this is the right word! *Gosh* no! Of course not!- that makes one give up something they want in order to serve another's best interests is something she's only been on the giving end of before, and it had all ended *horribly*. She's not sure how to deal with the fact that Regina has explained to her- in not so many words- that this is what she's willing to do due to the level of care she feels.

It's overwhelming.

And it's kind- *so* kind!

But, she still can't help but hope that the brunette realises she can have it *both* ways.

That she can like her and care about her- just as Emma does herself in return- and still have the sort of fun with her that makes the blonde shift her weight uncomfortably as she is struck by images of what *else* they could do to one another as she sits and talks to Cass.

"I should have given her 'til Thursday; that'd have been a *proper* week. Friday just seemed right at the time. More dramatic or something."

She grins, and Caskett blinks up at her lazily and offers a swish of her tail that suggests that she wouldn't be caught dead behaving so foolishly.

"And now I'm stuck with the whole fucking weekend to think about it!"

She grumbles, though her cheeks rouge delicately as she had done more than just 'think' about it last night, and she had been glad once she'd caught her breath and relaxed that she wouldn't have to go into the office the next day as she's not sure she'd have been able to look at the love-seats by the
hearth without whimpering, much as she had when tasting the brunette sat splayed upon one in her mind's eye.

A low rap at the door and she glances up expecting to see Ruby, but when her visitor awaits invitation politely behind painted wood, she deduces it's not the Waitress after all.

"Yeah?"

"Can I come in?"

"It's open."

She calls back, trying to place the voice muffled by the door, and recognising it to belong to Mary Margaret just before the schoolteacher comes into view.

"Hi!"

The blonde smiles in surprise, and the older woman grins back as Caskett darts forwards to brush against her legs.

"Cassie..."

Emma grumbles, but the schoolteacher shakes her head and scoops the old tabby up in her arms to take her over to the chair by the window.

"It's ok, I don't mind."

Mary Margaret reassures the younger woman as Caskett nuzzles into her chest shamelessly.

"Well, okay then. And it's more just that that cat is seriously weird! If Ruby or Granny come in, she's gone in a flash, but you or Regina show up, and she's motor-boating you guys without a second thought!"

The schoolteacher splutters with laughter at this, and Cass eyes her irritably in response, before being once more appeased as Mary Margaret strokes her thoughtfully.

"It's probably a funny smell from the kitchen or something she doesn't like."

"Then I'd smell of it too."

"Maybe, but, you're her girl. She'll allow it from you."

The older woman smiles, and Emma rolls her eyes as she perches on the bed.

"Oh, good. That's love, that is. Through sickness and health, thickness and thin, and questionable odours."

"Precisely!"

The schoolteacher laughs, before shooing the tabby away gently and pushing herself up from the chair.

"I thought I'd come up and see if you were around. I was going to go over to that bakery I was telling you about for lunch, and thought I'd see if you wanted to come along given you're not working for once."
"What, and cheat on Granny's?!

"Of course not! I come here for everything else, but Granny doesn't make cinnamon dusted dough-balls, and-

"-Say no more, I just need to find my shoes."

"-And then the other, bigger guy started to get all crazy and was eyeing up the small guy, and next thing we know, he's grabbed this pool cue and is waving it around like a damned sword or something!"

The blonde demonstrates as she tells the story of how she knows that while you can put a pool ball in your mouth, it's a lot harder to get out again- not that the school teacher had actually asked to hear it- and Mary Margaret grabs her hand while coughing with laughter as she foresees Emma's coffee going everywhere if she's not careful.

"Oh, gosh, I can't breathe! So what did-oops! Sorry!"

She yelps as she bumps lightly into her unsuspecting victim; her attention having been on Emma while the younger woman had told her curious tale.

"Watch where you're going!"

The Mayor snaps, but she nods curtly when Mary Margaret apologises again and studies the unlikely pair before her with mixed emotions.

"Good morning Miss Blanchard... Miss Swan..."

"Morning, Madame Mayor, and again, sorry about that, I-"

"-Hey, Regina."

The blonde smiles, and the brunette looks from the schoolteacher to the younger woman and sighs; all too aware of the fact that the coldness in her eyes as she smiles at Mary Margaret dissipates without her control when she regards Emma.

"Hello."

She repeats, and makes to turn around and carry on on her way home.

"Hey, do you want to try one of these?"

The blonde asks with no discernible respect for the fact that small talk and such amiable behaviour is not at all in line with the way things ordinarily go here in town for the Mayor. Regina glares at her accordingly, before glancing down at the paper bag Emma holds out to her and enquiring with practised disinterest.

"What is 'these'?"

"Cinnamon ball thingies. They're good!"

The blonde explains as she rustles the bag invitingly, and Regina opens her mouth to decline, before giving in to the small wave of warmth that accosts her as she comes to the uncomfortable realisation that it's actually strangely agreeable to be treated like a friend, even out in public.
"Just a small one. They're probably laden with calories."

She sniffs disdainfully as she plucks a small treat delicately from the bag Emma holds out to her.

"Yeah, probably."

The blonde agrees as she pops one of many into her mouth.

"Don't talk with your mouth full."

The Mayor glowers, and the younger woman blushes lightly as she swallows and murmurs a rather insincere sounding apology.

"Yes... Well..."

Regina responds; hesitating for a moment as her eyes find Emma's.

"You can have another if you like?"

The blonde offers a little shyly- which strikes the oblivious schoolteacher as rather strange, but, then, this is Emma- and the brunette shakes her head slowly before seeming to snap back to the present moment.

"No, thank you, Miss Swan. I should be on my way home. Good day, you two."

"Bye..."

"Later!"

Sighing as she turns back to Emma, Mary Margaret offers the younger woman the remaining treats in her own bag as she states she's full, and the blonde accepts them without hesitation.

"Just my luck to barge into Regina of all people."

"Yeah, that was weird. Could have been anyone."

Emma shrugs- not helping matters- and the schoolteacher rolls her eyes and mutters that she doubts 'anyone' else would take it so personally.

"Oh, she's just putting it on, she's fine really. She does that... I think Regina's day is made infinitely better if she can go to bed at night knowing she's made at least one person nervous... It isn't even lunchtime yet; she's doing well!"

The younger woman muses with a small grin, and Mary Margaret frowns as she would almost say that the glint in the blonde's eye is one of affection. And, true; Emma has told her on numerous occasions that she likes Storybrooke's formidable Mayor just fine, but, still... If she didn't know any better, the look the blonde adopts now is one of adoration, which- even from Emma- she just doesn't see as a look anyone would spare for the brunette.

She doesn't think it's a look Regina would allow to be offered towards her!

"Yes, well... I've lived here long enough to know she does a good job of it if that's her aim in life."

"Hey..."

Emma frowns, and the schoolteacher raises a brow questioningly before letting the matter drop and
guiding the blonde around the corner so that they might peer into the windows of the few stores Storybrooke has to offer.

They come to a stop outside the same small store Emma had visited with the Mayor when first arriving in town- the same store Regina had visited in her mind just this morning- and stare up at the newest offering with similar expressions of curiosity.

"Huh..."

"Yes, 'huh' is a good word for that!"

"Actually, I have a better word for it."

The blonde states as she cocks her head pensively. Mary Margaret nods. She, in fact, can think of several words for the garish red leather jacket draped over the shoulders of a sorry-looking mannequin.

"Bitching!"

"Oh..."
"Johanna, dear, would you care to sit with me?"

The brunette asks as she glances up to acknowledge the older woman who comes bustling in with a dust rag, humming quietly.

"Of course. Is everything alright?"

Johanna asks curiously as she shuts the rag neatly away beneath the sink and pads over to take a seat opposite the Mayor. Regina blinks in surprise in response to this question, before offering a small smile and nod of her head.

"For the most part. I never did quite get my head around portion sizes when cooking for one, though. Please, help yourself."

She points to the large bowl of gorgonzola bejewelled lentil salad resting on the table, and the older woman hesitates for just a moment before pushing herself up to grab a plate and some cutlery. For Regina to invite her to share a meal is a rarity, but also something she has learnt it is wise to indulge in when the situation does occur. Not because the Mayor demands it- in her own home, a rather different version of the outwardly cruel-tongued brunette exists- but because she has been able to tell every time she has accepted the offer that it gives the darker woman a strange sense of peace.

She imagines she might be able to guess why.

It must be terribly lonely living as the Mayor has chosen to live.

Still, at least she has the boy. The boy, and now that peculiar girl, that-

-Oh...

"...If I may be so bold, Madame Mayor, I wonder if you've had a chance to speak to the Swan child about the matter that was weighing on your mind?"

"Hmm... Hardly lunchtime chit-chat, Johanna, nor is Miss Swan a child."

Regina scolds, but she shrugs as she savours the sharp tang of the cheese and chews thoughtfully.

"We spoke-"

She continues in a kinder tone, and the ageing redhead is too used to this apparent fluctuation in mood to bat an eyelid. She had learnt quickly after accepting her position that what might seem like irritable scolding is more often than not simply Regina being a little old-fashioned in what she expects from others sharing her company. It is actually a trait Johanna finds curiously endearing. She has a fair few years on the brunette, but Regina has always behaved in a manner as though she comes from a different point in time entirely and was meant for better things. True, she is demanding,
but she is also refreshingly sharp, and, if one were to bother to read between the lines- as Johanna strives to do- she isn't half as formidable as she first comes across.

"-Actually, I wrote her a letter. It was Emma's suggestion, once she knew I had something that was bothering me... Quite a good one, I suppose. Although, of course, Miss Swan took it upon herself to liberate said letter from my desk without my knowledge."

"-Oh, Regina-"

"-And made it her duty to come and pay me a visit at a rather unsociable hour to put my mind at ease."

"Did she?!"

"... We didn't cover the topic at length, but enough for me to rest assured that she knows the truth and can somewhat handle it for the time being. As for what happens now in regards to Henry, I am unsure... Of course, nothing is to change, not at all, but in terms of how she might act when the boy is mentioned, I have no idea... But, I trust that she will behave in a way I am able to deal with. That was what had worried me initially, especially given the way she... Well... You know..."

"The way she ran?"

"Yes."

Regina nods, suppressing a shiver. She is almost certain after the events of the last week that this is not something she needs to fear from Emma anymore, but the memory still leaves her feeling cold. She supposes this has almost as much to do with her current dilemma as Henry does, as while she has some truly spectacular mental imagery of the blonde courtesy of the other night, the flashing showreel her mind resorts to when remembering Boston affects her gravely.

She is plagued by many versions of the young Saviour.

Some- most- speak to her wanton desire.

But some- like the girl she'd searched for frantically and followed back to Boston- leave her uneasy.

"Well, dear one, I would presume the fact that Miss Swan sought you out after we carried her upstairs, and then again in the light of a rather shocking letter of explanation is a good sign. I see the way she is with you, Regina, and how you are with her. Why, when I came in to collect your glasses yesterday, you two seemed thick as thieves laughing about whatever it was that had you so tickled. She seems nice, and I'm very pleased you've sorted out the business between the two of you as best as possible."

The redhead smiles, and Regina offers back a strained flash of teeth in response.

Oh, Johanna, if you only knew the half of it...

"Well, I'm not sure everything's entirely sorted out, dear, but-"

"-Oh, Regina, things never are! If you were to be privy to the private lives of half the people in this town, I'm sure you would be shocked at just how many loose ends and rough edges might be uncovered."

"Mmm..."
I think what I know about this town and its no good inhabitants might leave you shocked, Johanna, sweetheart.

"Just enjoy her."

The older woman nods wisely, and the brunette swallows silently as she recalls pulling gently at sharp hips to better position the younger woman so she could do just that.

"I will... I mean, I do."

She corrects herself with a frown, and Johanna smiles the carefree smile of one not struggling to toe the line between duty and desire and answers back amiably

"Of course, you do. And I'm sure she'll find herself in for a treat tomorrow!"

*Tomorrow?! No! Not tomorrow! Friday! She gave me until Friday! Tomorrow?!*

"Tomorrow, dear?"

The Mayor asks in as disinterested a tone as she can manage.

"Well, yes! After all, seems to me that most of the youngsters enjoy Miners' Day."

"Miners' Day..."

Regina repeats with something akin to horror, having completely forgotten about the upcoming festivities due to the tangled web of indecision wrapped around her mind.

"I saw the posters. The girl did a good job. Would you like help putting anything up tomorrow, or do you have it all under control?... Not that I mean any offence, I'm sure you have it all sorted, I just wouldn't feel right if I didn't offer!"

"Oh... No, Johanna, that's fine, dear. I believe Mother Superior has taken on most of the set-up duties. Were you still alright to watch Henry?"

"Of course, don't you worry yourself about that! I was thinking I might take him down to see all of the lights Marco's put up."

"Take him out?... Into town?"

The brunette thins her lips with displeasure, but beneath this irritable facade lies a deep discomfort. She knows- of course- that she can't keep Henry locked away forever, but even with the truth out between the two of them, the idea of letting the boy out of her sight with the blonde in the same town- hell, in the same state!- makes her nervous.

Strangely, she is almost certain that her nerves are *secondary* to what Emma's own might be in such a situation, but this does little to make her feel better. In fact, before she can stop it, an unwelcome but hatefully familiar voice in her mind spits

*Good! She should feel nervous! He's mine! Mine! She had her chance, she-

No- she shakes her head- no, she doesn't think that way anymore. *Won't* think that way!

Sensing the palpable tension settling over the table, Johanna studies her fork timidly and quickly strives to retract her suggestion
"Of course, if you would rather I didn't, then-

"-No."

"No, of course not, you're right. I apologise; it was a foolish idea."

"No, it wasn't. And not 'no' I don't wish for you to take Henry into town, just... 'no'. No, you shouldn't have to miss out on the festivities yourself, and I suppose this is going to have to happen sooner or later."

"So... That's a yes, dear?"

"A hesitant one. Now, I wonder if you might be so kind as to see to these plates? I suppose I have a few errands to run after all with the day creeping up the way it has. Be here for nine tomorrow. You can take Henry once I've gotten him ready."

"Oh, I can do that, dearest, if it's a bother! I'm sure you'll have your hands full enough and-

"-It's not a bother, Johanna. He's my son."

"I beg your pardon, Madame Mayor, I meant no disrespect."

"... Nine o' clock. Don't be late."

"Hey, doll, nine o'clock?"

"Huh?"

"Nine o' clock!"

"It's six thirty!"

"No, idiot! Regina! Incoming at your nine o'clock!"

"Ooooh!... You know, that's really more of a seven, but-"

"-Miss Swan."

Regina interrupts the younger women's hushed chattering, and Emma hurries over to the edge of the counter to greet her with a grin.

"Hey. What's up?"

"Hello yourself, dear. I was wondering if I could borrow you for a couple of minutes?"

The Mayor looks from the blonde to Ruby expectantly. Glancing back at the waitress also, Emma raises a brow, and Ruby nods with a shrug of her shoulders.

"Don't see why not, it's not busy yet."

She smiles.

"...Could we maybe find somewhere a little less, well, public, Miss Swan?"

The Mayor requests, and Emma's eyes widen in surprise, but she nods and beckons for Regina to follow her into the kitchens; cordially ignoring Ruby's shit-eating grin and rather conspicuous
thumbs-up. Leading the brunette around the back so that they stand in the shadow of the meat freezer, she smiles pleasantly and rests her shoulder blades casually against cool steel.

"So? What can I do for you?"

"... Miss Lucas seemed rather giddy upon my arrival?"

The Mayor muses as she looks around at their current surroundings with theatrical distaste.

"Yeah, well, maybe she fancies you."

Emma grins, and the darker woman rolls her eyes but plays along dutifully.

"Does she now?... Well, that could certainly get interesting..."

"Nah, I know you like me better."

The blonde chuckles, and Regina sighs wearily

"Not with that attitude."

"Oh, come on!"

Emma grumbles, and the Mayor takes a second to enjoy the mild look of hurt her teasing achieves, before adopting a more serious expression and calling an end to their messing around.

"My feelings towards yourself and Miss Lucas are, alas, not the reason I've come to talk to you, dear."

"Shame."

"Emma... Please. I trust you're helping Ruby with food tomorrow for Miner's Day tomorrow?"

"You trust right. But, I can always come and help you out if you need an extra pair of-"

"-No, no, it's quite alright, dear. I was just getting my bearings."

"Oh... Okay?"

"No, most of my work has been done already, not to mention with some of your help. I merely... Well, I am still expected to show face for most of the day and will be overseeing things here and there... Johanna's taking care of Henry, but I didn't deem it fair for her to miss out entirely... She'll take him into town in the morning. Just so... Just so you're aware."

"Oh."

Emma offers with no hint of her former mischief.

"I just thought it might be wise to tell you."

"Sure... Uhuh."

"Emma... I-"

"-No, sorry, it's fine. Totally fine-"

The blonde nods, offering a semi-convincing smile.
"-I think I'll mainly be sorting things out back here and loading the truck for Ruby in the morning, so...

"Oh. Well. That's good."

"Yeah."

"Yes."

Regina finishes with a sour taste in her mouth. Pulling herself together, she appropriates a quieter, more understanding tone and regards the younger woman solemnly.

"I'm sorry I'm not here about what you'd perhaps hoped I would be... Especially with me inviting you back here out of sight. It honestly isn't my intention to frustrate you, Miss Swan."

"Huh? Oh, nah, don't worry... It's fine. Tomorrow should be fun, and then there's only four more days for you to keep me waiting... Not that I'm counting."

A far more genuine grin, and Regina rolls her eyes with a smile of her own and nods amiably towards a series of jars that fill the shelves to their side.

"That purple one on the end there is about to turn bad by the way. Honestly, dear, do you do any work?"

"I do plenty!"

"Hmm.."

The brunette smirks, turning leave and deciding she's glad she'd decided to come and talk to Emma. She imagines she will still suffer a great deal of anxiety tomorrow morning, but, any hysterics or freaking out she might have feared seem unlikely. She is almost certain that the younger woman will make every effort imaginable to keep herself at a distance from the festivities until the safety of lunchtime- aware of Henry's nap schedule, however strange that fact might seem- and is content with this fact.

Still, she had been telling the truth; she doesn't wish to frustrate or aggravate the blonde, nor does she take much glee from the knowledge that the news she's brought with her will most likely cause Emma a sleepless night. (Although in all fairness, the younger woman has played quite a bit of havoc with her own sleep pattern, and she supposes in a cruel way, it's simply tit for tat).

As if on cue, Emma calls her back with a small smirk of mischief; the blonde deciding that she doesn't wish to leave things on such a tense note.

"Regina?"

"Yes, dear?"

"You're sure you had no intention of frustrating me?"

She offers a burlesque wink to make it clear she's merely joking around, and the brunette licks her lips thoughtfully before turning on her heel and breezing from the kitchen with an arrogant toss of her hair and a sultry mutter of

"Really, Miss Swan, don't pester me! Or else I might very well drag you into that pantry and punish such bad behaviour."
Eyes widening, Emma hurries out after her laughing, shaking her head and warning the retreating Mayor

"Oh, you're going to hell for that, Regina!"

"Miss Swan!"

The brunette snaps back angrily at such a crass insinuation, before taking her leave with an ill-hidden grin.
In the end it isn't until after lunch that Emma makes her way into the busy centre of town to meet up with Ruby; Granny having told her several times during the course of the morning that the two should switch, but being met each time with a smile and the assurance that the blonde was 'just fine' keeping things moving her end.

*Well, she's not the most sociable of creatures...*

The old cook had mused to herself, although by this time, she'd been beginning to begrudge this fact, as much as she likes the girl- Ruby is by far a more competent hand at the grill, and at packaging food neatly to go out.

Finally, once Billy had come by for the final time at around twelve thirty- leaving Ruby to watch over the stall at the fete- Granny had shooed the two of them off sternly; holding her hand out for the blonde's apron and demanding she get herself out of the Diner to start having fun immediately.

This assertive request had left Billy chuckling appreciatively as Emma had disappeared upstairs to swap her uniform for jeans and a sweater, but he'd noticed that the blonde had seemed inexplicably tense on their way out to the Town Square.

"Hey! There's Ruby!"

Billy points out now in an effort to snap her out of her funk, and the waitress glances up and smiles; beckoning them over cheerfully.

"All done in the kitchens?"

"Yeah, I think so..."

"Great! Give me a second, then. I asked Astrid if she'd mind taking over for a bit- the nuns are kind of meant to run this whole thing along with the volunteers- she's just finishing up over at the coconut shy."

"Seriously? A coconut shy?"

Emma grins, and Ruby nods with a confused smile; not sure what about this traditional game might be perplexing to the blonde.

"Yeah..."

"Awesome. I want in!"

The younger woman laughs; thrown by the way this day- much like many others she has experienced here in Storybrooke- seems almost as though it has been ripped right out of the pages of a book in its quaint perfection.

"All in good time. I propose some cotton candy and a tour of the stalls first; it's no fun trying to look at everything from way back here."

"Oh, I want in on *those* things, too."

Emma nods as she moves around the table to stand beside the Waitress to help her tidy up a bit. Billy smiles at both girls amiably before excusing himself with the explanation that he's promised Marco
that he'll take over manning the cart ride.

"Cart ride?"

Emma asks as they watch him navigate his way through the hoards—still nothing compared to the city!—and Ruby nods once again as she waves at a couple of boys chasing each other through the crowd.

"Yeah, it's this thing they do every year. They link up a few of the old mining carts behind the garage's tow-truck and make it into this kiddie ride."

"Huh... I'm still surprised you guys have miners!"

"Well, we don't anymore. It's more just an excuse for everyone to get out and gossip."

Ruby chuckles.

"But you can ride into the mines?"

"Oh, no, of course not! No, the mines are all closed off. They have been for as long as I can remember. Sometimes they come up in town meetings as there could be all sorts of stuff down there, you know? But the Mayor always overrules. It's one of her personal hangups; the mines. Any time the subject gets brought forwards, Regina gives her safety speech and refuses to hear another word on the topic. One time, Ross— one of Billy's friends— went in there on a dare, and when Regina found out she had him spend the night in a cell. He argued that cells are for drunks, and she told him they were also for idiots... It was one of the few times I was entirely favourable towards Regina; Ross is an idiot, and to hear her snap something like that when he confronted her about it out in town the morning after was pretty damn funny!"

"I guess it must have been!"

"But, no, the cart ride is just around the square."

Ruby smiles, before beckoning over a rather timid looking woman in a neat, blue coat.

"Astrid! Sorry, Sister Astrid... This is Emma. And this is what's left of the pastries and pies Granny made. A dollar each, or four for three dollars."

"Got it. You two go and have fun. Oh, and make sure you stop by to see the candles we're selling this year!"

"Sure."

Ruby smiles indulgently, before confiding quietly as she leads the blonde into the fray

"I like Astrid and most of the other nuns plenty, don't get me wrong— though Mother Superior's kind of a hard ass— but I don't know what on earth they think we might all want more candles for..."

"Well, I'm just trying to get my head around the facts you guys have nuns!"

Emma grins, and Ruby muses upon this thoughtfully as she pulls at the younger woman's wrist to steer her towards a small stand promising cotton candy and other treats.

"Do they not have nuns in Boston?"

"They have everything in Boston, it's huge. But, nuns and miners in a place this size... Storybrooke
"The brunette smiles; ordering them each a stick of spun sugar and shaking her head when Emma reaches into her pocket. Handing over the blonde's treat, she points out several of the other obscurities the fête has to offer as they stroll along amiably. They eventually come to a stop in front of a large podium decorated with colourful streamers, and Ruby explains that there'd been several announcements made during the course of the morning and that later there should be a live band.

"Awesome!"

"Oh, I wouldn't speak too soon. It's kind of an Amateurs Unite kind of deal, and if it's anything like last year..."

The waitress shudders.

"That bad?"

"Let's just say, I have all the respect in the world for those studying medicine, but neither Dr Whale, nor Archie has any business combining their ear-bleeding hobby of closet musicianship."

"Oh, dear..."

"Oh, you don't know the half of it!"

A voice greets them from behind, and they turn around to spy Mary Margaret heading over carrying a collection tin.

"Hi!"

The blonde smiles, and the schoolteacher raises her hand in return before sneaking a tuft of Ruby's cotton candy.

"Hi. Are you two having fun?"

"Getting there-"

The brunette grins.

"We've only just gotten our taste of freedom! Please don't tell me you're doing that awful charity collection for the nuns again? You know that roof's never going to get fixed, right? So give up and have some fun!"

"I am having fun! No reason I can't do a nice thing and have fun."

Mary Margaret smiles, and she points over to a large group of people huddled in a line a little way away.

"Marco's been doing good business with those carts this year. The Mayor's speech was actually pretty to the point and tolerable, too."

"Regina made a speech?"

Emma asks.
"Oh, she does every year; I guess it's just part of the role. That, and Madame Mayor is perhaps her own greatest fan when it comes to hearing herself speak."

The raven-headed woman sighs, and Ruby offers Emma a sly grin which the younger woman cordially ignores.

"Speak of the devil..."

Mary Margaret mutters, and they look up to spy Regina stalking through the crowd with a small man the blonde recognises as the elusive Mr Gold. Catching the Mayor's eye, she offers her a sunny grin, and the brunette flashes her companion a brief glance before reciprocating with a small smile of her own and a distracted raising of her hand before she and the pawnbroker disappear into the tide of chattering bodies.

"I suppose it's about time to pack up."

Ruby yawns as dusk turns a bruised purple and the lights strung around the square twinkle invitingly. The stalls are quieter now as people have been heading home in twos and threes since the sun began to set.

"I guess. That was really fun, though!"

Emma smiles, and she glances back in surprise as Regina comes stalking over to the podium on which they perch and addresses her smartly

"Well, I'm glad you enjoyed yourself, Miss Swan, though if you could kindly not use the railings as your personal furniture, that would be appreciated."

The younger woman hops down obediently, followed by the waitress, and they move to stand beside Mary Margaret as the Mayor begins unpinning the streamers weaving between the posts.

"Did you enjoy yourself, Regina?"

Emma prompts, and the brunette imagines she looks just about as surprised as the other two women.

*Though I certainly hope I don't look quite so gormless.*

"Yes, thank you... I think things went well this year."

She offers tentatively, and, it's not that she hasn't grown accustomed to chatting with the blonde when they spend time together, but more that it is highly unusual for members of her town to include her in their pleasantries. She is aware that this is mostly her own doing, but still, it feels kind of nice to not just be looked at for the dos and don'ts of an occasion.

"Cool."

The blonde grins, and her eyes light up when Billy comes strolling by and asks if they might like to take the last ride in the carts before he drives them back to the garage. She imagines this proposal is mostly aimed at Ruby, but she and Mary Margaret nod in unison as, with the way the lights of the town sparkle prettily, this seems like a wonderful idea.

Ruby doesn't need asking twice as she climbs into the cart at the front, beckoning Mary Margaret and Emma over with a shrug as she says she doesn't mind which one takes the seat beside her.

"It's alright, Emma, you sit by Ruby, I don't mind sitting behind you. Three never is the best number
for rides."

The schoolteacher smiles, but the younger woman shakes her head with a perplexed frown and coaxes Mary Margaret past her, before turning to beckon at the Mayor.

"No, it's cool, you guys go up front and we can sit in the back... You coming?"

She asks, turning to Regina, and the brunette frowns, as this is certainly not a situation she'd been anticipating. Later, when musing on this turn of events- and she will muse upon them quite a bit- she will imagine that if Emma had given her time to think about it, she might not have agreed to join in with such childish larking around. As it is, the younger woman simply smiles at her expectantly and holds open the levered bar at the side of the cart, and she purses her lips as she reads the joint expressions of surprise on the other women's faces, before stalking over and taking a tentative seat beside the blonde.

"Why are you doing this?"

She whispers irritably as she is forced to somewhat press up against the younger woman, and she looks away- troubled- when Emma greets this question with a look of entirely genuine confusion.

"Doing what?"
Chapter 63

A/N: Sooo, I know this 'week' thing has dragged, but it's ending next chapter! I also urge you to believe me that this fic IS listed as SwanQueen, and to keep the faith :p On that note, I apologise for leaving you with a cruel cliffhanger here, but I'm pretty much falling asleep at my laptop so am calling it a night. I promise to update and write the 'dinner' scene tomorrow, where things might change in your/ our favour (huh? what? who said that?). You have my full permission to beat me, whip me, etc if I don't... Either way, evil as it may be, I hope you enjoy this final little bit of insight and build up, and reviews would be lovely :)

By Thursday, the Mayor is distraught to find that she is practically counting down the minutes until she can reasonably ask the blonde to go and get them some lunch. Anything to give her some space.

Some breathing room.

The day is overcast, and her study is bathed in the unusual light that tends to come before a storm. She has struggled over the past few days to find Emma things to do to keep her busy- and, more importantly, to keep the blonde to herself- and she imagines the bored sigh from the couch is warranted as she has subsequently requested that the younger woman trawl through the town's directory in search of typing errors.

Not exactly a job of high importance, and she imagines Emma knows this just as well as she does.

Still, she has yet to receive any actual argument when handing down such pointless duties, and given that this is the second day running where she has put the blonde on this particularly tedious task, she is silently grateful. Glancing up, she studies the younger woman thoughtfully as the latter sits curled up on the sofa with a heavy book- names M to Z- in her lap and her glasses perched low on her nose.

The glasses had been in the Bug, which arrived back at the town line- at Regina's request- on Tuesday. She had said nothing about making the necessary arrangements to Emma- simply announcing before lunch that they were to pick the old car up at around three that afternoon- and the younger woman had refrained from making any further comment on the matter.

Emma had, of course, offered up a rather tentative embrace once both cars- one sleek, one beaten- had stood out on the Mayor's drive once again, but it had differed greatly from the way she'd pushed herself up against the brunette the first time she'd expressed her gratitude, and Regina imagines this to have been as much in respect of their current situation as it had been due to the fact that- when not flirting (badly!)- the blonde doesn't seem to be one for physical displays of affection.

"You didn't have to... Thank you."

Emma had whispered in her ear before releasing her and taking a hasty couple of steps backwards. In return, she'd simply shrugged and snapped at the younger woman that their coffee wasn't about to make itself, so perhaps she could stop swanning around wasting time mumbling. This particular term
of phrase has become a new favourite of hers, although she refuses to attribute this fact to the way it results in the blonde flashing her a dangerous glance that promises all sorts of things her generally amiable words do not.

You didn't have to...

That had struck her as curious, though.

No, she didn't have to. She hasn't had to do any of this... But, she imagines Emma had been referring to the fact that things are still undecided between them, and she has an idea that the blonde might have meant that she shouldn't have felt the need to do something nice before deciding whether or not she wishes to... Well... Do whatever it is that will happen if she gives Emma what she wants. She had considered pointing out that, whether or not she feels she can enjoy the blonde in all ways, she means to carry on enjoying her in the ways she does now, but had decided against it. It had seemed like a dangerous topic, and though she has seen several positive signs since things had fallen apart the way they did, she is terrified that if she allows Emma the chance to vocalise her thoughts, she might form her feelings into a declaration of debt once again.

Whether or not this is what the blonde actually means, or if it's simply an awkwardness with words, it is something Regina cannot allow herself to hear.

Not again.

So, she'd simply shrugged.

Snapped that she wanted coffee, and shrugged.

And Emma had said nothing more on the matter.

Has, in fact, been true to her word and said nothing out of the ordinary all week, despite the progressively irritable responses she's been rewarded with any time she opens her mouth. And, for this, the Mayor feels a little guilty- knowing that she's been barking and snarling when the younger woman has done nothing to deserve such a reaction- but it's hard.

It's hard not to give in to the stress and the confusion boiling her blood and clouding her mind.

Hard not to let her imagination wander as it had on Monday when Emma had come jogging up the path with her hands thrown comically over her head as the sky had thundered an angry grey and the heavens had opened for the better part of the morning. Hard not to let her gaze linger when the blonde had greeted her with a rueful grin while stripping out of her sweater and toeing off her sneakers. Hard not to reach out and touch pale skin so candidly exposed with wet wool stuck to thin cotton, allowing a brief study of taut flesh.

Hard.

Just as it's been hard not to growl irritably when, every time she finds herself studying the younger woman- something she only allows when Emma is engrossed in her work- she swallows as she is struck by the certainty that she feels something strongly feels something- for the girl that surpasses what a friend should feel for a mere companion... Because, every time she has found herself staring at the younger woman and thinking unsavoury thoughts, the latter has managed to say something that has thrown her off completely.

That has confused her.

Just like on Sunday. On Miner's Day.
It had been fate, she is sure of it, that had led to Ruby agreeing to ride home with Billy and taking Mary Margaret along with her to drop off on the way... Fate; nothing else would be so cruel. This turn of events had- of course- left her alone in the company of the blonde, and Emma had grinned at her through the last, crimson rays of sunset as they'd found themselves stood out in the deserted square where the nuns had already done a scrupulous job cleaning. That grin had been a shy one; not tainted with any form of cunning at finding themselves alone, but rather one of shared discomfort and good humour. They had set off towards the Diner- and subsequently the Mayor's mansion- at a slow stroll, and Emma had repeated her earlier words quietly.

"That was fun."

Sighing, Regina had replied in a kinder tone than used earlier that day, as their shadows had loomed long and withered ahead of them.

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself."

"... Are you mad at me because I asked you to ride in the carts with us?"

Emma had asked her after a short spell of silence, and the brunette had frowned, trying to find an answer; telling herself to desist as her attention had wandered again and again to messy curls and open features cast with shadow.

"No-"

She'd replied honestly after a moment's consideration

"-No, dear, I'm not mad at you. I just hadn't been prepared for the invitation. Such things are not really my style."

"I just wanted to include you..."

The younger woman had mumbled, before misreading the stony look to her left to be one of irritation and explaining hastily

"Not that I think you need me to or anything! Course not! No... I just... I dunno. They told me to sit by who I wanted to sit by, and I decided to take that advice. I didn't mean to annoy you... You were just the person I wanted to ride with is all."

And, Emma had followed up this revelation with a nonchalant shrug as if to brush her words away. As if they didn't mean anything.

Regina had merely swallowed.

Swallowed, as her previous musing of just how badly she might like to push the girl- hard- against the iron railings of the school as they walked past, and slip a hand- roughly- into the tight promise of her jeans had been interrupted by the wealth of emotion that simple declaration of camaraderie had demanded from within her.

Because, every time she's resigned herself to the fact that she wants the blonde and wishes to take what she's been offered, Emma manages to do something, or say something, that makes her chest tighten unbearably and make it seem like it's suddenly hard to breathe.

Every time.

Every time her mind has wandered into dangerous territory while studying the younger woman bent
over one of the filing cabinets, or sat trustingly beside her, or reaching up while balancing on a chair
to fix the lights with a generous swatch of her stomach exposed, Emma has turned around and
offered her some useless anecdote to make her smile, or has asked her about her day, or has
sauntered in with a goddamned paper cup of coffee baring a ridiculous illustration, leaving her
smiling to herself like a no good lunatic and saving a dirty, used, cup and placing it on the
windowsill in her bedroom.

Every time she's been busy imagining fucking her, the younger woman has given her pause for
thought by showing her what she might lose.

What she might ruin.

What she might abuse, demand too much from, and ultimately break.

Every time she feels like the Queen she knows she is, Emma finds a way to remind her that in this
world, she herself is little more than a naive maid far too eager to trust that she will be treated as
kindly as she has earned the right to be treated- as she deserves to be treated- and, the brunette
knows in her heart what will become of the young wretch.

Knows what she has done to the pretty, young things so ready to please her in the past.

Knows that she can't just take another bite without claiming her right to the whole, glorious lot.

After all; she knows herself, and knows that those who don't learn from history are fools.

And she has never been a fool...

"Oh, hell! I think if I have to read about one more 'Smith', I'm gonna go postal on the whole lot of
them!"

Emma groans; bringing the Mayor back to the present. Glancing up with a wry smirk, the brunette
offers up a disdainful sigh as she places the lid back on her pen.

"Well, as this town would look solely to Graham to step in should you give in to this urge, I would
request that you refrain; he struggles more than enough as it is with writing up a parking ticket."

"That's more of an encouragement than it is a deterrence if that was your aim."

The blonde grins, and Regina rolls her eyes as she attempts to cleanse her mind of images of the
younger woman masquerading as a bandit in an outfit that itself would barely be considered legal.
She offers up a glower in retribution and snaps distractedly

"Do you have the time?"

"Clock's above your head-"

"-I didn't ask for a smart answer, just a right answ-"

"-Eleven forty."

"Is that too early for lunch?"

"Well, I can always eat, so..."

Emma grins, and after a moment's hesitation, the brunette does the same. A lot about this last week
has been stressful, but one positive factor has been that- since her tense admission about Henry- the
younger woman has gone back to devouring whatever is offered to her without pause for breath. A good thing too, as the way the blonde's ribs had been stacked so starkly- *so vulnerably!*- in the hazy light of the moon, back when they had-

-No! Don't go there! Don't even think about that! Not the way her body looked! Not the way she tasted-

"-Want me to go get us something?"

Emma interrupts her mind's dangerous wandering, and she nods- relieved- as she hands over a couple of bills.

"Please, dear. Pasta for me..."

And, she almost-*almost*- finishes off by telling the younger woman that she might as well take the afternoon off as she has nothing for her to do but carry on trawling through the heavy book discarded on the coffee table, but she knows that telling the blonde she isn't needed won't be met with the same glee as most others would take towards being told to go and enjoy themselves rather than stick around at the office.

She doesn't want to upset the girl.

And therein lies her problem.

She knows that this is not something that has ever concerned her before.

And knows *also* that this is telling of how close she has allowed Emma to get to her.

*Or, how close I have allowed myself to get to Emma...*

"Well, *go* on then!"

She snaps as she pulls herself from her thoughts, and the younger woman hurries over and takes the money from her with an apologetic grin.

"Going!"

Emma assures the brunette, and she strives to keep from full-on smiling as she can see right through Regina's irritable mannerisms, and knows the Mayor's way of speaking to her comes from an obscure place of acceptance. Tucking the notes handed to her into her back pocket, she bids the darker woman farewell; scolding herself as her gaze lingers a little too long on full lips.

*You said you'd give her time, and you need to respect that offer, Swan...*

She reprimands herself.

It's *hard* though.

*Hard* when all she can think about while sat staring mindlessly down at the text in that godforsaken book is how much she'd like to just slip from the sofa and march authoritatively over to the desk and *straddle* the fucking woman.

Deep down, she knows she'd never dare...

And not just because it would go against her ultimatum, and she has always been one to make good on their word.
She has sensed since the very *beginning* that Regina is boss in more ways than one...

Which has arguably simply *added* to her frustration.

Ordinarily, she is not one to take kindly to being ordered around. Not one to *get* to that point with someone where they might feel like they possess some form of importance or ownership over her.

*And, if they did, I'd soon put them right!*

... Regina, though...

Well, with Regina, she's finding she's *okay* with being a little more obedient. A little more respectful.

*Hell, with Regina, I fucking want her to take advantage of what I'd let her do to me...*

The younger woman shivers, before slipping swiftly from the room before the darker woman can spot the blush colouring her cheeks.

Looking up from her work, the Mayor frowns. By her calculation, only five minutes have passed since Emma left the office to buy them lunch, and therefore it's far too soon for her front door to creak open and closed as it does now. Brow furrowing further still as a light rap sounds against her study door, she calls out warily

"Come in...?"

"Ah, Regina! All alone I see."

Gold smiles, and the brunette forces a pleasant expression of her own, although it feels rotten stretched across her face.

"Mr Gold... To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I merely wished for an opportunity to progress on our conversation this Sunday..."

"Oh?"

"About your girl... About Emma. Emma Swan."

The pawnbroker smiles, and the brunette offers a tightlipped grimace in return as she points woodenly to the sofa recently vacated by the blonde herself.

"As you wish..."

"I used to be much better, I swear!"

Emma laughs as she tosses her creation over at the Mayor, who lets out a noise of irritation at the act. Sighing, Regina plucks folded paper from her desk- the remnants of the sticky note stuck to the younger woman's food order- and studies it with a small smile.

"A bird?"

"*Obviously*, can you not tell from the sheer talent!? It's a crane, technically, but, I dunno... Are swans
and cranes really so different?"

"I'd imagine this is whatever you want to *tell* people it is... They might take pity on you and believe you."

Regina smirks, but there has been a tension in the air since Emma has returned that leaves the expression feeling sour.

Not that the *blonde* is at fault.

No, Gold is the culprit. She has yet to understand why the slippery little imp has chosen *now* to ask after the younger woman, but the very fact that he's done so at all causes her great unease.

*What does he want to know about her?*

*Why does he want to know about her suddenly?*

*What's his plan?*

Not that any of that matters.

No.

Because if Gold so much as lays a *finger* on Emma, she'll-

...*Damn*...

Yes. Damn. It seems she's not as confused as she'd believed.

Staring down at the crumpled paper in her hand, she sighs.

She knows she'll keep it.

Just as she has kept everything *else* Emma has given her.

"Are you alright?"

The blonde asks uneasily, and Regina glances up and forces a smile.

"Yes, dear. Never better... As will *you* be."

"How's that?"

"I'm giving you tomorrow afternoon off."

Regina smiles.

Emma doesn't reciprocate.

"... Yeah?"

"Why, Miss Swan, you sound *disappointed!*?"

The Mayor chuckles, though inwardly she wishes the younger woman would wipe the expression of disappointment off her face... She dislikes being the reason behind such a look.

"It's Friday tomorrow."
Emma states quietly, and Regina frowns as she catches a definite note of upset in the blonde's tone.

Then it dawns on her...

_Oh for heaven's sake! It's not as though you haven't been dreading the day all damned week!_

The Mayor sighs as she is struck with sudden understanding, and she shakes her head as she addresses the matter much more calmly than she feels she should be able to as her heart pounds rapidly in her chest.

"Relax. I'm not blowing you off, dear. I just... I've been asked to attend a meeting tomorrow afternoon with Mr Gold, and won't be needing you to assist me. I know you have... Things... You wish to discuss tomorrow. I just won't be needing you in the office after lunch."

"Okay..."

The younger woman offers with a furrowed brow, and, the brunette imagines she has done a fairly poor job of keeping her tone light after all.

"Why don't you come over for dinner? I know you have work, but I can ask Granny to-"

"-Nah, it's ok, I got it."

Emma grins, and the Mayor grits her teeth as she senses a definite shift from anxiety to excitement in Emma's demeanour.

"Well. In _that_ case..."

She sniffs, before looking up as the blonde pushes herself from her seat and strolls towards the kitchen with a sunny smile and the declaration that she'll make them some coffee.

"Dinner sounds really nice."

Emma grins on her way out, and the Mayor finds that she is unable to ascertain whether the younger woman means this in reference to her ultimatum or simply as a genuine fact.

As fate would have it, Emma decides to clarify; popping her head back round the door as the kettle boils.

"I know it's usually for work and all, but I really do _like_ hanging around with you. Dinner together would be nice"

Before disappearing to make their coffee.

Regina bites her lip.

_I really do like hanging around with you._

That simple admission fills her with unsuspected warmth.

"That means a lot to me..."

She confides to the quiet patter of rain, before glancing up as Emma pads back in with a mug in each hand.

"I tried to draw a foamy face with that milk frother thing you have, but... We'll just agree not to
discuss the monstrosity floating in your coffee."

The younger woman grins as she hands over the brunette's cup, and the latter feels a very sudden, unexpected wave of emotion come over her:

*No. I can't have you. Not the way you want; the way I want... Because I need you. You make my day a hundred times better, and I can't lose that. I can't hurt you. Can't ever do that to you... Because I'm the Queen, Emma. The Evil Queen. I'm the darkness.*

*The hate.*

*I want it ... But I won't take what I want.*

*Not this time.*

*Because I know how it will end.*

*I know what will become of you.*

*I'm not a fool...*

*I can't lose you.*

"Emma...I-"

"-Dinner sounds great."

The blonde repeats.

And the Mayor diverts her gaze swiftly when the younger woman winks with a small smile.
Chapter 64

Chapter Notes

A/N: This was getting long for a scene intro! I think the actual dinner might be long too, as I've been looking forward to writing it. So, have this bit, enjoy this bit, and I will go for a run, shower, and start on the next chapter. Hopefully, that will be up tonight as well! Enjoy! :) Please review :)

"Oh, Henry..."

The brunette sighs as she settles into the armchair beside the boy's crib. Massaging her temples, she studies her son with a strained smile; trying to fight back against the headache her chat with Gold has brought on.

*Chat*?!?

Hardly. Things are never that simple when it comes to that slippery little snake of a man.

*They never were.*

She is unsure just what to make of the ten minutes or so spent conversing with the old pawnbroker as they had sat cordially across from one another on the plush sofas in her study. With most people here in town, interactions are simple. Mundane. Predictable. She has gone to great lengths to make it so. But with Gold?... With Gold she never knows entirely *where* she stands. She had feared the Dark One and supposes some of that fear might simply have manifested itself so that it now lingers in her mind when dealing with his cursed counterpart... This theory certainly *seems* fairly logical, and yet...

And yet, Gold has always seemed to *know* more than he should.

Has always managed to word things in a way that leaves her feeling uneasy.

When she had adopted Henry, this little habit had been at its most alarming, and she had believed it would be impossible to get any worse...

Until now.

Now, what had once seemed like lunatic riddles and archaic sayings carry a veil so paper-thin, she had almost begun to imagine the trickster's skin might be *gleaming* in the hazy sunlight.

Had almost convinced herself that she could *smell* that old, familiar scent of blood and oil that had cloaked her long ago mentor like some hideous olfactory shroud that had left her tasting copper.

The imp had wanted to know about Emma.

Had expressed his amused surprise that she had brought the blonde to their town in the first place, and, when asked why this act of charity might tickle him so, he had offered a wide, terrible grin and announced his simple astonishment that she should want anything to do with the girl.

"*Knowing who she is and all...*"
He'd elaborated, and true, she imagines that following her trip to the little man's shop during which she had discussed her son's birth mother, Emma's arrival in town might have answered several questions for the old proprietor, but she is unsure whether she believes that Emma's blood-tie to Henry had been what Gold was talking about.

"I must say, I had presumed when word spread that the girl had disappeared that something unfortunate had happened to the little thing... Something terribly, terribly unfortunate... And, of course, entirely accidental, Madame Mayor."

"Just what are you implying?"

"Oh, nothing, dearie. Just that it would have been temptingly plausible for the poor thing to have found herself in a spot of trouble... And, what with the upbringing she's had, and lack of parental guidance- not to mention the fact that she doesn't appear to have anyone who might have gone looking for her- such things do have a terrible way of ending messily."

"... What do you know of her upbringing?"

"Why, Regina, I imagine I know just as much as you do."

The imp had smiled, and the brunette had felt the colour drain from her face as certainty had crawled up into her mind and taken root.

"...I know very little about Miss Swan's past, as a matter of fact."

"Ah, but, dearie... You know the part that counts."

Gold had insisted, and she'd studied him shrewdly; refusing to lower her gaze when terrible, all-seeing eyes had captured her own. Those bottomless coals had seemed to glitter with cruel mirth-mocking her- but then the little man had cleared his throat; once more taking on the guise of just another oblivious creature in her mindless town.

"Well, I'm sure Miss Lucas was relieved the Swan girl returned so surprisingly safe and sound. Thick as thieves those two seem to be whenever I happen upon them... Miss Blanchard has taken quite a liking to your girl as well... An odd pair, wouldn't you say?"

"... I've not given the matter all too much thought."

"If you say so, dearie. A lie is as a lie does, and your tongue is simply dripping with them of late."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, nothing, a simple quote from a forgotten book, I'm sure. Well, Regina, I won't keep you..."

"So, this 'meeting'... That was all you wished to discuss!? Your surprise at Miss Swan's safety?"

"Well, yes! And, I suppose 'surprise' is an acceptable term... But I should also say that I am relieved, Madame Mayor."

"... Are you?"

"Indeed I am."

Gold had answered cryptically, before pushing himself from the sofa and limping towards the door with a wave farewell.
"Of course I am relieved that the girl has turned up safe when the worst was feared. Anyone would be."

"I suppose so."

She'd replied coldly, but her lips had felt numb, and she'd not believed this latter explanation in the slightest.

"Why must things be so complicated, Henry?"

She laments now, and the little boy blinks at her curiously, before going back to studying his fingers without a care. She frowns as she finds herself suffering a grossly inappropriate flash of rage towards the child- towards every clueless cretin in this hateful world- as her heart burns with envy and her head pounds with guilt. She longs for the stupidity of innocence. Craves it.

But, she is at fault here. It is her own doing that everything has become so convoluted and interwoven...

She'd thought she'd won.

Thought she had what she wanted.

But Emma... Emma has ruined everything.

Emma has forced her to re-evaluate her current situation, and she is distraught by what she has found when doing so.

"Magic comes with a price."

She breathes quietly, and up until this last week, she had believed that the blonde- the Saviour- had been the one destined to pay it.

That turns out not to be entirely true.

Because, now that she wants something- and oh god, deep down she wants it badly- it turns out that she has her own debt to pay.

It turns out, even here, even when she stacks the decks and makes the rules, she can't have everything she wants.

Gold had solidified this within her mind.

Gold, as he had looked at her- really looked at her- and smirked at her true self hidden behind new clothes and new hair.

Gold who had flirted around the facts and danced with words... Who had come to tell her that he'd been surprised at the blonde's well-being.

At her good health.

Because Gold knows, somehow. Gold knows who she is and what she can do...

What she's capable of.

Because Gold is Rumplestiltskin. And Rumplestiltskin is the Dark One. And the Dark One knows all.
Knows about the pretty little cook.
Knows about the maid.
Knows what she fears most.
"I would never..."

She whispers, closing her eyes with a distraught shake of her head as an unwanted image fills her mind and turns her blood cold: the blonde cowering from her, as her own sated laughter sounds off the walls of her skull.

Trembling the way the cook had trembled.
Bruised and bleeding the way the maid had been painted crimson by the end of it all...

"Not here, and not her! Never with-"

-But she is pulled from her muddled thoughts as her phone sounds shrilly in her pocket.

See you at 7?
... Emma.

She recognises the number. Two days, and she has it memorised.

The phone is Granny's doing, not her own, though she supposes she would have insisted the blonde get herself one if the older woman hadn't beaten her to it. Glancing up at the clock on the wall, she makes it to be half four...

This seems to offer both far too much time and not enough at all.

Sighing, she taps back a weary reply.

Fine. See you then. Drive safe.

She swallows when she receives a reply almost instantly.

Can't wait :)

"...For what?"

Regina murmurs with a wary frown, but she has no idea how to answer her own question.

"So, what time are you heading over to Madame Mayor's?"

"Seven..."

Emma smiles a little awkwardly as Ruby offers her a shit-eating grin. The waitress has been full of questions about the upcoming evening, and her gleeful curiosity is beginning to grate on the blonde just a little. Emma imagines the sudden prickliness she feels towards the brunette- whom she usually allows to get away with murder- has an awful lot to do with how nervous she's feeling... Not that she's about to go and tell Ruby this.

"It's just so romantic! A sophisticated, rich older woman, grooming her young, ingenue little secretary..."
"Uhuh, yeah, that's totally how we planned it. I go over there to work, change into my little pencil skirt and seamed stockings, and crawl around at Regina's beck and call."

Emma sighs sarcastically as she finishes up helping with- and, by 'helping', she has so far ended up 'doing' - the ironing.

"Oh, I am so sure."

Ruby snorts with laughter as she mooches lazily on her bed. Rolling over to study Emma upside-down- long, chocolate tresses brushing the carpet- she grins knowingly

"Though, I wonder how much of that was an accidentally disclosed fantasy... Are you saying you'd mind?"

"It's hard enough to walk in a pencil skirt, let alone crawl."

The blonde replies breezily, and the waitress smirks as she spots a delicate blush creeping up the younger woman's throat as though blossoming from within her shirt.

"Ok, so don't wear the skirt. What about the rest?"

"... Shut up."

Emma mutters as she appears suddenly engrossed in the ironing board, and Ruby crows with laughter, before rolling onto her stomach and offering up a good-natured smile.

"You're so cute."

"My fist, your face, Lucas."

"So, so very lovely. I hope you get lady-laid, I really do."

"Oh, go fuck yourself."

The blonde hisses, but she grins as she tosses the billowing sack of Granny's nightdress at the brunette with a flourish.

"Maybe later. What about you?"

"Nah, I just finished, I'm good for a while."

Emma scoffs with a roll of her eyes, and Ruby mimics her with greater conviction as she plucks worn cotton from her head- the shade of which she believes to be one all old people look for in their undergarments- and sighs.

"Thanks for that insight."

"Welcome."

"I was being serious though..."

"Oh. I wasn't."

"Good to know! But are you... I mean... Do you think Regina might... Well, I dunno..."

"You don't know? You'll have to be more specific."
"Oi!"

Ruby protests, reaching behind her and tossing one of her pillows in the vague direction of the blonde. Sighing when she misses her mark by a good couple of feet, she pushes herself up so that she perches on the edge of the bed and elaborates a little less giddily.

"What I meant was Regina knows you like her, doesn't she? And, I get the feeling from some of the things you've said and the way she was at Miner's day that she quite likes you, too. Maybe not in a naked way, but... Well... Do you think maybe she's curious?"

Emma shrugs uncomfortably- not willing to share the fact that some of that curiosity has already been sated- and leans against the wall.

"I dunno... I was hoping to talk to her about stuff today, but then she didn't need me because of her meeting."

"Yeah... And she invited you over for dinner instead."

The brunette points out with a grin, and the younger woman shrugs once more, as though she isn't all that bothered.

"It's just dinner."

"Is it?"

The Waitress asks seriously, and the blonde pulls a face as she unplugs the iron, and opts to tell her friend the truth.

"I really don't know."

________________________________________________________________________________________

"Really? Really?! This is what you wanted to show me?"

Ruby rolls her eyes as she stands with her hand linked in the crook of the blonde's elbow outside the store by the Station.

"It's pretty cool."

Emma shrugs, and the brunette shakes her head while dutifully following the younger woman inside.

"That is the ugliest f'ing jacket, Emma."

She mutters in the blonde's ear as they nod their greetings to the proprietor, and Emma shrugs before asking the old woman behind the counter if she would mind getting it down.

"Is not, and I don't see anyone else wearing one like it."

"Yeah! For good reason! They have actual, working eyes!"

"Says the girl wearing leather shorts. Seriously. Before we met, I didn't even know that was a thing. And if I had thought it was a thing, I'd have presumed it was a style mostly appropriated by the fabulous men of San Francisco."

The blonde goads as she accepts the scarlet leather held out to her and shrugs it on. Studying herself in the mirror she smiles, before glancing at Ruby through the glass and sticking out her tongue.
"I'm buying it."

"You know, when Granny came in to give you your wages, I don't think she realised you were actually an insane person. I think-"

"-I think you should watch yourself."

Emma snaps, and the waitress giggles as she strolls over to the counter where the shopkeeper bags up red leather and takes a fair portion of the younger woman's cash.

"Don't go pretending to be a badass now just because you own a leather jacket."

The brunette grins, waving her farewell to the disgruntled looking woman privy to their bickering and following Emma outside.

"I was always a badass. Now I can just look good doing it."

The blonde winks, and the waitress punches her lightly in the arm before adopting a grin when Emma glances up at the looming face of the clock tower.

"Doesn't work anymore, remember? It's almost six."

"I wasn't-"

"-You were."

"... Fine."

The younger woman agrees, and she offers the brunette a self-deprecating grin that radiates nervousness.

"It'll be fine."

Ruby smiles knowingly, before linking her arm through Emma's and steering her back towards the Diner.

"Come on, at least find something nicer to wear."

"You mean like leather shorts?"

"I mean like bite your tongue... And let me do your makeup."
Chapter 65

Chapter Notes

A/N: Dinner is served. :) 

"What on earth are you wearing?..."

Regina frowns as she pulls open the front door to greet the younger woman waiting expectantly out on the steps.

"I got it today."

Emma explains, glancing down at the garish leather that contrasts quite shockingly with her pale features. The brunette smirks in response- her expression saying more than enough about what she makes of the blonde's newest purchase- and she steps aside to let her guest in. She'd been struggling to regulate the crazed beating of her heart when the doorbell chimed, but now, as she watches Emma pull off her shoes with the lack of grace she has come to know so well, she feels herself relax just a little. She is still wary of how tonight might go- how it might end- but there is something about actually being in the blonde's company that puts her a little more at ease.

"I see... Well, why don't you hang it up there with mine, dear; it's rather warm in here."

She points over to the coat stand by the door that bears several of her own coats and jackets, and Emma complies obediently and slips free of crimson leather. Beneath, she wears the flattering dark slacks the Mayor has grown rather fond of- and wonders curiously if Emma might have picked up on this fact- and the green woollen sweater she often pairs with a shirt, but has opted to wear on its own for tonight. A peek of white cotton flashes at the very bottom of the sweater's deep V, and the brunette smiles appreciatively as she isn't sure she would have been able to concentrate on much else if Emma had decided to simply throw thin wool over the delicate cups of her bra.

The fact that the younger woman has painted her lips a pale cherry is distracting enough.

Distracting... But also a little endearing. After all, she herself flaunts her favoured shade of deep shiraz, but it is a look she has perfected over the years and that suits her well. She isn't accustomed to seeing Emma wearing any form of makeup, and while the blonde has kept sensibly from going overboard, a definite amount effort has been made, and she finds herself sighing a little uncomfortably as she leads them into the kitchen.

"Would you like a drink?"

"Sure. What are you having?"

Emma asks- respectfully deciding against declaring her current wish for something strong and lots of it- as she follows the brunette shyly while breathing in a delectable blend of herbs and spices.

"You cooked."

"I invited you over for dinner, what were you expecting me to do?"
Regina frowns as she gestures towards a bottle of wine and hands over a corkscrew when Emma nods her approval.

"Well, I just... I mean I thought you meant like some pasta or a pizza or something, not... All this. You have almost as many pans stacked in your sink as we do when we cook at Granny's!"

"Yes, well, guests are generally not brought into the kitchen."

The darker woman remarks stiffly, and Emma raises a brow when she comes to the baffling realisation that her observation has somehow embarrassed her host slightly.

"Oh, please, it's only me!"

She smiles, and the Mayor shakes her head as she fetches a couple of wine glasses and takes the open bottle from the younger woman.

"Only you? Well, that may be, but I invited you over as my guest, and I take pride in playing host."

And, because it is Emma- 'only' Emma- she goes on to confide truthfully

"To be honest, I very much enjoy cooking more elaborate dishes, but I don't often have the opportunity nor reason to do so as it's just myself and Hen... I usually eat alone."

"Well, I'd say that works in my favour, then!"

The blonde grins, and she sips tentatively at her wine as she watches Regina move a large dish from the oven to the counter. The darker woman busies herself adding a few finishing touches, and Emma cocks her head appreciatively as she studies the way the brunette's soft curves are hugged by the expert tailoring of her expensive dress.

"Do you want to go through to the dining room, dear?"

Regina interrupts her casual voyeurism, and she tears her gaze away from the pleasant round of the darker woman's backside with a bashful smile.

"Uh, sure..."

She nods, glancing over at the kitchen table where she had imagined they might eat.

"Everything's set up already, but if you could take my wine through with you, that would be appreciated."

The Mayor requests, and Emma nods compliantly as she takes the darker woman's drink and what remains of the bottle through with her. She has been in the mansion's dining room only once- while searching for a book of matches at Regina's request- and recalls the rather overwhelming grandeur of the room. In all honesty, she would feel more comfortable eating in the kitchen, but-

"Well, shit."

She mutters in surprise as she pushes open the door and lets herself in. The table has been laid out nicely, though a large portion of its grand expanse has been left unused. She is in favour of this fact, as the place settings Regina has laid out are at the end of the table near the hearth, opposite each other. She had worried the Mayor might have placed them one on each end of the lavish piece of furniture, as though they might be members of royalty in some dusty old fairytale book.

With the fire flickering in its grate- she was right, it is warm in here, but also pretty!- and candles
placed along the window sill, the stuffy elegance of the room she remembers has been thwarted, and she takes a seat at the end of the table with a smile. Regina comes in bearing plates, but shakes her head sternly when Emma asks if there's anything still to come; the younger woman hovering restlessly in her seat.

"Only the jus, and sit down, Miss Swan!"

She growls, but the long-suffering sigh she offers when she leaves the room is laced with good humour and the blonde grins as she sips her wine; eyes widening as she takes in the impressive offering on the table.

"Here. Careful; it's hot."

The brunette warns as she comes back in with a rather elegant vessel held carefully within a cloth.

"Hey, that's cool! Kind of looks like a genie lamp or something."

"Imagine that..."

Regina smiles, before gesturing for younger woman to help herself. She is unsure what to say now that they sit opposite one another; fully aware of what this evening is supposed to be about, but not sure how and when to broach the subject. This bothers her, as when Emma compliments her on her cooking and smiles at her amiably, she is struck by the fact that this evening also carries elements of the sort of companionship she has secretly craved. The reasoning behind their dinner is one that has caused her a great deal of anguish, but the company is pleasant, and the idle flow of conversation is comfortable in a way she never finds it to be with anybody else.

And this calls some of her previous fears into question.

She has worried so frequently about the younger woman's maturity level and ability to handle herself, but whenever they share some time together and simply sit and talk, she has generally found herself rather impressed with the way Emma conducts herself when given the chance, and tonight is no exception. She nods along curiously as the blonde tells her the story of how she ended up with Caskett, and raises a brow now and then in response to the younger woman's blunt but realistic references to the way things had been for her back in Boston.

"A rather brave choice to make; taking the cat in when you weren't in the best position yourself."

She remarks when Emma pauses to sip at her drink.

"Brave or foolish. I think my thoughts on that fluctuated... But mostly I just told myself it was smart."

The blonde smiles and Regina reciprocates as she loads her fork gracefully.

"Smart?"

"I was lonely, but I was also afraid of allowing anyone else into the wonderful, awesome pit of my life. I think I needed something to think about. To look after. Sometimes it's easier being responsible when it's not only for your own sake. For a little while, Cass needed me- when she was still healing after tearing herself up the way she did on that wire- but, once she was over the worst of it, she wasn't entirely dependent on me and I wondered what might happen then. Of course, I wasn't ever entirely dependent on her... But I believe we did each other a favour by sticking together the way we did. She's just a dumb old tabby, but... She's my dumb old tabby."

Emma grins.
"I slept better once Cass showed up. I'd spent a good deal of my time before that thinking I was this terrible, awful person, and it's hard to really bother doing right by yourself when you think that way. I guess in the grand scheme of things, I only thought those things as badly as I did for a few weeks, but it felt like a lot longer than that, if you get what I mean... When Cassie showed up and I fed her up and let her dry off, I was just glad for something to do, you know? But after the wire incident and realising she wasn't planning on going anywhere, sometimes I'd look at her and allow myself to just kind of think... I did a good thing. It didn't make the guilt any less; it doesn't work that way- at least, it never has for me- but it gave me something else to think about on nights when I'd sit in that crappy apartment and evaluate the great, magnificent train-wreck of my life."

The younger woman sighs, but she maintains an expression of good humour, and Regina imagines the blonde has better things to think about these days.

I did a good thing, too...

"Animals can bring out the best in us."

Is all she offers out loud, and Emma nods as she runs a finger thoughtfully down the stem of her wine glass.

"Have you ever had pets?"

"Yes, as a girl. We owned horses."

"Cool!"

"Yes, I suppose it was."

Regina smiles, and she shakes her head when the blonde asks if she's ever thought of owning any here in town.

"No, I don't believe I would have the time, nor the patience for such things now. I do occasionally wander down to the stables out by the woods, though. A horse is a magnificent creature, but the way they are owned here is rather different from what I was accustomed to."

"Here? You mean in Storybrooke?"

Emma frowns, and the brunette hesitates, before breezing carefully past the question.

"The stables are too far for me to travel to on a day to day basis, and a horse requires more time than I have to spare if it is to be a happy creature."

"I guess... I've never ridden a horse. I like them- they had a couple out by where I lived as a girl and they'd eat grass out of your hand- but I've never been on one."

"Well, if you like, you could always go down to the stables here in town and have a go. Ask for Shadow; she's an older mare, but she's a sweetheart. She won't mess you around like some of the younger ones like to do."

"Really? That'd be awesome! You should come too, it'd be fun!"

Emma grins, before she takes an awkward sip from her wine and lowers her gaze back down to her plate. She doesn't need to be a mind-reader to know that the tense pull to the brunette's lips is due to the fact that making such plans seems a little dangerous given how much rests on this evening, and she is in full agreement.
"This wine is good."

She changes the subject uncomfortably, and Regina raises a brow before laughing affectionately.

"Because you're such a connoisseur, dear?"

"You have no idea..."

Emma growls, sticking out her tongue, and the Mayor takes in a sharp breath as she catches the scarlet stain of merlot painting pink velvet.

"Actually, I'm rather confident that I do, Miss Swan."

She scoffs as she regains control easily, and she smirks as the latter offers her a baleful look that doesn't quite mask the glittering of her eyes. Moving on, she instigates a new topic of conversation and laughs accordingly when the younger woman responds with a quick play on words. She nods for Emma to continue, while inwardly scolding herself as she realises she sits lent forward in her chair, studying the younger woman raptly.

Still, she hadn't noticed before today- and she imagines this might have a lot to do with the fact she's been avoiding looking at the blonde any more than she has to- the changes apparent in the younger woman's face. She struggles to concentrate on what the blonde tells her now as her mind rings with the warning bells of what's still to come, but she drinks in rapidly moving lips and dark, sooty lashes pensively. She recalls the previous hollowness of the blonde's cheeks and the faded bruise beneath her eye- that old version of Emma being the one her mind tends to conjure when thinking about the girl- and realises that pale flesh has taken on a great deal more colour, and chapped lips now appear soft and inviting. Hollow cheeks appear fuller and full of life.

_I did that..._

She muses, before slowly realising that the younger woman's chattering has tapered off and that Emma sits watching her curiously.

"You ok?"

"Yes, dear."

She assures swiftly, and she opens her mouth to begin a new topic of conversation when Emma decides to call the shots and bring their pleasant masquerade crashing down.

"Regina... I'm not sure I can keep pretending like I'm just here for dinner. I mean, it was lovely, and I do genuinely enjoy spending time with you, it's just... All I can think about is the fact that you've said nothing to me all week in regards to our, um, arrangement, and don't get me wrong, I know I gave you until Friday, and shouldn't have expected you to, but... Today's Friday. I'm not trying to be annoying. I just... You know where I stand with all this. I just need to know what you're thinking. Please! Because there's been a lot of times this week when I've just wanted to tell you to quit stalling and fuck my ultimatum. To fuck _me_! And, I... Well, I know that's probably not the way you'd like me to talk at the dinner table, but shit... I just want to know what's on your mind... At least I _think_ I do. Maybe I might regret that in a minute or two, but... I think it's still better _knowing_, you know?"

The younger woman practically stammers over the last couple of words, offering up an awkward, hopeful smile that falls slowly when the brunette sighs in response and stares down into her wine.
Lowering her eyes to her own empty glass, Emma continues quietly
"...I'm guessing your lack of an enthusiastic proposition is kind of telling."

"Emma... Dear..."

"Hey, it's ok... It's cool, It's fine."

The blonde shrugs with an uninspired attempt at nonchalance, and Regina closes her eyes and throws her head back with an audible groan as her heart aches and her mind spins with images.

*Emma in her grey dress playing coyly with the ice in her glass.*

*Emma confused and naked, curled up on the mattress back in Boston, stinking of whisky.*

*Emma laughing at her amiably while sharing a pecan pastry brought over from Granny's.*

*Emma looking up at her with unwavering trust as she'd lowered herself onto the bed.*

*Emma as her dreams have conjured her; submissive, obedient, willing.*

*Emma with scarlet wine painting her tongue as it flickers between sharp, white teeth: just begging to be tasted.*

*Emma as she might end up... Hurt. Confused. Broken.*

"It's not fine."

She whispers sadly, before lowering her jaw back down and studying the blonde glumly.

"It's not fine at all! I can only tell you that I want to do this, Emma... You might not believe that, but I do. I want this. But I can't... I'm sorry."

She shakes her head, before pushing herself from the table and stalking from the room. The younger woman baulks at this sudden dismissal with an expression of hurt. Licking her lips and placing her knife and fork together on her plate with trembling hands, Emma swallows as she is unsure what to do. She catches the sound of a new bottle of wine being opened- along with what sounds suspiciously like a watery sniff- before the click of the brunette's heels sounds down the hall. Away from her.

A door opens and closes, and she knows Regina has disappeared into her study.

"Fuck..."

She murmurs, and her eyes prickle distractingly as she nibbles at what remains of her lipstick. Ordinarily, she is certain her reaction to such a thing- not that this is a predicament she has landed herself in before- would be to flee. Not from town- not anymore- but from the situation. She doubts she's alone in this. After all, she can't very well remain sat at the Mayor's otherwise deserted table.

She wants to cry.

This surprises her, as it tends to be something she does when she's angry rather than upset.

She's not angry.

Not really.
She'd given the darker woman a week with the understanding that it would allow her time to make a decision.

She tells herself she can't get mad just because that decision turns out to be one she doesn't want to hear.

"I really thought she'd."

But she stops herself. It's pointless to continue fooling herself in such a way.

I wasn't fooling myself. Maybe at first, but not for a while now. The way she was when we... When we...

"That wasn't an act."

Pushing herself up slowly- aware that her legs are shaking ever so slightly- she pads nervously from the room and down the hall; knocking on the study door softly before letting herself in.

Regina glances up at her warily, and the blonde notes that sooty lashes glisten with moisture, before looking back down at the generous helping of wine in her glass.

"I'm sorry, Emma."

The Mayor sighs, and the younger woman nods as she takes a tentative seat on the sofa.

"I know. Me too."

She replies quietly, and she wishes she'd thought to bring her own glass through as she swallows dryly.

"Can I... Can I ask why?"

She whispers, and the brunette looks up wearily with a distraught pull to her mouth.

"Emma..."

"Please? I just... I need to know."

The blonde pleads apologetically, and the Mayor sighs as she nods acceptingly.

"I understand that, dear, I do... I just don't know what to tell you."

"Just the truth... It's okay. I just... I thought you liked me in the same way, and I feel foolish. After what happened, I just assumed-"

"-Emma. I like you. I like you in every possible way... But the truth? The truth is that I had believed at first my concerns were all for you. I worried about your age and your state of mind, amongst other things... But, Emma, the truth is that it's myself that I worry about. I worry about what I might do to you..."

"I think about that a lot too, but I'm not sure I'd describe my feelings towards those thoughts as 'worried'..."

The blonde jokes quietly, before sighing deeply and raising a brow.

"What are you worried about?"
She prompts gently, and the brunette flashes her an angry glower before her shoulders slump and she rests her jaw in the palm of her hand.

"I worry about the past. I worry about who I am and how little you know about me. You've brought out a side of me that I had forgotten existed, and for that, I am truly grateful to you, Emma, but you don't know how I can be when that light goes out. I have a talent for cruelty, and I fear that sooner or later, it might come out. I've ruined a lot of relationships of various contexts in the past, dear... Ruined them irreparably."

"Regina, everyone has a less pleasant side. I think you're being unnecessarily hard on yourself. I know what that can be like. I mean-"

"-No. All due respect, Emma, but you don't. You don't know the things I've done. What I'm capable of. No one here knows. When you opened up to me before and told me you'd done a terrible thing, I told you then- and I will tell you now- that you didn't. You really didn't. You did what had to be done... I can't say the same about what I've done. I've done awful things, Emma... Awful, horrible things. I've hurt people over and over until they couldn't hurt any more. I need you to take my word on that, dear. The things I've done are not the kind of things I'm prepared to discuss. I can't discuss them. But I need you to trust me when I say that this is not my way of backing out of the situation... I know what you want, Emma, and I want it too. I want you... We should never have done what we did that night, and I'm not saying that because I disliked it, or dislike you... I'm saying that because you were- are- sublime, and this is, therefore, all the more painful...

I've done some terrible things, Emma, but I refuse to risk doing anything like that to you. You're much too important to me to allow that."

The blonde blinks in surprise as the Mayor falls silent; both due to the unexpectedness of the darker woman's response, and because Regina's blunt admission that she's important to her catches her off-guard.

Swallowing, she speaks up hesitantly

"I can't comment on what you've done when you won't tell me... I can only comment on what you've done for me and on what I've seen. You've been good to me, Regina... I'm not afraid of you."

"You would be if you knew the truth."

"I think that's probably a little over-dramatic, I-"

"-No. Forgive me, but you're wrong... And clueless. I've seen the result of what my anger can do. What it's reduced people to. I mean no disrespect, dear, but in all honesty, I don't really care what it is you think. Because it doesn't matter. I refuse to put you in a position where I might hurt you... I've done it many times before, Emma, and I may well do it again... But not to you. Not if I can help it."

"But, what if this time things were different?... What if-"

"-Emma! Please! Don't you see?! Don't you see that's a risk? 'What if' isn't good enough for me! Not when it comes to you."

Regina cries, and she balls her fists angrily as she wishes the blonde would refrain from sitting bent forward the way that she does, as it allows her a generous view of black, satin cups as the latter's sweater and shirt gape open.

Don't make this harder for me. Please. I have always taken what I wanted, and done things to suit myself, and right now, you're what I want, and, oh, dear, the things I would like to do to you...
"You took a risk in coming to find me... You took a risk in bringing me back with you..."

Emma points out.

"Yes, but I didn't know how that would end! With this... I've seen the way it ends. I've seen it over and over again. I have a history of treating others in a way that I would never wish for you to be treated. Only a fool doesn't take heed of their history."

Regina insists morosely, and Emma sighs as she falls back into the sofa defeatedly.

"Well... I guess that's that."

"I'm sorry..."

The brunette repeats quietly, and she means it in more ways than one, as her heart aches but her stomach flutters as she regards the younger woman strewn out- so pretty with her lips painted and her clothes demurely hinting at her slim frame beneath- on the sofa.

"It's okay," Emma sighs, and she sounds a little more sure of herself this time, "I asked for an answer and you gave me one. I'm bummed out, I'm not gonna lie, but I still like you- we're still friends- I'm not pissed off or anything like that, just... Disappointed. In a flattering way, I hope you understand!... And, you know, not that it really matters or anything, but that's not how that saying actually goes."

She smiles wearily, and Regina sips at her wine before adopting an exhausted yet curious smile of her own.

"What saying?"

"The one about history and fools? Maybe you were thinking of something else, but the one I know goes 'those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.' Of course, that's actually commonly misquoted, as Santayana actually said-"

"Say that again..."

"...Those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it?... See, that's the thing, Regina. We all fuck up- some of us worse than others- but it's not a case of heeding history and presuming it's just gonna happen again and again. It's about learning from it and using that knowledge the next time. For example, the next time someone offers me gin, I will say 'no thank you, kind sir or madam, but I believe I shall stick to whisky for-""

But the rest is lost on the brunette as she stares into the void of her wine with wide eyes and ruminates on Emma's words.

What if she's right?... What if... What if it doesn't have to be that way this time?

Looking up, she studies pale curls and good-natured features.

"You would trust that I have learnt enough not to hurt you?"

"I never said I didn't want you to hurt me."

Emma grins, and the Mayor grits her teeth as her sex clenches in response to this teasing reply.

"Emma..."

"What? I imagine you might hurt me! And it's something I imagine with great relish! ... But I also
imagine- and, yes, I also trust- that you'll stop if it's needed... I like you, Regina, but I can hold my own. Things happened the way they did that night because of everything else that had gone on between us, but you and I have both said since that it had nothing to do with a disinclination to explore each other a little less tentatively... You say you've done terrible things? Well, I don't know about that, but I've sure as hell done some stupid stuff that you do know about. And we're still here. Still talking. Still interested in one another... And, you know... I'm not made of glass, okay? I'm not made of glass, and you're not all-powerful. You're a stunning woman, Regina, and I'd be pretty fucking happy to do most things you say... But you're not some inconceivable force. You're not magic. You're just you."

"... Just me..."

The Mayor murmurs quietly, and the blonde bites her lip as she can't quite read the strange depth to the brunette's tone.

"Yes... And that's all I want!"

She insists with greater authority than she truly feels. Still, she speaks with conviction, and she offers Regina a warm smile when the darker woman looks up at her intently; silently lamenting the fact that things haven't gone the way she'd hoped. She understands- she does!- but... Well, Regina just affects her on a pleasantly- frustratingly!- carnal level.

"You have a bold way with words."

The brunette informs her, and Emma shrugs as she has been told this several times before, while wishing the Mayor would stop staring at her as though she might mean to devour her, because, well...

Oh, stop it, Swan!

"I just said what I felt needed to be said."

"And you honestly have no fear in regards to my mentions of what I've done?"

"No... If you'd wanted to discuss things, you'd have elaborated. And... All due respect... I'm not bothered by what you've done with others. Only what you might do to me."

It's a brave move- perhaps foolish- and she knows this. Her words are loaded, and she inflects the last of them to create the guise of a question. She understands that Regina has expressed her concerns and declined her proposition, but she also senses that there has been a shift between them in the last minute or so, and... She plans to make the most of it.

The worst Regina can do is reject her again.

Although, something in the brunette's face- in the darkness of her eyes- suggests that this might not happen...

"Are you baiting me?"

The Mayor breathes, and the blonde licks her lips as- and she knows she might be entirely mistaken, but fate loves a sucker, and oh hell, she doesn't think she is this time!- she is certain that the darker woman's tone is raspy with sex.

"Just saying what I felt needed to be said, Madame Mayor..."
She replies quietly, and the brunette studies her with a slow-growing smile that causes the younger woman to shiver.

"I see."

"I-

"I wasn't finished."

Regina interrupts sternly, and she savours the soft flash of nervousness that dances in green eyes. Eyes that are otherwise begging nothing but 'fuck me' and she's beginning to realise that this is exactly what she plans to do.

Because it's okay.

Emma trusts her to know her limits.

Beckoning the blonde over and experiencing an overwhelming wave of anticipation as she feels more like her former self- but not in that terrible way I feared, I won't let it go that far- she addresses the younger woman huskily.

"You need to learn how to behave, dear."

Understanding glitters in the younger woman's eyes as Emma pushes herself up and offers a small, secretive smile.

"I guess so."

Returning the blonde's pointed look of approval with a small smirk of her own, Regina sits back in her chair and adopts a wider smile that speaks only of sin.

"Come here..."
Chapter 66

Chapter Notes

A/N: Bowchicawowow... I received a bunch of messages regarding this scene/ chapter with comments on what you guys wanted to see and also what you didn't! I've tried to honour as many of them as I could- though some conflicted, so I couldn't give you everything!- and I hope it reads well :)

"Come here..."

The blonde obeys with an intoxicating sense of nervous energy; looking to the Mayor for a hint as to what she should do next- understanding by some unspoken rule that Regina is the one who calls the shots between them now- but she is met only with silence and that devilish smile. Stalking around the darker woman's desk until she stands directly in front of her, she locks eyes with the brunette for just a moment longer, before leaning in to kiss her.

Her kiss is gentle at first, and Regina responds in much the same manner; contemplating the move of pulling the girl down to straddle her lap and deciding against it. She wants more of her. Wants to own this moment and to see just what all of her recent heartache has earned her. Pale fingers slip sweetly into her hair, and she shivers as the blonde licks lightly at her top lip- allowing her entrance immediately- before pushing herself up and claiming dominance of their kiss with one hand disappearing into golden curls and the other finding the younger woman's waist to hold her flush. Emma reciprocates by tilting her hips slightly to press herself against the expensive material of the Mayor's dress, and Regina bites at her bottom lip gently.

"I-"

But the brunette shakes her head when the blonde speaks; not wanting to taint the moment with words. They have spoken enough about the whys and hows of this moment. If Emma tells her 'no' then she will of course- she reminds herself sternly- listen, but otherwise, she doesn't want to hear what the younger woman has to say. Not right now. Because, the blonde has told her many times over the last couple of weeks how she feels, but she needs to see it. Wants to see it. Wants to rid herself of the hateful pent up energy surging through her veins, as it has been a long time since she has craved anything so badly, and to have been told over and over that her wish would be reciprocated should she just take a chance has done quite a job of whetting her appetite.

"Quiet."

She snarls breathlessly into thick, honey-scented hair, and the younger woman flashes her a reproachful look that swiftly becomes a knowing grin. She's testing the blonde, and it seems Emma understands enough to take this new direction without offence. If anything- with the way the blonde nips at her lip so recently released from between the Mayor's teeth- Regina imagines she might find this form of play invigorating for her own reasons.

For herself- for the Queen- this kind of power is of a breed she has sorely missed, but the hand she slips up beneath thin wool is tentative- tender- and the way she crashes her lips back against Emma's is passionate as well as dominant. The younger woman quivers against her, and she hazily recalls the
scenes of her dreams, though they seem much less worrisome now. Remembering the way the blonde had whimpered when she'd teased her in her mind's eye with the riding crop, she digs in her nails experimentally and is rewarded with the real thing.

"You shouldn't let anybody treat you poorly..."

She hisses, although she can tell from the way the younger woman's breath has become shallow and needy that her rougher ministrations have been met with nothing but appreciation.

"I know that. I know that now, but if I let them, it's my choice... And you're not just anybody."

Emma murmurs into her hair, and that old, darker side of her psyche accepts this as a challenge with great relish.

"No. I'm not."

She agrees, before pushing the blonde away with measured force and studying her intently.

Mine.

Comes a possessive and appealing thought, and she smiles as green eyes glitter back at her, bright with anticipation; pupils blown to show only the thinnest rim of green.

"Take off your clothes."

She demands huskily, and Emma raises an eyebrow in surprise. She is intensely aware that what Regina has given her is an order, and the way the brunette studies her with keen, fiery interest only confirms this notion. In some vague way, she understands that she is being tested, but she wonders if perhaps they might have gotten their wires crossed- or if perhaps she just doesn't share the same past experiences as the Mayor- as it seems like a rather curious request. Tame, yet crass. Humbling, yet ordinary.

For Emma, the idea carries its own awkwardness, as she has never been one to find herself all that enamoured with her looks, and this mild apprehension- for it is mild; nothing crippling or debilitating or usually even worth noting- has only grown since carrying a child. She knows she's slim, and she has the luxury of knowing already that Regina likes what she sees, but that faint sense of self-consciousness still exists. That said, it is not the first time she has been asked to strip off for another's amusement, and she merely grins and offers a small shrug of her shoulders that goads 'fine... Is that it?'

Is that it?

Regina reads the question dancing on softly parted lips easily and offers up a smile of her own. Emma's reaction to her request is not the nervous submission she'd anticipated, but she knows better than anyone that the ways of this strange land are queer, and understands that her order might not carry the same weight as it would back home. This realisation has an odd sort of effect on her, as she battles between amusement, excitement, and an altogether more bitter feeling; distaste. The idea that this is not the first time Emma has been asked to perform in such a manner sparks her curiosity sordidly, but with what she has managed to piece together of the younger woman's amorous- though she can think of several less kind words for it- activities in the past, she suffers a simultaneous wave of anger directed towards whichever fine, upstanding young gentleman might have had the nerve to ask such a thing of her girl.

My girl?
Yes. Her girl.

Back in her Castle, the request that one should bear their flesh had been an intimate order, infrequently met with the smirk Emma offers her now. It had been a demand for ownership. For dominance. It hadn't held the same fickle amusement of unimportant, transient fucking she'd sensed back in the bar in Boston. It had meant something. It had been an intimate dance between Master and Servant. To be forced into a state of nakedness by one's better had been one thing, but for it to be asked for? For it to be requested behind closed doors? That had been an act saved only for those whom in their loyalty and obedience might reap reward... After all... Even a cruel Queen had sought to play by the most basic of rules.

What was considered worth having, was paid for.

"Well?"

She demands, regarding Emma impatiently, and the blonde pulls a face as she smiles back with a sense of confusion that is altogether rather more amiable than the Mayor believes her tone warrants.

"Like... Seriously?"

The younger woman grins, before clearing her throat when the brunette simply waits with an expression that suggests she's never been more serious about anything in her life.

"Well, like... Do you want me to just get naked? Or, uh... I mean are you genuinely asking me to strip for you?"

Emma giggles a little nervously as the idea fills her with butterflies in a way it certainly hadn't when assing around in one of many low-rate motels along the New Mexico state line. It had been Neal's idea that time, but he'd simply been running his mouth and she'd called his bluff; laughing hysterically at her companion's poor attempts at providing a soundtrack. Sure, she'd swayed her hips and given a coy look over her shoulder here and there, but by the time she'd been down to her underwear and mismatched socks, she'd been chuckling with such manic self-deprecation, it had been a struggle to stand up.

Somehow... She doesn't foresee Regina laying down a beat and offering her beautifully obscene heckles in a variety of accents.

"I'm asking you to strip."

The Mayor nods- answering the question with no room for doubt- and Emma swallows as the brunette reclaims her seat behind the desk.

Slim legs cross in a slow, sensual manner beneath rich fabric, and scarlet lips smirk damningly.

"I trust you'll do as you're told?"

She asks silkily, and she suppresses an altogether more affectionate smile as she catches a flicker of rebellion in response to her insinuation, before Emma raises her jaw and plays along; her eyes conveying once more that she understands that this is a test- a game- and that she's more than willing to play.

"I imagine you might make me do so."

She replies huskily, and the brunette notes a faint tinge of shyness and inexperience in the younger woman's retort, but she pays this no mind. It's not the way any of the girls back in her castle had ever
spoken to her, but she finds she relishes the blonde's take on her role.

Eyes glittering feverishly, the Mayor offers a small nod, and the younger woman lowers her gaze as she plucks at the hem of her sweater and pulls it off slowly. She imagines this would all probably be a whole lot sexier if she'd thought to wear something with buttons or lacing- yes, Swan, it's such a shame you didn't rock up in one of your many corsets and ribboned leather pants!- but there is still something deliciously sinful in being observed as she stands with discarded wool in one hand, and the thin cotton of her tank top rouchéd up to reveal the pale flesh of her midriff.

She glances back up at Regina who gives her an impatient nod to continue, before shucking up her top and allowing both white cotton and green wool to fall to the floor.

She is acutely aware of the fact her skin feels tight and freckled with goosebumps that have little to do with the temperature of the room.

Dropping her hands to the catch at the front of her slacks, she stills when Regina addresses her firmly "No. First your bra."

The brunette orders, and she wets her lips as Emma regards her curiously and obeys. Leaning back in her chair- using the arm rests comfortably in this world's version of her throne- she catches the plump petal of her lower lip between her teeth as she watches Emma think twice about pulling scant satin from her slight frame; green eyes flashing up to meet her own, before the blonde slowly slips down one narrow strap and then the other. It is a coy move, but the Mayor doesn't miss the way the younger woman lowers her lashes shyly as she allows satin cups to fall to the floor, and she swallows with a growing sense of lust.

"You're nervous. Here... Take a sip."

She points to her wine, dimly aware that she wouldn't have believed she'd see the day where she'd be encouraging the girl to drink. Still, her glass is only half full, and she knows Emma hasn't finished off more than one of her own tonight... Not that her request has anything to do with alcohol in the first place.

No.

What it has to do with is the image the younger woman creates as she stalks obediently over to the desk with her tailored pants resting delicately low at her hips, and her long hair serving to tease as it tumbles over bare flesh. Emma takes the glass from the Mayor and lifts it to her lips with tentative poise, before placing it down on the desk and licking the residue of the wine from her lips.

She does so slowly, and Regina doesn't believe for a second that this is any sort of accident.

Dusky lashes shroud cool glass, and after seeming to give the act a moment's thought, Emma pulls a hand through her messy curls with peculiar grace. It is a fluid movement- habitual- and it serves quite nicely to keep golden tresses from obscuring the darker woman's view.

"Now the pants?"

She asks, and the Mayor responds with a sadistic breath of laughter as she catches a small- but easily recognised- hint of sass in the younger woman's voice.

What do you think, Princess...?

"Is that not what I asked?"
She challenges, and the impish glimmer that has taken up residence in pretty, green eyes this last week retreats shyly as Emma seems to think on this, before nodding with swiftly reclaimed compliance.

Regina smirks.

*The girl is a novice... But she's good.*

Pale fingers work to free the clasp of modest slacks, and the blonde lowers the zipper slowly before displaying her palms in a curiously elegant manner and allowing the dark material to ghost down her legs. Stepping out of the bundled fabric, she adopts a strangely defiant stance that suits the Mayor just fine. She likes that the girl has fire.

She likes *everything* about what's on offer.

"Why the delay?"

She purrs; negating to let Emma in on her appreciative thoughts as she points to the remaining scrap of fabric obscuring pale limbs, and the blonde frowns as she looks down at the plain black swatch of her underwear. The fabric rides high up her thighs and is pulled taut across peaked hipbones in a most pleasuring manner, and the brunette muses to herself that the way this allows a narrow line of shadow to fall across smooth flesh to tease at the prize beneath makes it hard to sit back and allow the younger woman to complete the task that has been asked of her.

Makes it hard not to command that the blonde come to her so that she might dip her fingers into that shadowed promise and feel for herself whether this little game is effecting Emma as deliciously as it is effecting herself.

Keeping her composure, she simply nods once more, and the younger woman sighs a little uncomfortably but drags scant cotton slowly down until it flutters around her ankles.

"Okay?"

The blonde growls, and it is such an unexpected response to the situation in the Mayor's eyes that the darker woman laughs richly and shakes her head with lust-tainted affection.

"Yes, Miss Swan, okay."

She assures silkily, and she grazes her bottom lip with her teeth as she watches awkwardness evolve into the amiable, somehow lazy good humour she has come to associate with the girl.

As if on cue, Emma shrugs with a small grin; still not entirely sure what to think about her little striptease. She is fairly sure that it has gone down favourably as Regina regards her from beneath hooded lids, and this thought serves to make her stomach ache in a purely pleasurable way. She is unsure as to the etiquette of these kinds of things, but she refrains from looking down to see if the wetness she can feel is obvious.

*After all, if it isn't now, it soon will be.*

This thought has her breaking into a sly grin, which Regina observes curiously; taking great interest in Emma's reactions to their current situation. She imagines that the powerful vibe of dominance she'd cast over the younger woman is slowly wearing off, and moves in for another attack before the blonde can fool herself into believing that this is all she's got.

"Very nice..."
She breathes, as she allows her gaze to wander shamelessly, licking her lips with anticipation when her open perversion quells the mischievous expression that has recently found sharp features. The younger woman's impish grin falls in favour of a delicate blush, and Emma lowers her eyes as she bites her own lip shyly.

The resultant look is one Regina finds exceptionally pleasing, and she finds herself slightly breathless when she conveys her next order.

"Come here."

Despite the thick tension between them, the younger woman doesn't need telling twice, and she strives to move with grace rather than to dart over to the Mayor as she would like to. Her reasoning for such behaviour sits oddly in her chest, as she finds that it is a desire born mostly out of lust, but also from a much more troubling sense of comfort she finds when close to the brunette. It is still somewhat of a foreign thought to her, and one she swiftly works to banish so that she can focus on the tactile neediness shared between them.

"Such a pretty thing..."

Regina murmurs as she reaches out a hand to brush against soft skin as Emma stands in front of her obediently, and the younger woman cocks her head as there is something strange in the way the brunette says these words. She sounds like herself- like Regina- but also as though those words might belong to somebody else. Some other form of Storybrooke's ravishing Mayor. Some darker version.

Oh, enough with the crazy, Swan!

Smiling down tentatively, she closes her eyes with an audible intake of breath as Regina caresses her side and leans in to graze her teeth against the sharp peak of her hipbone; closing scarlet lips over pale flesh and applying just a little pressure while continuing to stroke soft skin lightly.

"Fuck... Regina..."

Emma growls- slipping her fingers into dark hair- and the brunette releases her gently; her breath playing softly over the wet crescent left by her teeth and turning the flesh there instantly cold.

"On your knees."

She commands, and the blonde raises a brow in surprise, and wonders once more if the Mayor is being serious. She's almost certain that Regina means for her to obey her husky request, but it is not something that has ever been demanded of her before. It is a position she has taken of her own accord and in the heat of the moment, but to be told to submit in such a fashion is new to her.

She does as she's told a little sheepishly; feeling slightly foolish, but not really caring when she thinks about the bigger picture. She had been telling the truth when stating she would like Regina to have her way with her, but there is still the question of fulfilling her role that she hadn't considered, and while it had all been very well imagining such things in her head... The disconcerting fact of the matter is that she's still just her- just Emma- and the air in the Mayor's study is electric, and her blood thums maddeningly, and she just wants to play on the same level as the brunette is managing to uphold without even seeming to try.

This is fantasy turned flesh, and she just hopes she's holding up her side of the bargain.

Looking up at the Mayor, she finds this a little hard to believe, as elegant features tilt down to study her; dark tresses perfectly styled and begging to be touched, lips full and painted that delicious sinful
scarlet, and soulful eyes glittering with beauty. She ponders uncomfortably on the fact that she
doesn't quite get why Regina chose to reciprocate her affection; not seeing how she can compare,
and feeling suddenly very much like the scruffy young girl from Boston, from Phoenix, from
Oregon, from Dallas, from Denver, from who the fuck knows where, in bad need of a haircut and a
better diet that she knows herself to be; knelt awkwardly on treated stone, with every imperfection
out to see.

"You're special to me..."

Regina murmurs—shaking the blonde from her thoughts—and the darker woman plays her fingers
through thick curls as she remembers those words from her dream and knows them to be true.

Emma blinks up at her in surprise, before replying softly

"You too, Regina."

And she offers up a smile laced with such open affection that the brunette grits her teeth. That is not
the way any of the girls had ever looked at her when in the position the blonde favours now.

... It's not the way anyone has ever looked at her.

Pulling herself swiftly back under control, she returns Emma's soft smile with a more devious one of
her own and flashes the younger woman her teeth. Leaning forwards, she captures pale lips
possessively while allowing her hand to travel down the taut flesh of the blonde's stomach; pressing
her palm just below her navel and smirking into the younger woman's kiss as the latter tenses and
cocks her hips forward in an open- hopeful- invitation for her to continue south.

"Oh, so bold..."

She whispers teasingly, and Emma murmurs a confused apology as though she is unsure whether or
not this is what is being requested of her, and the brunette laughs lightly. Slipping her hand ever so
slightly lower with cruel promise, she hisses into the younger woman's ear as her own sex clenches
with pent up desire.

"I can't help but feel like you want me to continue... Like you want me to tease you... Play with
you... *Fuck* you..."

"Please, Regina..."

The blonde chokes, and the darker woman turns her head to graze her teeth against the soft skin of
the girl's cheek before pressing a breathless kiss to that same spot.

"Please? Please, *what*? What do you want me to do, Emma? You've told me before, but I do *so* want
to hear you tell me again..."

"Please fuck me..."

The younger woman groans quietly; dimly aware of the fact that it isn't like her to plead in such a
fashion, and yet knowing that she means every note of the desperation in her voice.

"I'm going to-"

Regina confides, relishing the way the blonde clenches her stomach beneath the soft weight of her
hand at these words
"-Oh, yes, dear, I'm going to... I'm going to do it the way I've been wanting to do it ever since you so crudely confessed your wish for me to- how did you put it? - fuck you bent over my 'goddamned' desk?"

"Oh, shit..."

"Hmm?... What's wrong? You're shaking, sweetheart..."

"Regina, come on, please, just-"

"-Just what? Give you what you want? Just like that?"

"... Huh?"

Emma frowns and leans back with a hazy look of confusion, and the Mayor notes with a sense of fascination that the blonde's pupils are so blown out it's as if she's riding the waves of some unknown, fantastical substance.

"Well, dear... If you want something from me... You're going to have to earn it."

She breathes, but she allows just the tiniest hint of a smile when the younger woman's brow furrows further, and the blonde looks up at her nervously.

"What do you... What do you want?"

Emma asks softly, and the brunette suppresses a shiver, as the blonde's tone suggests that she might just give her anything she desires.

Locking her gaze with blown green, she allows the younger woman's question to linger between them as her own breathing has become audible and shallow, before gliding her palms slowly up her thighs to inch her dress up to expose sun-kissed flesh.

"Regina..."

The blonde whispers uncertainly- though her eyes remain trained on the intimate sight exposed- and the brunette raises a brow inquisitively as she leans back in her chair and regards the young woman knelt sweetly before her.

"I don't... I don't..."

But Emma can't quite find the words for what she's trying to say, and so she simply lowers her gaze while biting her lip anxiously.

I don't know what I'm doing!

She looks back up into glittering coals earnestly, and the Mayor urges her quietly but firmly to continue.

"You don't what, Miss Swan?"

"I haven't ever... Ummm..."

"I am aware of this."

Regina states simply, and she watches curiously as the younger woman sits back on her heels with a worried frown.
"Do you not want to?"

She asks quietly.

"... I want to."

Emma whispers; not adding 'very much!' as it flashes hotly through her mind.

Holding the younger woman's gaze intently as she awaits a move on Emma's part, the Mayor feels her haughty mask of superiority soften ever so slightly when the blonde licks her lips nervously and continues to look up at her pleadingly. Leaning forward, Regina takes Emma's hands in her own and offers the younger woman a measured look, before guiding them pointedly to her knees and giving a small squeeze to indicate she wishes for the blonde to take it from here.

"Go on..."

She commands, and Emma flashes her one last look of shy anticipation before pushing slender legs tentatively apart.

"Can you-"

But the brunette lifts her hips before the younger woman can finish her request; swallowing as the blonde drags down her underwear to expose the damning glitter of her excitement. Resting her head against the high back of the chair, she closes her eyes as Emma glides her hands timidly up the smooth expanse of her thighs, before soft curls tickle pleasantly against her skin.

The blonde's attention is almost too gentle at first, but they have each stoked the fire and the Mayor finds herself deliciously sensitive. Allowing the younger woman to experiment and grow bolder, she hisses quiet encouragement to let the girl know where and when her ministrations are best received.

After a while, she no longer does so out of measured kindness, but rather out of necessity; her hands getting lost in golden tangles as she guides the blonde ever more roughly. Closing her fists around handfuls of curls, she let's out a choked cry as the intensity of the evening overwhelms her and she shudders violently beneath the younger woman's deviant tongue.

"Emma..."

She growls the blonde's name- the sound purely predatory, not really a word at all- and pulls the girl up onto her feet; the latter wincing as her knees ache in a sinfully pleasurable way from being knelt before the Mayor on the stone floor. Offering the younger woman a hard kiss- tasting herself on wicked lips- she is overcome by a breed of desire she remembers well, and she dances precariously on the edge of letting it consume her completely.

She forces the blonde round and pushes her roughly down onto the desk in a manner she recognises from her reign and has sorely missed, yet she takes care to cup her hand swiftly over the latter's stomach so as to soften the impact against hard wood. Similarly, as she kicks apart shaking legs, she leans over the younger woman and takes a moment to kiss her shoulder gently, before biting down and plunging her hand into thick curls to keep Emma flush with the desk and at her mercy.

In the end, it's quick. Rough. Wet. It's what they'd both said they'd fantasised about it being; the Mayor fucking the quivering blonde aggressively with the latter panting breathlessly for her to carry on doing just that. Still, Regina finds herself playing her other hand through the younger woman's hair affectionately, and she takes care to enter her at a sweet angle; stimulating her where she's most sensitive, rather than simply taking out what remains of her pent up frustration on the girl.
"Oh fuck..."

Emma states in an almost comically matter-of-fact way, before biting down on the flesh of her inner arm to stifle a scream and the brunette slows her movements respectfully as she feels the younger woman's core muscles spasm tellingly around her fingers.

"Don't bite so hard, dear..."

She warns softly- although she watches sharp teeth close violently over pale skin with great intrigue and represses a shiver- as she caresses the blonde's shoulder gently while drinking in the way the latter twitches and pants beneath her.

"Holy shit..."

The blonde laughs weakly with a sigh, before realising she remains stood stark naked with her legs spread and the town's devastatingly attractive Mayor leant over her dominantly.

"Well, that was new...

She muses with an exhausted smile, and the darker woman pulls at her gently to coax her around to perch on the lip of the desk.

"It was..."

Regina agrees as she stands facing the blonde with the younger woman's cheeks cupped in her palms; studying her raptly.

"And it was okay..."

Emma grins; feeling a little awkward sat on display the way she is, but finding she doesn't much care which tells her more than she feels she can process right now. She simply refers to the fact that, while things had been far more intense than they have ever been between them, she knows they remain on the same level as when the evening began. Closer... But their dynamic hasn't changed. She respects Regina, and she knows the darker woman reciprocates that respect in her own way... Just as she knows this had always been the underlying issue for the brunette, rather than for herself.

"Just okay?!"

Regina scoffs irritably, but her eyes convey an understanding of what has happened between them, and she responds in kind gladly when Emma smiles at her warmly.

"Red hot, and should probably become a regular thing."

The blonde elaborates, and the Mayor rolls her eyes before placing a surprisingly gentle kiss on parted lips.

"Okay."

"Seriously? You're ok with it?"

Emma asks, stunned, and Regina chuckles quietly as she offers the younger woman a pointed look up and down.

"I'm okay with certain aspects, yes... But we see how it goes, understood? Nothing happens in the workplace, and you don't share what's happened between us with anyone- not if you wish for any form of reprise!- and you promise me now, hand on heart, that if for any reason our activities cause
you to begin acting... As you have done in the past... You inform me immediately. That goes both ways, mind you. I was apprehensive of doing anything that might hurt you or ruin what I have worked so hard to build... That apprehension remains. I trust you'll respect that fact?"

"Yeah..."

Emma agrees, scolding herself as her mind wanders dangerously close to the topic of HENRY, and shying away from that impossible hurdle with practiced skill. Tucking her hair behind her ears and shivering slightly, she replies with a little more conviction when she catches a small tug of doubt gracing full lips

"I'm not saying I'm good at always knowing what to do... But I'm promising to try."

She smiles, and Regina laughs fondly as she points out Emma seems to have a better handle on things than she gives herself credit for.

"You did quite a job in convincing me!"

"Oh, yeah, well, that's different."

"How so?"

"I'm very wise when it comes to other people's idiocy."

"Watch yourself, dear..."

The Mayor snaps, before sighing as she glances down at the discarded heap of the younger woman's clothes.

"You should put those back on before you freeze."

She warns, and the blonde smiles as she catches a note of genuine regret in the darker woman's voice. Slipping down from the table and picking up her underwear, she raises a brow as Regina stalks over to one of the love seats that centre the room and takes a voyeur's seat.

"I'm afraid it's a repeat show..."

She jokes as she pulls her underwear and sweater back on.

"It's still an enjoyable one and a good use of what's left of my wine... Have a glass with me before you go?"

The brunette asks lightly; though her heart hammers rapidly in her chest.

This is the part she would never have been caught dead offering to one of her girls back when she could have had everything and anything she wanted...

But it's the part of her relationship with Emma- that comfortable, amiable time spent in each other's company- that she cherishes.

She realises that now.

And, as the blonde nods her enthusiastic acceptance of this offer, the Mayor wonders if maybe she doesn't have more now than she'd ever had back in that other world.
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Emma moves to pick her slacks up from the floor but stills as she catches a regretful sigh escape Regina's lips. Looking up curiously, she offers a small smile and straightens back up; standing in just her sweater and underwear.

"This is probably going to shock you shitless, Regina, but I'm not really the kind of girl that walks around other people's houses half naked."

Raising a brow, the brunette chuckles softly as her eyes glitter fiendishly over the rim of her glass.

"Actually, that does shock me a little. You seem the type."

"I'm flattered."

"Oh, it wasn't a compliment-"

Regina replies airily, and she smirks as Emma responds with a dramatic sigh and roll of her eyes.

"...Though, you do offer a rather compelling argument for allowing such things... That said... Why do you imagine I should wish for you to stalk around my house, clothed or not?"

I was going to get my glass."

Emma shrugs, and the Mayor studies her thoughtfully, before leaning back a little more comfortably into the plush cushions of the sofa.

"Share mine."

She suggests; recalling the way she had fed the pretty, redheaded maid from her cup while the latter had knelt obediently at her feet with a peculiar sense of homesickness. She has no inclination to ask Emma to kneel for her again. The girl is not her maid, and she doesn't believe the blonde would enjoy being asked to do such a thing when not playing her role for carnal release. More importantly, though... She has a feeling that this wouldn't stop Emma obeying her, however much she might begrudge the request.

And that's not what she wants from the younger woman.

Not really.

It's tempting- of course it is!- and familiar in a way she realises she misses so dearly it hurts her heart, but she would much rather have the blonde smile at her the way she does now, then for her to bend to her every whim in order to keep a nervous grasp on what she desires.

I'll make her work for it because we both enjoy that part of the game, but I won't make her work so hard that it ruins any part of this for her.

No, and besides, she believes Emma has qualities she has been generous enough to offer her in return. Not because she's the Queen, and not because she has given any sort of threat or order... Quite the opposite. She has inadvertently allowed the younger woman in, and Emma has offered her both trust and respect in return... Not as Her Majesty... Just as Regina.

"And that's all I want."
Pulling herself from her thoughts, she smiles up at the younger woman who hesitates uncertainly in the centre of the room and holds up her glass in an attempt to coax her over. Returning that comforting expression of warmth with a grin of her own, Emma pads back to the sofa and takes the Mayor's proffered glass. Her instincts tell her to take a seat opposite Regina so that they might chat and finish the evening with comfortable pleasantries as the darker woman clearly wishes to do.

Taking a leap of faith and reading what she is almost certain Regina would rather, she settles down tentatively on the love seat beside the brunette; her bare knees brushing against the Mayor's as they sit companionably close to one another.

Studying Regina as she sips slowly at the wine, Emma returns the darker woman's intense gaze and drinks in tousled hair and the faded ghost of red lipstick.

"Thank you."

She breathes quietly as she hands the Mayor the glass, and Regina regards her unblinkingly for what feels like a long while, before responding lightly

"Yes, well, it just saves you getting up."

Laughing, Emma shakes her head as she knows full well the brunette knows that hadn't been what she was referring to, and she leans over without even thinking about it and kisses the darker woman fondly.

Returning that soft kiss and deepening it passionately, Regina holds what remains of the wine out carefully to the side, and runs her other hand gently up the bare flesh of the blonde's thigh. Laughing quietly as the younger woman spreads her legs slightly in invitation, she scolds the girl with affectionate disbelief.

"Really, dear? So soon?"

Emma simply shrugs to avoid having to answer and pulls the Mayor's lips back to her own while the darker woman slips her hand coyly between slender thighs to tease lightly over the blonde's underwear. She finds soft cotton to be damp but doesn't know if this is due to their interactions before or after the main event... Nor does she care particularly. She simply caresses and strokes; keeping her attention light and casual rather than instigating any sort of second round.

It's just... Nice.

Nice to kiss the younger woman in a tender and exploratory way, while feeling deliciously satisfied herself. Nice to occasionally glance down to see the odd twitch or tensing of a pale thigh, but otherwise Emma has simply moved in closer to her and sits with one leg loosely draped over her own while slender fingers remain lost in her hair.

Nice... And so different from how these things usually end.

Nice not to be met with that somewhat confused, troubled look offered to her by Graham whenever the Sheriff goes about reclaiming his clothes. She knows that she is the one to blame for this, but it still has always served to dampen her satisfaction. She is relieved not to be met by that look from Emma.

Or worse... The wince of pain she remembers from back home.

Nice to play her fingers sweetly over soft lingerie- almost certainly damper now then when Emma had first taken up her place on the sofa- while enjoying the strangely affectionate way the blonde
kisses her; stopping every now and then to simply brush pale lips against her own while playing with her hair in a way that feels surprisingly pleasurable. Nice to share this moment, rather than watch-expressionless- as any blood gets wiped away and any injuries are shakily dressed.

Nice to-

"Oh..."

She sighs reluctantly as needy wails travel down to them from upstairs, and she furrows her brow-eyes clenched shut and mouth pressed to Emma's- as she feels the younger woman tense rigidly against her.

"Emma..."

She whispers- shaking her head as the blonde begins to move away from her with a telling nervousness rippling through slim limbs- and she removes her hand from the younger woman's hidden sex to wrap her arm tightly around the latter's slim waist; holding her against her fiercely in an entirely protective way, before releasing her and addressing the matter quietly.

"Go. We both know you need to, and we both know you want to."

The blonde doesn't need telling twice; pushing herself from the sofa a little clumsily in her haste, and fumbling with her slacks while her long hair hangs down to cover her face.

"But, Emma... One moment if you please."

Regina halts her as she shakes out long curls and makes a breathless, strained attempt at a nonchalant farewell.

"Sure."

The younger woman shrugs as if entirely non-plussed by this request, and the brunette smiles at her gently as she understands in an odd sort of way that she made the right decision tonight. As she understands that the blonde isn't entirely foolish in her ways- that she's not made of glass- but rather just unequivocally protective of her own emotions and mind in a way that the darker woman is slowly beginning to understand has been necessary as well as sometimes damaging.

"You told me you didn't wish to discuss this part yet... In all honesty, it's not something I wish to get into either, but we have to... I won't force you to talk about Henry until you're ready, but, remember what I said to you, dear; what I said about finding yourself in a dark place because of your time spent with me? That's all-encompassing. That includes feeling the way you feel now."

"I don't-"

"-The way I can see written quite clearly across your face... I don't want to talk about it either, Emma, but I will when you come and tell me that you can handle it... I'm not telling you that I'm willing to wait until you feel happy discussing such things. I care about you a great deal, but I am not willing to extend you that luxury. But I will wait until you are able to talk about such things... That's not a challenge. That's not me goading you, saying that you can't do something in an attempt to coax you into proving me wrong. It's an observation... I don't believe you're there; I believe you threw yourself into doing... This... And that gave you an excuse not to think about the rest... But you do need to talk about it if you want to stay here in Storybrooke... As do I."

The Mayor cringes as this last part causes the blonde to baulk visibly, and she shakes her head while trying to keep her thoughts intact over the wailing from above.
"Don't look at me like that. I told you before that I would hate to see you gone from this place. That wasn't a lie. I'm not conflicted over whether or not I want you around, Miss Swan, so don't you dare allow yourself to begin fretting that this is the case! I simply need to come up with some sort of solution as to what to do since you are going to be around."

"...Regina, you need to go upstairs. Please. Make him stop. Please make him stop doing that."

Emma pleads nervously, and the brunette nods as she pushes herself up from the sofa and walks towards the door; stopping in front of the younger woman who stands with her hand resting on the handle.

"I'm going, dear, of course, I am. As are you. I believe you drove here?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I think you might still be within the legal limit, but I'm going to request you walk back anyway. If you want to call Ruby and-"

"It's fine. I think walking might be a good idea."

"So do I... Tonight was... Tonight was exquisite, Miss Swan. Thank you... For everything."

"I think that should be the other way round, I mean, I should be thanking you, I-"

"Oh, you should, and you have, and you will."

Regina smirks with pointed intent and the blonde's nervous grimace softens slightly as she allows a small, hopeful smile of her own.

"But I do need to thank you, Emma. You might not even know what it is I'm thanking you for, but that's alright, because I do. Now go home and take a shower, or at least change out of your underwear; that can't be comfortable."

She professes silkily; dark eyes glittering knowingly while pale cheeks pinken delicately.

"It's not so bad."

Emma challenges quietly, and the brunette chuckles with sordid delight before a fresh series of wails has her adopting a kinder expression as she watches green eyes flash nervously up at the ceiling.

"It's ok, he'll just be wanting his bottle. It's okay; he's okay, dear... He has been ever since he was put in my care-"

She assures, and she finds she is explicitly careful to make it clear she means her words as a form of comfort rather than spite.

"Now go on. Go home and change... Though into what, I don't know. Your delicates all seemed rather worse for wear."

"Have you been snooping through my underwear, Madame Mayor?"

Emma teases; a little lamely, but she manages a small grin.

"I've seen enough to form a conclusion."

Regina replies primly, before smirking as she guides the younger woman out into the hall and
towards the front door with the soft weight of her hand resting between her shoulder blades.

"Go see to Cass."

She continues, though Emma has a *strange* suspicion the brunette longs to refer to the tabby by *another* word, but that Madame Mayor can't quite bring herself to stoop to such a level- even in the interests of innuendo- and she laughs quietly at this; returning the darker woman's smile.

"I will."

"And take this... See if you can't prove me *wrong* in my assumptions."

"Huh?"

The younger woman frowns as she accepts the folded bill Regina slips from the pocket of her coat hung by the door.

"The clothes shop by the Station, dear... Go have a little browse in the back."

Looking from Regina to the fifty in her hand, Emma raises a brow and chides with mock horror

"Are you *paying* me for my services, Madame Mayor?"

Matching sarcasm with false disdain, Regina rolls her eyes, before adopting a salacious grin and kissing the younger woman firmly on the lips.

"I'm paying in advance."

She breathes, before letting the blonde go and neatening her hair primly.

"Now go... Goodnight, Miss Swan."

"Night, Regina."
"So? Go on then!"

"Huh?"

Emma asks with with a false expression of confusion, and Ruby groans as she punches the blonde lightly in the arm before hooking her hand through the crook of the younger woman's elbow.

"Stop that, you know exactly what I'm talking about. You went for dinner at Regina's last night and you've not said a word about it!"

The brunette whines; having tried several times over breakfast to pick the younger woman's brains on the matter, only to be suspiciously snubbed time and again as Emma had leant past her to strike up a conversation with some of the regulars in an entirely uncharacteristic fashion.

"Maybe that was by choice."

Emma suggests wisely, and the brunette shakes her impressive mane- streaked with red and looking especially girlish pulled up into high pigtails- and combats irritably

"Oh come on! You can't go offering me such tempting bait and not give me some sort of reward!"

"No?"

The younger woman grins; inwardly feeling she'd spent the last couple of weeks in just such a predicament until last night, when Regina had rewarded her quite pleasantly indeed, oh yes she had... She-

"-Stop smirking! Tell me what happened! Come on, I'm dying here!"

"We had dinner."

Emma shrugs, before sighing when Ruby pulls at her arm and pleads childishly

"And?!"

"And, Regina's a good cook. We drank, we spoke, it was very nice."

She elaborates vaguely, before shaking her head a little more firmly when the Waitress persists with her begging.

"Ruby, stop, please... I had a good time- a great time- but I'm really not one for gossip, and I wouldn't feel comfortable telling you anything- and that's not saying anything happened!- behind Regina's back. I've never been someone to like indulging in that kind of crap- though it would have made my early teens a hell of a lot more pleasant, I'd imagine- and don't plan on starting now."

"You don't gossip?! What happened to 'oh there was this girl in the basketball court who fucking fingered me with no warn-'""

"-Ruby!"

The blonde snaps, and the brunette sighs as she studies her friend out of the corner of her eye- the latter adopting a moody glower- before reaching over to brush several stray hairs from the younger
woman's cheek.

"I'm sorry, Emma, I didn't mean that. I just... Things are so boring here all the time. I feel like you're the only person I know that seems to actually live any sort of life!"

"You go out all the time!"

"To the Rabbit. Always. With the same people and we talk about the same things and drink the same drinks... I just... You coming here really made me see it, you know? And I feel kind of bad for thinking that given what you've told me about your life before now and some of the stuff that's happened to you, it's just... You also live life like it's an adventure... I want that. I want to have something to talk about that isn't fried foods. I want to go somewhere where I don't know everyone. I want to talk to guys that aren't just Billy. I'm young, and I'm hot, and I should be out doing stuff!"

Emma chuckles at this last part and shrugs away any remnants of her irritation; by now having learnt she has to accept that Ruby doesn't always work on the same wavelength as she does. The waitress is fun, flirty and open, and those are all things that the blonde likes about her, even if she feels she doesn't quite share those same characteristics.

"There must be other guys you know apart from Billy? And I thought you liked him, anyway? So what if you guys talk all the time? Surely that's good?"

"I guess... But, I just want a change, you know? Hell, even you're more interesting than he is a lot of the time."

"Oh?"

Emma asks in surprise, trying to gauge the context of the waitress's remark, but Ruby puts her out of her misery swiftly; characteristically honest and seemingly without shame.

"Well, just like... I dunno. I'm frustrated and I'm bored, and knowing what you're into and stuff it's just interesting, I guess... Sometimes I just get a bit curious."

She shrugs, and Emma gives a burlesque shake of her head before offering Ruby a smile.

"Oh jeez, don't put that on me!"

"What? You're pretty, and I need excitement!"

"Ruby, I am so not your type!"

"Well, you're not exactly the kind of girl the Mayor would usually hang out with either."

"That's-"

"-Probably why I'm jealous."

"...Jealous?"

The blonde croaks with something akin to shock and the waitress throws back her head and laughs.

"Oh, don't worry! Nothing like what you're thinking! I just... Your whole thing with Regina seems kind of fun and exciting, and I guess I just want a little piece of that for myself. Sure, that's a little selfish, but it is what it is... And you're a hell of a lot less terrifying that the Mayor is... And you're kind of cute..."
"Oh god-

Emma groans, but she grins amiably and leans against a bench overlooking the Square as the waitress bends to tighten a loose shoelace,

"-You clearly weren't around for most of the whole 'thing' with Regina and I, then... I'd describe it many ways, but 'fun and exciting' rank fairly low down!... But, look, why don't we go somewhere tomorrow after we finish up serving breakfast? We could go over to Portland; it's not too far. It'll be a change of scenery, and you can get rid of whatever pent up urges you have, and I can go find a McDonalds."

"A what?"

"... Seriously?"

"What or who is that?"

"He had a farm... And a lot of gloriously salty products that probably never touched a field or cow in their lifetime."

"So wait, are you saying that's a good thing?"

"... You have so much to learn."

The blonde informs Ruby soberly, and the brunette grins and takes a seat on the bench.

"You gonna school me, Swan?"

"And then some."

Emma winks, before glancing up at the awning of the little shop at the end of the street.

"Actually, I do have something I need to do... But yeah, if you want to head out tomorrow, I don't mind driving, and we can go walk around the city."

She smiles, thinking to herself that it might be nice to get away for a couple of hours to where life seems just a little more, well, normal, and waves a curt farewell to Ruby who grins and says she'll take her up on that promise.

"Can I help you?"

"Oh... Uh... That's okay."

Emma assures the beady-eyed shop clerk that greets her as she walks in. Selecting a nondescript shirt from a rail near the door, she meanders towards the back of the store to try and decipher Regina's request when the brunette had handed her the crisp fifty now folded in the back pocket of her jeans.

It doesn't take long.

Raising a brow as she drinks in delicate lace and scant satin hidden behind modest clothes, she leans back surreptitiously to check that the woman behind the counter remains engrossed in peering distrustfully out the window before stepping in for a closer look.

"Madame Mayor!"
She scolds beneath her breath, before clearing her throat when she mistakes a mannequin for another shopper. Realising her error, she gives the cloth-headed impostor a good glimpse of her middle finger before plucking at delicate lace with her bottom lip caught between her teeth.

In all honesty, she had been unsure what she might come across here; fairly certain from the way the Mayor's eyes had sparkled that it might be something along these lines, but this is still entirely new territory so far as she's concerned. True, she had taken a moment to admire the delicacy of Regina's silken lingerie when they had first seen one another in a state of undress- oh, please, what with your talent of fucking up, she'd seen plenty more of you before that!- but it is not something she's ever indulged in. For one, nice underwear had never seemed like a good reason to spend what little money she'd had, for another... Well... She is still young, and all past activities aside, there is something alluringly, well, adult in purchasing an ensemble of the likes she studies now.

This is a big step. An odd step, but a big step.

She's offered up what she has in order to get what she wants plenty of times before, but she's always offered it plain. Always happy to give to the lowest bidder so long as something was in it for her. Nothing fancy. Nothing special. Just another form of currency.

The lace she runs her finger over costs more than most of the clothes she'd owned before coming here, and it feels sublime to her touch. She imagines it might look sublime also, but- more importantly- it looks expensive. It looks desirable. It looks... Well, it looks like it's worth something.

"Hmm."

The thought appeals to her in a way that makes her blush a little; partly because the idea is sinfully risqué, but partly because it's quite far removed from what she's used to. Seeing pretty, skimpy, sexy outfits on models and on the TV is one thing, but wearing them... She shakes her head and quickly moves on from one of the delicate bras her fingers have found.

Save that for a woman with something a little more impressive up top...

She scolds herself as her gaze lingers on a whole lot of lace that looks as though it might somehow cover very little.

Pondering sheer black instead, she sighs as she muses that this would be a whole lot easier if she had a better idea of the Mayor's tastes.

Not that she isn't certain Regina wants to see what she comes back with of her own choosing.

Else the darker woman would have spent the fifty herself... A thought that arouses the blonde somewhat, and she grins to herself.

"Could have at least hinted at what colour she likes..."

She grumbles, but she supposes there's no use moaning about her delectable position. Deciding to go with what she does know, she opts for black. She's pale, and so trusts the contrast will be shocking if nothing else. Avoiding the flouncier options and those that seem like they might be for a more buxom shape, she finally picks out a set that meets her approval.

Simply cut panties, yet deliciously sheer, with a small V of black lace at the back.

A bra with a similarly sheer back and full cup, with lace creeping up the insides to hide just enough.
Black straps.
Simple.
Elegant.
Unequivocally sexual.

Recalling the wetness the Mayor had achieved by playing her fingers over the scant cotton of her underwear before, she pictures the same effect and how it might look beneath translucent fabric and shivers, before snatching bra and panties from the shelf and stalking briskly over to the counter with scarlet flushed cheeks.

"Your bag."

"Huh?"

"Something's about to fall out of your bag."

Gold points out; hiding a smirk as he catches up with Emma as she hastily goes about pushing the peek of a black lace back into her bag.

"Thanks."

She offers a little gruffly, and the pawnbroker smiles as he matches the girl's pace with a little difficulty.

"Mind if I walk with you?"

"Uh, no... Course not. It's Mr Gold, right?"

"That's right, dearie, and you, I recollect, are the young Miss Swan... Emma?"

"... Yeah."
Chapter 69

Clearing her throat as the pawnbroker studies her shrewdly, Emma offers a tight smile and quickens her pace in the hopes of ditching her curious companion as soon as possible.

"Regina said you're also kind of a landlord around here...?"

She broaches; striving to strike up some form of conversation. The little man nods as his dark eyes remain fixed on sharp features- the Saviour's face so similar in shape to Snow's, but her complexion more reminiscent of Charming's- and the long, golden locks he wouldn't have anticipated. The girl is every bit as beautiful as the stories had proclaimed her mother to be, and her fair curls please him as they both suit and juxtapose what he knows of her inner self so far.

"I am. Public relations are the Mayor's game- Regina does so like to serve as the face of things, and quite the attractive face she provides- but if one were to get down to the truth of the matter, I suppose you could say that I own this town."

He grins, and it is an expression Emma hopes he won't offer her again; gold tooth gleaming odiously in the sunlight and drawing attention to the crooked tombstones lining his jaw. The one thing she has always been particular about during her transient life before now has been her teeth; having spent sufficient time with others victim to enough dirty habits and simple neglect to know the high price to pay for forgoing such things. Neal had reaffirmed this notion when they had first begun travelling the tarmac arteries of the cities together; complaining frequently of excruciating toothache and envying her for her stringency on keeping her own in good condition.

"Keep your teeth in check and stay hydrated."

Words of wisdom imparted unto her by Lazy Eve at fifteen and taken very much to heart. The old woman who'd spoken them had been dead not a month after sharing her lacklustre life hacks, but she had died with a full set of working yellowing-whites and the ashen colour to her flesh had been nothing to do with lack of fluids... Quite the opposite.

"You must be pretty important, then."

Emma comments now, and her queer companion flashes her a much larger shark-like grin as he laughs appreciatively. She imagines the best comparison to that noise would be the jangle of broken shards of glass in an old tin can and smiles tentatively in response. Gold shakes his head in his mirth and continues jovially

"Oh, I suppose you could say that... But I imagine, princess, that I have finally met my match on that count. I imagine you might prove to be very important yourself, young Emma... In time."

"Hardly-"

The blonde shrugs uncomfortably; the pet name 'princess' one of her all-time least favourites, and seeming inexplicably all the more loathsome when uttered from the leathery lips of the pawnbroker.

"I don't even know what half the positions in that big town charter book Regina has are! I'm not really an 'important' kind of person, I guess. That stuff's usually for squares, anyway."

"I see. Well, if that were true, then I agree; you are not a square. I imagine you have a vast number of sides to you, Emma Swan."
"Uh, sure, but I meant more like-"

"If, by 'square', you were referring to positions of authority, however; you don't need a badge or a suit to be important, dearie... Although, I imagine you have little time for those in authority... Especially those wearing a badge."

"Oh yeah? And what makes you say that?"

"Authority has mistreated you. Oh, not in the way they sometimes show in those terrible old movies- you strike me more as a kicked puppy than a beaten whelp- but not all misuse of power must be so ghastly and perverse as using one's hands when they oughtn't, and putting vile things up where they have no business being put-"

"What did you-"

"Oh, no, dearie, nothing so crass. You wouldn't stand for it; that much is in your nature. But you were told what to do and when to do it, which, if I may say, is a rather cruel punishment for one never before shown such strict attention out of kindness... You never did tell them, did you, Emma? You never did plead that it wasn't your fault in the first place. You should never have been in that place. You knew it, and so did they; you're simply not the type."

"Who told you?"

The blonde hisses, and Gold marvels at the predatory pull to her lips and the iciness of her tone. He knows- having kept an eye on things as has always been his way- that the girl has proven to be vulnerable whilst here in town in a way that might beg the question of whether or not she possesses the power prophecy has dictated, but there is a brittleness to her, and a hardness that shines through glaringly now as she matches his cool gaze and comes to a stop.

He wonders briefly if she plans to take a swing at him.

That would be something indeed.

The young heroine before her prime splitting the lip and spilling the blood of the Dark One; an ancient power which even he himself struggles to understand.

"Oh dear, have I upset you?"

He enquires silkily, and the blonde studies him coldly as she runs the sharp point of her tongue over her teeth.

"Who told you?"

She repeats, and the little man cocks his head as though thinking the matter over.

"Well, there are only a few people that know about such things, am I right in thinking? I mean, I am certain your little friend from the Diner might know some of these things- perhaps even her grandmother- but I have little business down at Granny's, as you well know by now. So... Well... That really just leaves-"

"No."

"Madame Mayor."

"You're a liar."
The blonde growls and Gold smiles pleasantly as he shrugs to show his indifference.

"How else would I know about such things?"

He points out simply, before finding himself intrigued when Emma hisses

"She'd never tell you anything like that... You're lying."

With such conviction, and such anger, that he knows the younger woman believes every word that leaves her mouth.

Curious.

Since when has Her Majesty/Madame Mayor/Regina ever instilled such loyalty? Such belief? What is she planning with you, dearie? And why, pray tell, are you still here?

He has little clue, but it's fascinating to say the least. It has not gone unnoticed to him that the brunette seems to spend an inordinate amount of time with the girl, nor that she seems to actually enjoy her companionship, which— all things considered— raises more questions than it answers.

Regina seems to have taken a liking to the girl.

To Emma.

To the Saviour.

And the good, the light, the hope seems adamant to refuse to believe that the woman behind every miserable aspect of her sorry life might betray her.

Refuses to entertain the very idea that the Evil Queen would stoop to sharing a few, simple words out of turn.

Fascinating.

But in no way helpful to him.

No.

He has yet to figure out how things might work given the premature arrival of the Saviour to their little town.

She was supposed to come to them when she was twenty-eight, it had been told to him that it would be so, and the fact that she is ten years early is most perplexing. He has his own uses for the Saviour who will one day break the curse set upon their little town, but whether or not she can be broken in early is another thing.

For now, he is stuck with having to simply test the waters.

Something which has become a whole lot more interesting since about forty minutes ago, when he’d overheard the waitress telling the cretin boy from the garage that she and the blonde might be heading off on a little trip.

A little trip out of town.

Let's just see how that goes...
Smiling at Emma as she stands facing him seething angrily, he asks her silkily

"Why would I lie?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything about you. All I know is that Regina wouldn't do something like that. She'd not tell you that stuff."

Fascinating...

"Oh? Well, then-

"And, I don't know how you did come about that information, but I would suggest you keep it to yourself. Because if you ever- ever- ask me about that shit again... I don't care who you are or whether you're important, I will punch your fucking lights out."

"Oh ho!"

He laughs giddily; tickled by the venomous bite of his creation.

"Don't test me."

Emma warns, and he holds up his palms placatingly and smiles.

"I wouldn't dream of it, and I see that you are in no mood for company at present. I will ask you this though, Emma... You say you refuse to believe Regina would share your private business. Does the Mayor not strike you as a little odd, though? Come to think of it... This whole town? Doesn't her hold on the place not bring certain things to question? Your friend Ruby, for example... Her answers to your queries about this place have all been a little vague, have they not?"

"I-"

"-I suggest, Emma, that you muse upon that notion a little... Enjoy your trip tomorrow."

"How did you-"

"-Oh, come now. I've already explained... This is my town. I make it my duty to investigate when someone enters... And when someone leaves... Good day, Miss Swan."

"Uh... Yeah... Bye..."

The blonde mutters, watching the curious little man limp away, before snarling after behind his back

"Fuck you, asshole."

"Is everything alright?"

Regina asks with a frown as she sits across from Emma on the love seats in her study. She had been a little surprised to see the blonde but inwardly rather pleased, and had excused herself to answer the door when an anticipated knock had come on the dot at three thirty and sent Graham away with a shrug of her shoulders. Stalking back into the study and answering Emma's inquisitive look with a smile of 'no one important, dear' she had taken up her seat and poured them each a glass of iced tea.

Conversation since has been light and easy- something she is both surprised and relieved by- but there is something troubling in the younger woman's expression that she doesn't like.
"Yeah, of course, it is."

Emma replies dutifully, before sighing and elaborating uncomfortably

"Mr Gold came and spoke to me."

"Did he?"

Regina enquires lightly, but her heart hammers in her chest, and she grips her glass so tightly she's in danger of shattering it.

"Yeah. He just kind of... I dunno... I guess he just threw me off a bit."

"Is that so?... What did he say to you, Emma?"

She asks tentatively, and the blonde frowns as she stares into her glass, before looking up and taking a moment to share the Mayor's intent gaze before breaking into a smile.

"Nothing I really give a shit about, to be totally honest."

Chuckling, Regina offers up a stern glance in response to the younger woman's language, but it is simply an act as she wouldn't rather Emma had answered any other way.

"Careful, dear."

She warns amiably, before taking a sip from her glass and leaning back against plush cushions.

"What did you want to see me for anyway?"

"I wanted to know if you were around for dinner?"

"So soon? Why, my dear, one might think you were a little desperate..."

She teases, laughing wickedly at the look of poison this suggestion garners her, before assuring softly "It's intoxicating when one gets a taste for a good thing."

"Something like that."

Emma agrees gruffly; shrugging to prove that she absolutely isn't desperate, and Regina smirks as she swirls the ice in her glass.

"I see... Well, I suppose I could clear some space in my diary."

"I think you'll be glad that you did."

The blonde challenges bravely, and the Mayor raises a shapely brow, before continuing smugly "Is that so?... Well, I myself can't help but feel as though you're simply wanting to be fed."

She teases, and Emma rolls her eyes with a grin as she assures

"That is so not why I'm asking!"

"No? So you're going to cook, then?"

Regina asks sarcastically, before opening her mouth in surprise when the younger woman replies
smartly

"Fine."
"Need any help?"

"No."

The blonde growls defiantly as she stalks around the kitchen; opening and closing cupboards at random while maintaining a carefully applied superior expression.

"I mean, I could always tell you where things are kept, dear."

Regina elaborates, but she wears a sinful smirk as she watches Emma fumble around with a comically ill-suited air of competence that is somewhat flawed by the occasional expletive muttered beneath her breath.

"I'm fine."

"Suit yourself... So, what culinary delicacy will you be preparing for us tonight, Miss Swan?"

She purrs as the blonde finally locates her pots and pans with a triumphant grin.

"That would ruin the surprise."

"Of what to tell Dr Whale was the cause of my food poisoning, or...?"

"Oh, bite me."

Emma huffs, but she glances up with a quick flash of her teeth, and the Mayor imagines that brief, heated look might have a lot to do with the younger woman conveying she'd have no qualms should she be taken up on her suggestion.

"Perhaps later, dear."

Regina muses silkily, and she watches with intrigue as the blonde shrugs indifferently while her cheeks blossom pink.

"I'll hold you to that."

Emma retaliates; trying to decide whether or not she can pull off such breezy, coy flirtation and imagining she probably can't. Still, Regina had given her a fairly lengthy up and down when she'd arrived, and their chatter since entering the kitchen has been baited with sexual tension, yet enjoyable. She just really hopes she isn't about to ruin things with her cooking.

_You're an idiot, Swan._

It had been pretty pathetic she supposes, but it had occurred to her on the way back to the Diner earlier today that her rather stubborn proposition to conjure up a dish for the two of them might have been alarmingly forthcoming. True, she has learnt a thing or two about preparing breakfast items since working alongside Ruby, but it's still a good day when she doesn't burn something when left alone in the back.

"Crap."

The word had left her lips in a low whine as she'd headed home, which in turn had sent her into a
gale of quiet laughter which she'd hastened to disguise as a coughing fit when Archie had come strolling past with Pongo on a leash and a look of mild concern. Watching the town's shrink disappear down the road, she had taken her bottom lip between her teeth and begrudgingly accepted the belated realisation that she might need a little help to make good on her promise to the Mayor.

She supposes she could have just come clean and admitted she felt in over her head. After all, Regina would most likely have found this to be rather amusing before showing her a little pity, but...

_That's not the way I roll._

She shrugs as she strives to decipher the complex arrangement of the darker woman's hob. Her first thought this afternoon had been to go and find Ruby to ask if the young waitress might know of any simple yet effective recipes, but the idea of trying to explain why she might need such advice had caused her to shudder. She is fairly sure that if she'd gone to Ruby for help, she'd still be sat at the Diner now waiting for the brunette to finish teasing her.

In the end, she'd found herself jogging up the narrow flight of stairs in the old redbrick building down the block and knocking a little beat out on painted wood.

"Hi."

"Emma! How are you? Come in, come in! What can I do for you?"

"Well..."

And she'd taken up one of the stools in Mary Margaret's kitchen and explained her dilemma. Explained that she was wanting to cook something- leaving out who it might be for- but had little clue where to begin. She had waited awkwardly for the older woman to scoff at her or roll her eyes, but the schoolteacher had simply smiled and pulled down several heavy cookbooks from a shelf by the fridge.

They'd sat together companionably flicking through various options, but when Mary Margaret had offered to let the blonde borrow the book with the most likely recipes, Emma had shaken her head and muttered uncomfortably

"I don't really want to do it with the book... I kind of want to, you know... Pretend like maybe I know what I'm doing a bit..."

And this time Mary Margaret had laughed, but she hadn't done so unkindly, rather with a wink as she'd admitted to knowing exactly what the younger woman might mean. Putting the books away, she'd suggested instead that she simply show Emma how to cook up a staple; confiding that the mushrooms she fetches from the fridge and the steak she jots down on a scrap of paper are her own go-to dish whenever playing host.

"For when people come over?"

"Kind of... But also if I'm entertaining more intimately."

"Like a date?"

"Don't give me that look, I'm trying to help you!"

The schoolteacher had chuckled as green eyes had glittered at her impishly above a shit-eating grin.

"Ok, ok, but now I want to know! Are you seeing someone here in town?"
"No... Well, not really. Every now and then Dr Whale and I make arrangements..."

"Dr Whale?!

"Well, yes, but it never turns out all too well in all honesty."

"So, wait... You're saying you guys have made these "arrangements" more than once, even though they don't go well?"

"Kind of... I don't know. I guess every now and then we just decide to give it another go."

Mary Margaret had sighed with a slightly confused expression, and Emma had frowned- reminded of her conversation with Gold that morning- before lowering her eyes with a shake of her head when the older woman had turned the tables.

"So, who are you cooking for?"

"Oh... No one."

She'd murmured awkwardly, and Mary Margaret had chuckled quietly while jotting down instructions on the sheet of paper in front of her.

"I see."

And she'd left it at that with a knowing smile, and proceeded to explain how to go about sautéing the mushrooms and knowing when to flip the steak, first in a rather general manner, and then going into a little more detail after catching a hint of uncertainty dancing at the corners of the blonde's mouth.

"It's not that I'm stupid... I just-"

"-I don't think you're stupid, Emma."

Mary Margaret had replied sharply, though the younger woman had privately wondered why on earth not, given the rather disastrous repertoire of events between herself and the smiling woman sat beside her. In the end, Mary Margaret had joined her as she'd left to go to the store and had helped her pick out what she'd needed in a way that had succeeded in not making her feel entirely moronic.

"Thank you."

"It's no trouble. I needed to pick up a few things myself."

"Cool, but also, like, well, you know... Thanks for explaining stuff to me. You didn't have to do that."

"Maybe not, but I enjoyed it. You're always welcome to come to me if you need anything, Emma."

A smile, and a deep blush and shrug of skinny shoulders in response, and the schoolteacher had grinned and bid her farewell.

"Good luck, I'm sure you'll do great!"

"That remains to be seen."

Emma murmurs to herself now, as she pulls out the largest of the Mayor's frying pans before returning to her hunt- this time for a chopping board.

"Aren't you at least going to offer me a drink?"
Regina asks as she crosses her legs primly, perched upon an elegant barstool.

"Oh...I didn't-

The blonde looks up at her as though coming to a horrific realisation, and the Mayor softens her expression slightly as she points over to the cabinet behind her guest and appeases gently

"-Behind you, dear, unless you want white wine, which is in the fridge. I merely meant it was part of the role of host, not that you were expected to bring anything."

She means this last part, having been mildly surprised that Emma hadn't given in and called off her proposition at some point during the day, and even more surprised when she'd gone to greet the blonde at the door to find the girl bearing a bag of groceries. When noon had given way to evening and she'd received no text or call from the younger woman begging out of cooking for them, she'd contemplated calling Emma herself to ask if she needed anything specific, but had eventually decided to simply let things play out with the blonde calling the shots.

Emma smiles at her now and momentarily abandons her search in favour of pulling open the cupboard doors and scanning the generous selection hosted within.

"What do you want?"

She asks- her stomach knotting as she scans several varieties of gin- not quite daring to help herself to anything other than what Regina requests.

"Wine with dinner, I should think. Would you recommend red or white with the dish?"

"Uh..."

"Are we eating fish?"

"No."

"Then red... Please."

"Cool."

"The '92 shiraz at the top there will do nicely; it's the one with the blue wax seal."

She elaborates as she watches- amused- while the younger woman deliberates over her intoxicating artillery. Emma shoots her a grateful glance in response, before stretching up onto her toes in an attempt to reach the bottle in question. Regina opens her mouth to explain that the wines are stacked in a pull-out mechanism and can be pulled down to be obtained with ease, before Emma climbs up onto the counter with a peculiar display of grace and kneels up to retrieve the bottle in question.

An unladylike move, but one that has the Mayor raising a brow as she studies the girl intently.

Dark denim has slipped down in this new, knelt position, and she can make out a delicate cross of lace bleeding into tantalisingly sheer midnight, and she both knows that the blonde's underwear isn't anything that had been bought over from Boston, and suddenly understands why Emma had been so keen to see her tonight.

"That is rather sneaky of you, Miss Swan."

She purrs, and Emma freezes with her hand curled around the neck of the bottle as she senses a note of danger in that low, intoxicating tone.
"I'm sorry?"

"Bringing me a present and not giving it to me..."

"Present?"

"Show me."

"Huh?"

Emma frowns as she lowers herself down carefully, before turning to the brunette with the wine in her hand.

"I paid for a show... It seems only fair I be treated to the full performance, not just what I am able to glimpse due to your jeans being ill-fitting."

"Oh!... Well, I was gonna show you later."

Emma grins with sudden understanding, before licking her lips a little nervously when this suggestion is met only by silence and the piercing intensity of dark coals.

"No."

Regina breathes eventually, and the blonde frowns as she had thought the Mayor would want to see her newest purchase. Surely that had been why she'd-

"-You will show me now."

"Uh-"

Emma offers a little uncomfortably- wondering if the brunette means for her to repeat her little office striptease- before Regina quells any doubt as she rises from her seat and taps away slim fingers when the blonde goes to remove her sweater.

"I don't want your clothes all over my kitchen floor, Miss Swan."

"But."

"-Go see to your ensemble in the bathroom. I will pour you a drink. There is a lot to be said in how we present ourselves, dear, and I'm keen to give you another chance."

"Okay..."

Emma frowns; wanting to suggest that she'd quite like Regina to 'present' herself also, but knowing deep down that's not how this works. To be honest, she imagines this understanding has a lot to do with the steep increase in her arousal; always having been one to enjoy striving to please, and finding the brunette's dominant, demanding approach to the subject highly titillating. An old friend- who had occasionally become a little more than that- had once informed her that she might be somewhat of submissive, and she'd met the term with a great deal of offence that had manifested itself as a brief stint of being nothing short of sadistic when engaging in any sort of amorous activity. She'd played the part well- possessing a great deal of anger and very little sympathy- but playing 'bitch' had bored her before too long, and it had been a welcome relief to take a step back when she'd met Neal.

Neal who had called her 'nice'.

A fair enough term, but she supposes a rather unusual thing to say in bed, and she had known what
he'd really meant by it.

Had known, but not known what to do with that information, so had simply chosen to ignore the comment and enjoy herself.

Because for a long time, the idea of being submissive had seemed like a bad thing.

A shame, as there had been something enticing and pleasurable in being told what to do and giving herself to others in a way she never would usually, but it had just seemed like a good way to ask for trouble.

It had seemed dangerous.

But not with Regina.

No, not with Regina. She trusts the brunette not to abuse the power she's so willing - not desperate though, shit no, I don't do that crap - to give her.

"Go on, then."

The Mayor hisses- interrupting the younger woman's thoughts- and Emma nods obediently and slips out of sight.

"Good girl."

Regina murmurs to herself as she fetches a couple of glasses and a corkscrew, and that low utterance has her swallowing thickly. She imagines she's in for quite a treat when the blonde comes back, but the visual aspect of Emma's offering is only part of what now causes her breath to hitch in her throat. There has been no discussion between the two of them as to their roles, and in this world, there exists no prefabricated hierarchy that would demand Emma obey her as she so willingly does... It just seems to have come about naturally, as though they might be entirely contrasting puzzle pieces cut and moulded to fit perfectly together.

"That's rather dangerously poetic, dear..."

She scolds herself- sipping from her glass- before closing her eyes as she catches the telling sound of a door opening and closing down the hall and a light pad of footsteps. Reaching up, she slowly unfastens a button of her shirt, before doing the same to the next one down after a moment's hesitation. Placing her hands back on the counter, she waits.

"Better?"

Emma asks, and the Mayor turns slowly to spy the blonde stood in the doorway; long hair purposefully mussed, and pale skin bleached white by the kitchen overheads.

"Much."

Regina confides; drinking in teasing lace and temptingly sheer fabric that sits delicately on the younger woman's slim frame.

"Black suits you"

"Yeah, well, I wasn't sure what you liked, so..."

"This will do just fine."
The brunette smiles wickedly, and she hands the blonde her glass, before pointing to the cooker.

"Now, if you wouldn't mind, dear."

"Getting hungry, Madame Mayor?"

"... Famished."
The darker woman smirks, and Emma grins, before stalking over to the bag of ingredients that rests on the countertop. Regina considers asking the girl what size shoe she is in hopes of lending her a pair of heels to complete the ensemble, although she isn't sure how well this suggestion might go down as Emma doesn't exactly strike her as one to have much practice walking in anything other than the ratty sneakers she favours.

Still... This evening has so far turned from 'dinner' into a version of one of her own private fantasies, and she isn't the sort not to demand what she wants.

Toeing off one of her stilettos, she swallows as she is briefly struck by the thought that she is offering the younger woman a significant height advantage, before deciding it doesn't much matter. She's in control here, and nothing is about to change that.

"Have you ever worn anything like this before?"

Raising a brow, Emma looks down at the sharp point of the Mayor's Louboutins and nods.

"Kind of, but not that fancy."

"Oh?"

"You sound surprised?"

"You don't seem like the type."

Regina muses- leaving out the fact that the Emma she'd met back in Boston hadn't seemed the type for any of this- and the blonde shrugs, before indulging in a sultry grin that's all teeth.

"There's a lot you don't know about me, Regina... And plenty that might surprise you."

She shrugs once more as though simply imparting an innocent fact, but there's a heavy undertone of promise in those seemingly careless words, and the brunette licks her lips before pointing to the shoes at her feet.

"Try them on."

"Okay."

Emma agrees, and, when it becomes clear that Regina isn't about to hand them to her, she pads over and offers the Mayor a weighted look before bending down and slipping them on; the leather soft and ever so slightly warm.

"Do they fit?"

"Pretty well."

"Can you walk?"
"Yes."

The younger woman replies instantly, and the brunette smiles indulgently as she imagines Emma would insist on doing so whether she could or couldn't.

As it turns out... She can.

Watching with silent surprise as the blonde stalks back to the counter with ease, Regina reclaims her perch on the barstool and sips at her wine; eyes bright as she studies the girl go about slicing open a packet of steak with a flick of her wrist and flash of cold steel, and realising just how wrong she might have been when believing herself to be the one in control.
"How do you want it?"

Emma asks as she allows a knob of butter to drop into the pan with a low hiss to create an ebbing golden pool.

"Excuse me?"

Regina replies; momentarily distracted by the visions that question incites as well as her current view.

*How do I want it? Well, I'd like it several ways- many ways- dear. I'd like it fast and slow with you begging my name..."

"The steak."

The blonde elaborates with a small grin that suggests she's picked up on the darker woman's uncharacteristic faltering. In all honesty, she'd prefer to just play this as an exercise of surprise; having remembered to ask about the steak like Mary Margaret had told her to, but not altogether confident she possesses the ability to make good on the brunette's desires.

*Oh well, hopefully she'll just say she doesn't mind, and-*

"Medium-rare. Still pink in the middle, but make sure it's sufficiently braised."

*Of course, she minds.*

Emma sighs, but she does so with a great deal of affection, and drops in two generous- and rather expensive!- cuts of meat with a silent prayer to any interested deity to help her out on this one. With that done, she starts up another pan for the mushrooms and helps herself to one of the bottles of oil beside the hob. Splashing a generous amount of extra-virgin olive oil into the saucepan, she waits for it to heat up.

"Hey!"

A yelp of surprise, and the Mayor raises a brow as the blonde jumps back from the cooker with her hand over her stomach. Looking down at herself and chuckling, Emma glances back at the brunette and rolls her eyes.

"Not exactly the most sensible ensemble when frying stuff, I guess."

She smiles, and Regina laughs quietly, before pushing herself from her seat with her wine glass in hand and stalking over to take a better look at the red tinge colouring the girl's bare flesh. As she watches, the oil in the pan spits up with a hissing noise; a small droplet catching the back of her hand and smarting slightly. The hot oil stings a little, but it's not unbearable. Looking from Emma-'s dark eyes roaming over pale skin coquettishly encased in black- and back to the hob, she smiles; the blonde's surprised whimper just now bringing her instantly back home- back to her palace chambers- and causing excitement to pool low in her stomach.

*It won't burn her, not really. It will just sting a little. And look how prettily her skin glows to show off the pain..."

"Aren't you going to put the mushrooms in?"
She asks silkily, and she leans over to fetch the small pummet from the grocery bag and hands it to Emma with a pointed look; moving in on the blonde silently so that she stands behind her and offers little room to back away. In doing so, she the hopes that the younger woman might understand what she wants.

Emma does, and she hisses as a second spattering of oil freckles the flesh above her navel.

She is in two minds about what she understands to be happening here. On the one hand, she is both a little surprised and slightly dubious at Regina's apparent desire that she welcome the hot oil spitting up at her every now and then; not so much out of any fear of pain or any repulsion at the idea, more just... It's not something she's ever really thought about when it comes to what might turn someone on. It just seems a little strange.

On the other hand...

On the other hand, she supposes it must be this element of pain- mild pain, to be fair- mixed with her reaction that serves as the catalyst to the Mayor's arousal, more so than the oil or activity itself, and this realisation has her breathing becoming slightly ragged. Her thoughts on the matter are similar to Regina's own- though neither woman could know such a thing- when she muses on the fact that, while no discussion has ever been had concerning fantasies and fetishes, things seem to be falling into place between them beautifully.

This could work... And she actually seems on board this time...

She had tried to explain to the brunette when they'd been in her office that being hurt and allowing people to hurt her were two very different things, but that had been as far as their conversation had gone. She'd not elaborated to disclose the fact that the idea of allowing such a thing for another's pleasure arouses her greatly also, and she guesses that this had been in part due to their desire to get down to business, but also simply due to being shy on her part as well.

After all, she'd told some of the others- the ones she'd at least felt some sort of connection with- and received mixed results. Either sordid excitement that had much too easily become heavy-handedness with no finesse and very little reward, or a look of discomfort that had occasionally veered dangerously close to disgust and had put her off continuing with the act entirely.

Neal had favoured the latter response, and his visible distaste had pissed her off royally. Probably because she'd liked him and hadn't appreciated his look of unease as a result of something she'd finally dared to share with him

It hadn't seemed fair.

He'd always been good to her, though. Right up until... Well, right up until he wasn't. And he'd at least attempted to turn his apprehension into curiosity rather than tell her she was 'fucked up' as some of the others had. Not that this had made things any less awkward. He'd asked her what she'd meant and what she liked, and she'd told him she didn't know. Had thought of telling him she was hoping to find that out and explore, but by that point she'd already been wishing the ground would just swallow her up whole. He'd tried though- she really believes he had- and had asked her with glowing patches of redness creeping beneath his scruff if she'd meant being into things like 'spanking' and 'that kind of stuff'.

She'd told him again that she didn't really know, not bothering to point out that it didn't matter anymore anyway. The part that has always seemed appealing to her is the mutual enjoyment of the game- the dangerous dance of exploration- and by the time they'd gotten around to tentatively discussing whether it might be preferable for him to use his hand or the back of a hairbrush, she'd just
wanted to go the fuck to sleep and forget the whole thing.

Because he'd not been into it.

And she hadn't known how to answer him.

She'd not known what kind of thing she might like, but had been sure- even then- that there must be more to it than reenacting one of the goddawful subservient scenes occasionally watched when favouring motel rooms over the bug. Scenes featuring a whole crapload of 'oh, no, please, sir's that sounded just about as sincere as the political debates broadcasted on other channels.

She'd imagined there must be more fun to be had than limp-wristed spanking.

Something like obeying orders.

Like cooking dinner as good as naked.

Something like the burn of hot oil against flesh while dark eyes devour their entertainment wickedly, glittering with nothing but desire and intent.

Yeah... She supposes she gets it after all.

"Could you hand me one of the shallots from the bag, please?"

She asks; silently offering her understanding and willingness to play along.

"Certainly, dear."

The brunette purrs, and Emma shivers as warm fingers brush gently against her side before the Mayor steps away.

When the next spat of oil greets her skin, she makes sure that her responding hiss is audible.

Regina hands over the shallot plucked from the grocery bag on the counter, before stalking over to the fridge-freezer. Leaning against cool steel, she privately compliments the blonde on her instinctual refusal to turn around. Emma might be new to a lot of this, but so far she's played her part well. Watching on from her voyeuristic vantage point, the brunette swallows as another low hum escapes the girl's lips; the latter's muscles tensing visibly in response to the barely tolerable heat.

Barely tolerable; that's something she keeps reminding herself.

It can't be comfortable for the blonde to have hot oil spit up at her as it does, but that doesn't have to mean that the sensation isn't pleasant, and Regina is willing to bet that the younger woman is finding her ordeal to be just that. Her first little yelp had been one of surprise tinged with a mild helping of pain, but the last whimper to leave soft lips had been heavy with something else. It had been a wonderful sound, and she tells herself that's enough.

Tells herself 'no' as that husky mewl of tainted pleasure reminds her much too easily of that other world, and in that other world, that sound would swiftly have become high and frantic; pleading for mercy if she'd had her way.

And she'd always had her way.

"I have it now, too..."

She whispers to herself, and she knows she's right. A part of her imagines that having Emma crying...
up at her with bright tears swimming in wide green eyes and pain evident on her face would be- and she hates herself for it- unbearably arousing. But... She also knows that the pleasure she'd felt from witnessing such distress in the past had been short-lived. What had happened in the office between herself and Emma had been slow, and beautifully frustrating, as that state of want- of need- had been passed between them and spun out to last.

That's more appealing to her now than the girl crying her name.

The oil is merely accidental foreplay, and already her heart is hammering in her chest... Why would she ever wish to finish things now when they can continue to dance?

Opening the freezer, she slips a cube of ice from the back of the dispenser so as not to alert the blonde to her movements. Stalking back to the stove on stockinged feet, she places one hand possessively at the younger woman's waist and leans in when Emma turns to grin at her. Brushing her lips demandingly against the blonde's, she brings the ice up slyly and presses it against the girl's stomach.

"Regina!"

Emma gasps, and the brunette kisses her greedily as she draws a melting pattern across hot flesh, before trailing the diminishing cube slowly but pointedly south with the blonde's harsh panting playing against her lips. Once the ice has slipped down below her navel, Emma gives up striving to keep her composure and whirls around to taste the Mayor deeply; dropping the spatula in her hand onto the counter with a messy clatter.

The darker woman moans quietly into their kiss as a pale hand slips into the deep V of her semi-buttoned shirt to caress satin covered flesh with playful intent and she nips lightly at the girl's tongue. Moving her own hand around to dig her nails into skinny ribs, she holds the blonde against her firmly as she trails the ice ever lower; skimming over scant fabric to hold what's left of the cube against the flimsy crotch of the younger woman's underwear to win herself a breathy, choked sound as the girl tenses in her embrace.

"Fuck, Regina, fuck!"

"Language..."

The brunette warns with laughter thick in her voice, and she plays her fingers against damp fabric for good measure when all that's left of the ice has melted.

"H-hey, come on, I need to keep an eye on my cooking! I failed every fucking home-ec assignment I was ever set. At least let me have this one."

Emma laughs huskily, and the Mayor smirks as she leans comfortably against the counter and admires the wet glisten of the younger woman's reddened flesh, and the rapid rise and fall of her chest.

"Why doesn't that surprise me, Miss Swan. Cooking and sewing not to your liking?"

"Hell no."

The blonde growls, playing along. Regina nods as though in agreement and continues with a baited smile

"What subjects did you enjoy, then? Let me guess... Recess?"
"Actually, no, but thanks for your high opinion of me. Recess sadly involved other kids, which I found most unpalatable."

Emma offers with a burlesque shudder and mockingly exaggerated enunciation to the last part. Dropping her act, she shrugs and prods at the rather soggy looking mushrooms dubiously.

"Nah, I just hung out in the library pretty much, which was okay if no one came and bothered me. I liked music okay, I guess, and gym. One school I went to had a dance class you could opt for, so that was pretty neat."

She explains, and Regina raises a brow as she catches a genuine hint of passion in the girl's voice.

"You like dancing?"

"Again with the surprise."

The younger woman rolls her eyes, and the brunette laughs and shakes her head.

"Not at all. My amusement has nothing to do with you liking to dance, we're just a little more similar than I thought."

"Oh yeah? You dance? What kind?"

The blonde asks as she continues to stir shrivelling mushrooms, the steak long since having left her mind as she is now a little preoccupied imagining the brunette in a rather skimpy showgirl outfit she imagines Regina might slap her for if she was privy to such a thing.

"Oh, you know... The usual."

The Mayor replies breezily; not sure whether or not the style of waltz and ballroom dancing she'd once enjoyed exists in this world or not. Either way, she has a distinct inclination that neither of these styles would have been the blonde's forte, and so simply turns the tables with a smile.

"What kind of dance did you cover?"

"Well, they offered all sorts, but some you had to pay for, like tap and stuff, you know? They did a pretty shitty version of ballet, which wasn't so bad once the crappier kids got put in another class. Some jazz stuff, and just general kids' dancing. I always wanted to do more, but then I moved, and the next place didn't do anything like that. Best after that was cheerleading, which I kind of hated but I was ok at, and it kept me in the principle's good books, which, given what I got up to the rest of the time while I was in that shit-hole, was pretty invaluable."

She grins with a small shrug, and the brunette studies her curiously as the blonde goes back to cluelessly watching the demise of their dinner. She knows the term 'cheerleading' from the wide array of false knowledge plaguing them in this world, along with having seen the odd movie here and there depicting the skill. Most recently, the term had been somewhat thrust upon her, when Ruby, Ashley and several of their irritating little friends had watched a newly released movie in which girls around about their age were attempting to 'bring it on', though what exactly was being brought, she has no clue. She just knows that after suffering several weeks of idiotic singing and the waitress dressing even more skimpily than usual, she'd wished more than ever that The Curse had simply done away with the idiot boxes in every one of her snivelling past subjects' homes, rather than just channels carrying national news and outside information. It had been highly bemusing being met with snippets of the movie every time she'd flipped through the channels of her own idiot box, but... She recalls the flouncy little outfits and rather impressive flips and kicks choreographed across the screen before she'd switched over to something more palatable, and she licks her lips as she imagines
the blonde doing some of those tight little twirls.

"You were a cheerleader?"

"Not a very cheery one, but I was good at tricks so I guess that counts for something."

"Tricks?"

"Well, yeah..."

Emma glances up as she catches a distinct increase in the huskiness of the Mayor's voice and adopts a slow smile as she takes in tellingly blown pupils.

"Can you still do any?"

The brunette asks quietly, and the younger woman raises a brow before placing her spatula down primly.

"Some, sure. Why?"

She asks, feigning confusion, and the brunette narrows her eyes as she takes a step forward.

"I'd like to see."

"I'm cooking."

Emma admonishes, though she's turned away from slowly blackening meat without a second glance.

"That's okay. That mouthwatering feast became inedible about ten minutes ago."

Regina scoffs as she leans into the younger woman with a dark gaze and reaches past her to kill the flames.

"Ah, crap..."

The blonde sighs with genuine irritation, turning back to the mess in the pans behind her. Still, she can't help but feel she shouldn't be held solely accountable for the disaster she faces; Regina has been a little more distracting than usual this evening after all.

"Quite."

The Mayor agrees, and the girl turns back to her apologetically.

"Sorry... I don't even have a backup or anything... Kinda idiotic, huh?"

"Kind of... But I would guess neither of us will be going to bed without eating."

Perfect teeth show in a salacious smile, and green eyes widen slowly as Emma replays this sultry promise back in her head with something akin to gleeful shock that the brunette would stoop so deliciously low.

"Oh?"

She challenges; aiming for nonchalance but failing when her voice cracks slightly.

"Show me a trick."
Regina demands, and the blonde regards her as though thinking the matter over, before lowering her
eyes coyly to the glistening tiles of the kitchen floor.

"Lie down."

"I beg your pardon?"

The Mayor demands; looking down at the tiles- at the floor- with an expression of disgust.

"Please."

The younger woman urges; not entirely sure of herself, but not about to back away from a challenge. That, and the idea of the brunette lying at her feet and allowing her momentary control of the game makes her head spin a little.

She means to give Regina what she wants- or hopes to at least- and isn't trying to steal the upper hand- she doesn't want it- but it's exciting to think that she might be able to bring something to the table here, and she sincerely hopes the darker woman will allow her a chance.

In the end, Regina does.

The brunette imagines that doing so might have an awful lot to do with the fact that the girl stands in front of her, ready for the taking, in just the delectable little lingerie set she'd picked out, with the translucent gauze covering her sex glistening wetly. She knows most of that dampness is her own doing with the ice, but she is certain that the girl's underwear doesn't glitter only because of her sly hand, and she is curious to find out where this might all be going.

Lowering herself down onto the floor- her shoulder blades pressing against the cold surface- Regina looks up at the blonde in anticipation of what comes next; managing a fairly admirable glower of superiority given that she lies at the younger woman's feet.

"This had better be good, Miss Swan."

She warns, and Emma smiles a little nervously as she toes off the brunette's heels.

"I'll try."

She replies, and she would have loved to respond with a far more sultry retort, but she finds she is suddenly a little shy. She doesn't want to disappoint, and what had seemed like a good idea a second ago now seems a little stupid. Nor has she tried anything like this since, well...

*Since a good nine months or so ago, let's put it that way.*

Glancing briefly up at the ceiling, she pulls herself together and strives to adopt a salacious smile to hide her discomfort. Walking around the brunette and turning to face her, she steps lightly over the darker woman's hips so that Regina lies between her legs. Offering a small flash of her teeth, she allows her feet to slide out from under her with skilled control; lowering herself slowly with swiftly mounting anticipation.

Regina watches on hungrily as she soon understands what Emma means to do; drinking in the sinewy lines of muscle that flex beneath pale flesh as the blonde spreads her legs ever wider. Reaching up to grip sharp hipbones, she allows herself to apply just a little pressure and appreciate the warmth of the girl's flesh, but refrains from pulling her roughly down as she'd like to. She does so more out of respect for Emma's attempt at wanting to play her- rather delightful- hand, rather than out of any real fear of hurting the girl, but when the younger woman swallows audibly, hovering no
more than a tantalising inch over the Mayor's own covered sex, the latter frowns and lets go.

"Are you okay? Does that hurt?"

"Nah, it's ok, I'm just a little stiff is all."

Emma assures dutifully through gritted teeth, but she finds that once she gives herself a moment to get used to the stretch, it's not so bad, and she grins as she slides all the way down to straddle the brunette in a final fluid motion.

"It's not really high up on the list of tricks- especially as I'm kind of cheating like this- but I figured maybe you'd like it more than-"

Regina cuts her off as she pulls her down roughly and demands dominance of an especially heated kiss. Running her hands down over splayed thighs with tangible need, she groans against parted lips as the younger woman releases the final buttons of her shirt with clumsy desperation.

"Not here, not here."

The Mayor pants breathlessly, although she allows her fingers to wander with increasing intent before she pushes Emma off of her so that she can find her feet.

"I'm not going to be taken on my own goddamn floor."

She sniffs indignantly, and the blonde shrugs with a grin as she confides huskily that she doesn't much mind where she takes the darker woman, just so long as she can do so soon. Rolling her eyes and striving to regain an air of dignified composure, the Mayor leads them hastily up the stairs; not bothering to give the cooling remains of Emma's disastrous attempt at cooking a second glance.

Once they find themselves in the comfort of the brunette's bedroom, Emma goes back to the task of relinquishing the Mayor of her clothes. Ordinarily, this is not something Regina appreciates others taking it upon themselves to do, but the girl's touch is obscurely gentle, and the blonde's lips never leave her own.

"Rather more confident, dear?"

She purrs as the younger woman flicks her tongue playfully across the soft petal of her upper lip, and Emma shrugs as she pushes plush dress pants down to settle around the Mayor's ankles.

"Well, I've spent the best part of the evening half naked, so I guess I've bucked up."

She jokes, and the brunette laughs as she hooks her finger into the blonde's bra strap and allows it to snap back sharply against sparsely freckled flesh.

"You chose well, by the way."

"Good."

Emma smiles, and the Mayor opens her mouth to perhaps say a little more on the matter, before closing her eyes with a choked moan as slim fingers find her heat and tease her gently. She notes that the blonde still touches her in a rather shy manner- as though not entirely sure whether doing so is permitted- but, when she cocks her hips pointedly to grind against the younger woman's palm, Emma enters her smoothly and curls her fingers the way she'd been asked to down in her office.

"I can't believe I could have said no to this..."
Regina hisses with her jaw clenched; and the younger woman takes her words as a compliment and increases the attention of her fingers accordingly, murmuring into sweet-smelling chestnut tresses

"I'm glad you didn't..."

Backing them blindly towards the bed, Regina falls back onto soft covers, pulling the blonde down on top of her, and Emma resumes a less demanding version of her previous stretch with busy fingers working between them as she begins a hot trail of lips and teeth down the darker woman's throat. She takes care not to graze or suck in a way that might leave a mark on perfect flesh, and it is a delicate caution that the Mayor picks up on with silent appreciation. True, it robs her of the pleasure of snarling up at the girl to do just that- which is a role she relishes- but it is also rather delicious playing with one so swift to learn.

A slower, deeper thrust of slick fingers, and she groans as she is met with beautiful confirmation of this last thought.

"Move."

She orders gutturally, and when this request is met with a look of confusion before Emma begins to push herself up hesitantly, the brunette shakes her head and finds the younger woman's hips; guiding her with sly pinches and sharp nails to grind down on her while her hand remains trapped between them. Nodding her approval, and watching through slitted lashes as this new friction has the blonde biting her lip and letting out a few quiet noises of her own pleasure, Regina pulls her back down so that she can kiss her wetly, arousal beginning to knot devilishly in her stomach.

"You're amazing."

Low words rasped into her ear before sharp teeth graze her cheek, and she arches her back with a bitten back cry as she comes swiftly undone. Riding out the waves of her pleasure, she keeps the blonde pulled flush in a vicelike grip, before laughing softly and relaxing. Opening her eyes, she swallows as Emma pushes herself back up to regard her heatedly from her splayed position, and she allows her eyes to travel down the taut plane of the girl's stomach to drink in the tantalising spread of her legs.

"Get on your back."

She instructs quietly, and green eyes flash down at her through the shadows as Emma rocks her hips a little before nodding and rolling over so that she lies beside her. Moving up so that she hovers over the blonde, Regina kisses her deeply while sliding her palm firmly down soft skin to cup the younger woman's sex through her underwear.

"Legs up."

She orders, and the blonde raises a brow but does as she's told; lifting her legs towards the ceiling and grinning when the Mayor slips her hands between her calves and spreads them apart. Regina does so gently at first, before purchasing a grip at the blonde's ankles and pushing down experimentally.

"Is that comfortable?"

She asks as she runs her fingers lightly down an extended thigh, and Emma laughs softly as she shrugs.

"Not particularly, but I can handle it... It doesn't hurt."
She elaborates, and in all honesty, she's not that sure she really cares at the moment. She feels entirely debauched lying with her legs spread the way they are, and her movements above the writhing Mayor coupled with watching the darker woman go over the edge have left her only focusing on one thing; release.

"Keep them like this."

Regina orders- very much in favour of the younger woman's current position, debauched or not!- before taking an experimental nip at the taut web of muscle lining the girl's inner thigh.

"Fuck..."

A hissed expletive of approval from the younger woman, but the brunette frowns as the blonde's legs spasm instantly a little closer together. Pushing them back apart with a pointed shove, she pulls black underwear to the side and leans down to taste the wetness she can see glittering through the shadows.

Slim legs twitch and come together once more.

"I told you to keep them apart."

She snaps, and the younger woman regards her apologetically.

"It's pretty hard this way... You can try to hold them out like that if you want, but I can't stop doing that; I am trying to!"

Emma explains, and the brunette sighs as though she finds this to be remarkably inconsiderate of the younger woman's reflexes. Her frustration is short-lived however, as an evil smile finds her lips, and she slips from the covers to open the top drawer of her dresser.

"What are you doing?"

The blonde asks curiously, before biting her lip when Regina turns back to face her with a slim, leather belt in her hands.

"I won't hurt you."

The brunette assures, and Emma nods, although she feels a private pang of disappointment as a result of this promise.

"Okay... What are you gonna do?"

She breathes quietly, but Regina opts to simply let such things become clear with time. Coaxing the girl to lift her legs once more, she takes a hold of the blonde's left ankle and pushes it back rather than to the side.

"Stop me if you wish to."

She warns, although she imagines they both know that what she really means is that Emma should only stop her if she needs to. If she's in danger of causing herself an injury... Not because the deep stretch the Mayor demands incites a deliciously tight twinge of pain.

Regina works slowly- enjoying the idea of testing the girl, but not inclined to manhandle her in any way- and offers a small smile down into wide eyes to convey that she's impressed when she pushes the blonde's leg against the iron post of her headboard, looping the belt in her hand around cold metal before wrapping the remaining leather around the younger woman's ankle.
"Very nice..."

She praises; admiring the scene as Emma lies with her hips cocked slightly to allow for her enforced stretch, and her hands obediently splayed out at her sides.

"Regina..."

The blonde whispers, and the brunette strokes the taut expanse of her shackled thigh soothingly before lowering herself back down and tasting vulnerable flesh. Emma closes her eyes and balls her fists as pointed velvet sets her nerve-endings alight; never before having considered the position she finds herself in, but almost unbearably aroused by the simple fact of her restraints alone. It's a far cry from what she'd envisaged when knocking at the Mayor's door bearing her useless bag of groceries, but she understands that this- among many things- is why she finds herself so drawn to the brunette.

Regina sparks feelings and sensations within her she hadn't known even existed, and she's desperate to explore.

"Shit, oh shit..."

She curses through gritted teeth as the darker woman's ministrations become serious, and her limbs begin to tremble.

"Regina, fuck!"

Her hands fly into the Mayor's hair as the latter bites down while introducing her fingers to cinch the deal, and Emma shakes her head pleadingly as she struggles to get away from that beautiful attack as it becomes too much. Indulging herself just a moment more- smirking slyly as a broken cry echoes above her- Regina eventually shows mercy and pushes herself up to smile down on the younger woman as the latter pants with her hair billowing out beneath her in a crazed mane.

"Oh, but you are enjoyable, dear."

She compliments, before reaching over and gently freeing the blonde of her restraints. Emma brings her leg down stiffly with a hiss of gratitude.

"Are you okay?"

Regina enquires; softly, and with a little more room for compassion now that her desire has been sated. The younger woman nods with a blissed-out sigh; her eyes closed and a serene smile painting her lips as she massages her thigh. It is a good smile, the Mayor concludes. A real smile. So different from the mask of 'I'm okay. I'm fine. Everything's alright' that Emma had favoured back in Boston. It is a happy smile... And Regina wonders if the woman she had been expecting- the feared Saviour destined to ruin her ten years from now rather than the curious, wayward blonde sharing her bed- might ever have smiled in such a way.

Of course, it is impossible to say, and it distresses her to think on such a thing at all, but...

She doesn't think so.

Doesn't think that smile would have ever found the lips of one continuing on the hazardous road the girl had been on before coming here.

Smiling herself, she reaches over and plays a gentle hand through the blonde's curls as she continues her thoughtful study of exhausted features. She expects the younger woman to shy away or push her hand aside as she offers such tender affection, but the latter simply goes on smiling with her lashes
casting dusky shadows over her cheeks.

"Thank you for coming over."

She murmurs, and Emma finally opens her eyes and regards her amiably.

"I'm just sorry I messed up dinner. Though dessert was fun..."

She grins, and the brunette rolls her eyes with a smirk. Spying the bruise lining the blonde's forearm from where she'd sunken her teeth into pale flesh in the throes of her pleasure bent over her desk, Regina takes soft skin in her hand and guides it to her lips; biting down gently over the small mark of the blonde's own doing.

Heavy lashes flicker, and Emma clears her throat.

"You are unbelievably hot, did you know that?"

She offers, and the Mayor laughs quietly as she nods without embarrassment.

"Yes."

"And so humble..."

"Why should I be?"

"Huh... Well, I guess that's a fair point!"

Emma grins, and the brunette yawns as she fingers the delicate strap of the girl's bra.

"You do quite well yourself, Miss Swan."

"Hmm..."

The blonde wrinkles her nose, and Regina sighs as she glances up at the clock on her nightstand, surprised at how late it's gotten.

"Did you drive?"

She asks neutrally; not wanting to come right out and say that the younger woman should probably think about getting herself home. She imagines Emma understands this requirement perfectly well, but... While she had never experienced any qualms about sending her maids and play partners away once sated, it is not the fact that this practice is not common place in this land that causes her unease when telling Emma to take her leave now... It's the fact that she doesn't really want to.

"Yeah."

The younger woman smiles obliviously, and she pushes herself up with a wince.

"It might be an early start tomorrow. I need to remember to get gas, too. I'm terrible for ignoring the little warning light, and I don't want to get stuck halfway out to Portland."

She grumbles companionably, and Regina nods, before adopting a confused frown.

"You're going to Portland?"

"Yeah. Just for the day. I said I'd take Ruby so she could relieve some stress."
Emma grins.

"... You're going with Ruby?"

"Uhuh. Why?"

"...You and Ruby are going to leave town?"
"...You and Ruby are going to leave town?"

"Well, yeah..."

Emma nods; her hair tumbling over bare shoulders as she sits in the crumpled nest of the Mayor's bedsheets.

"...Is that not okay?"

She asks curiously, and the playful glint that finds green eyes hints at the fact that she would find it to be rather amusing should this be the case. That she might, in fact, deem Regina's irritation at her leaving town to have something to do with a small spark of jealousy on the brunette's part.

"Of course it is, but why take Ruby with you? I wouldn't have thought you two shared the same passion for shopping and other nonsense."

"Nonsense? I thought you would probably like shopping? And I have no clue how I feel about it; I've never really had the money to go and do it before now."

Emma points out with a slight hint of annoyance before she sighs and strives to get to the heart of the matter.

"Are you pissed I'm going with Ruby?"

"Of course not!"

Regina snaps automatically, before running her fingers through her hair and gazing thoughtfully out the window. She understands enough about the shift in tension between them to gather that her vague answers on the subject are having the combined effect of both irritating the blonde and arousing suspicions so ludicrous she refuses to give them any further thought, but it's just...

How can she answer?

How can she tell Emma the truth?

Of course, I have my misgivings that you're taking that little harlot along with you, but I am a long way from 'pissed' about it, and even further away from any other crass fantasies of jealousy your idiot mind might fathom!

Pursing her lips, she strives to find her voice, but she discovers this is a rather difficult task when she is presented with the unpalatable knowledge that she is in the dark here.

Ruby can't leave Storybrooke, at least... She doesn't think so... But then, does that same rule still apply if she crosses over the town line in the company of the Saviour?
I don't know...

No. And this limbo of uncertainty is not a situation she likes to be in.

*It's been so long since any attempt was made that I don't even really recall the details.*

But... This isn't strictly *true*, and she knows it.

She recalls enough to find herself worried by Emma's flippant comment about her plans for the weekend.

It has been a good ten years since the last time anyone in town had been stupid enough to even come *close* to trying to leave, and she counts herself lucky that there seems to be an element to The Curse that *keeps* the number so low. For the most part, she has never heard talk of anyone wanting to venture beyond the town line- or sparing the outside world even the slightest bit of *interest*- but when the topic *does* occasionally surface, it is met with disquiet and a curious sense of reluctance on the given candidate's behalf.

It had come as a shock then, when Mikey- once better known in his frog form- had gone speeding through the woods in his old Chevrolet pickup towards that unseen border.

It had taken three weeks for the boy to come out of his coma, and at one point, Dr Whale had been sure they were going to lose him.

When he'd finally been able to speak, young Mikey Toad had found himself the recipient of a- perhaps rather perplexing- hospital visit from the Mayor.

She'd asked him what he had been up to- why he had strayed so far from town- and he had explained how he had been in hot pursuit of a young buck with a desirable head of antlers. He simply hadn't been thinking.

*They never do*...

No. But all disdain aside, the fact of the matter *is* that the boy had suffered a serious concussion and a rather grave array of injuries when the Chevy's engine had exploded several feet from Storybrooke's boundary line.

She'd eventually put the matter down to pure idiocy, but- glancing over at Emma now- she finds she is having a hard time ridding herself of the memory of the smoking heap of scrap the Toad boy had been pulled from shortly after Graham had called her to share the news.

She and the blonde have both crossed the invisible line several times... But what happens when *Ruby* gets thrown into the mix?

She closes her eyes as her mind assaults her with an unwanted image of the smoking wreckage of the younger woman's bug; the windscreen splattered with blood as two girls- one dark one fair- sit slumped forwards over the dashboard.

She replaces Mikey's fractured face with Emma's and swallows as she remembers the lazy drip of crimson that had rolled down ashen cheeks from a jagged tear in the boy's hairline.

Remembers the way Whale's eyes had lost hope when he'd answered the *kind* and *caring* Mayor's insistent enquiries as to Mikey's chances of survival.

*Don't be a fool. The brat was speeding and paying no attention to where he was going! Of course, it*
won't be like that!

Perhaps not... But, what if the bug were to actually make it over the town line? What then? Here in Storybrooke, Ruby knows nothing of her former life, but outside the stringent dome of control held over her little pocket of sanity... What might the girl remember?

Who might the girl remember?

And what state of mind or lunacy might she afflict Emma with?

To think of the blonde coughing and choking on her own blood is an appalling image, but to think of Emma being faced with the madness that might exist in her friend should they be successful in crossing the town line causes the brunette to shudder. She-

"-Regina?..."

Emma interrupts her troubled thoughts uncertainly, and a brief glance over at the younger woman has her realising that any amusement the girl might have found in fancying she'd gleaned a breed of jealousy or irritation in response to her declaration she means to leave town has now been replaced by nervousness.

"Yes, dear... Sorry... I got lost in my thoughts."

She replies, and she forces a smile to try and alleviate some of the tension between them.

"How come you don't want me to go?"

The blonde pushes, but any impishness to her tone has been rejected in favour of careful politeness.

"I never said-"

Regina begins- though how she means to continue, she doesn't know!- before Emma silences her with her next statement.

"I'm not going to run away again if that's why you're pissed at me..."

Her words are quiet and uncomfortable, and she worries the heavy silk of the brunette's throw as she averts her eyes. Sighing deeply, Regina nods and agrees heavily

"No, I know. It's not about that... It's just..."

It's just what?

What can she say to explain herself?

To stop the blonde from going?!

I could tell her I'd rather she come over here...

True, but she doesn't deem this course of action to be wise. She doesn't imagine either of them is the type to wish to be suddenly inseparable, and has the disturbing notion that such an excuse might simply serve to arouse suspicion.

She really has no option other than to pretend she's okay with this.

To bid the girl goodnight and wish her a nice time.
"It's nothing, Miss Swan. I believe I am simply tired- and rather malnourished!- and suffered a moment's absurdity. Of course, I have no problem with you going to Portland with Miss Lucas; I imagine you'll have a lovely time. I hope so, anyway."

She smiles, and Emma offers her a relieved grin in return.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Now, do be a dear and leave me in peace; I have a rather disastrous mess in the kitchen to see to."

She sighs, but not unkindly, and she shakes her head when Emma offers to stick around and help out.

"No, dear, just get going before your nighttime absence evolves from mere gossip to town news."

"Going!"

The blonde laughs, and Regina rolls her eyes as she follows the girl downstairs and fills the kitchen sink with water while Emma slips back into her clothes.

"Night, Regina."

"Goodnight, dear. Have fun tomorrow."

She smiles as she walks the blonde to the door and accepts the soft brush of her lips as a farewell gift.

Watching the bug wheeze along the shadowed tarmac of her drive, she waits until the scarlet glow of the blonde's taillights disappear into the night, before closing the front door gently.

Stalking back into the kitchen, she ignores the disaster of pots and pans littering her hob and goes straight for the cordless phone mounted beside the fridge.

Using speed dial, she counts one ring, two, thr-

"Hello?"

"Graham... I need you to do something for me."
"You be good now, you hear?"

Emma warns Caskett with a grin; brandishing her hairbrush at the tabby regarding her lazily from the bed. Yawning to show her displeasure that the blonde should possess the audacity to think she'd behave poorly- not to mention the ludicrous notion that she should care whether or not her Girl approves of her actions either way- Cass rolls lazily onto her side and paws at the puffs of air ricocheting from the blonde's brush.

"No parties, no alcohol, no boys."

Emma elaborates, before turning back to the mirror and wincing as she strives to untangle her bed-mussed curls. She stands in just the washed-out cotton of her underwear, having stripped out of her uniform only to find herself in a curious limbo of what to wear. She had peered out through the curtains this morning before heading down to work to find the air riddled with the promise of sun and heat; most likely the final, dying breath of summer choked out to banish the rain, before being laid to rest for the next few months once and for all. Her initial response to cloudless skies and a nonexistent breeze had been to step out of her skirt and into the battered denim shorts she'd favoured before coming to town; thinking nothing of the act until she'd found herself struggling to pull the tattered fabric over her hips. Raising a brow, she'd proceeded to study herself in the mirror curiously, turning this way and that, before shrugging and letting the tight denim flutter back to the floor.

Glancing down at them now, she smiles at herself in the mirror. She recalls with some sense of embarrassment the way she'd studied her slim frame in a similar fashion after her blow-out with Ruby what seems like a lifetime ago, but she can't find it within herself to greet her reflection with that same breed of hate and disgust. Not now that her secret has been shared, and- more importantly- accepted. In all honesty, she's silently relieved that the denim scrap lying at her feet seems just a little too snug; the washed out label barely legible, but not so much so that the word 'kids' is impossible to make out.

"They'd seen better days, anyway."

She confides in the tabby, although this had already been true of the shorts at the time she'd pulled them out of the Lost and Found box at the Comfort Inn between Phoenix and Tucson.

Padding over to the closet filled with the mishmash of clothes brought from 'back, before' and those bought for her by Regina, she pulls down a dark, blue dress with a rather kitsch sailor's collar from the 'back, before' section. This is another random find, though she has no clue where from anymore, and a little more girlish than she'd usually like. Still, it's longer than her other dress- the one she hasn't worn since afflicting it upon the Mayor- and pleasantly light, which is something that seems like it might work in her favour as her ordinarily airy room feels hot and muggy before the sun has even fully risen.

"And that's here in town! In the city, it's gonna be..."

She trails off with a wrinkle of her nose to say the rest. This expression doesn't quite cover the nervous beating of her heart as she is suddenly- unwelcomely- accosted by a sensory orchestra of vile recollection.

The heat.
The Heat, and the City.

Boston.

It had been weird.

No. That's not quite right. It had been implausible, senseless, crazy... maddening... The thrum of the heat had played on her mind terribly once she'd returned to New England, despite making her way up and over from scorching temperatures while cruising the tarmac arteries of the country.

When she'd left Phoenix, she had done so during the midst of a hellish hot spell, with the trunk of the Bug crammed to its limits with nothing but bottles of water and a spare milk jug filled with fuel. This latter had been something she'd learnt to keep with her from Neal, but she'd always secretly wondered what might happen if she'd actually need to put it to use; not knowing the first thing about syphoning gas, save for not swallowing the stuff. The water, though... That had simply been common sense. It had been hot- baking hot- in the desert, but it had been a sane heat nevertheless.

Boston hadn't seemed sane.

Perhaps it had been the toll of her journey, or the mess of darkness consuming her thoughts, but that first night back on what she'd supposed was the closest she'd ever really had to her 'home turf', she'd sat beneath the bridge listening to what had sounded like a thousand summer-wild dogs crying up at the moon, and found herself thinking that the madness lacing their howls might just be the only thing about the place that made any sense.

Boston had been hot, alright.

Hot, and not quite right.

Not quite heal-

"-Well, it's a good thing you told Ruby we'd go to Portland, then, isn't it?"

She snaps at her reflection as she assesses herself in the mirror, and green eyes stare back at her solemnly as one part of her mind apologises to the other for peeking into the boxes carefully taped shut and stacked away out of harm's reach. Caskett mewls uncomfortably as she senses the brittle ice on her Girl's tongue that has become a seldom feature in their day to day life since moving here, and this seems to shake the blonde from the last of her uneasy pondering as she tosses back her curls and perches on the bed to scratch the old tabby gently between the ears.

"It's okay, Cassie. Hell, today should be fun! I guess my biggest concern is just dying of boredom while shopping!"

She grins, although she doesn't really think this is going to be an issue. During their rather quiet breakfast service, she and Ruby had touched on just about any topic concerning their imminent trip she could fathom, and thus they had somehow- for some reason- entered into the territory of Victoria and her infamous Secrets, and since then, Ruby has been unable to ask about much else.

"Oh, fuck me running."

She groans now, but she does so with a smirk as she imagines she might well wind up falling into bed tonight knowing a hell of a lot more about the waitress's lacy, satin, and generally depraved interests than she'd really care to know. Laughing quietly to herself- while sticking her tongue out at Cass who glares at her for such lunacy- she pushes herself up off the bed and grabs her jacket- just in case- before padding to the door; knowing that while she might not be the most girlish or gossipy of
people, her lack of interest in what strange and inappropriate facts Ruby is bound to divulge doesn't mean she won't find amusement and enjoyment in the situation.

Because Ruby's her friend.

And- apparently- friends tell friends everything... Or so goes the world according to the waitress herself.

And that's fine.

She's been surprisingly alright with telling Ruby things.

Lots of things.

Almost everything.

Almost...

"But some secrets are just too good to share."

The blonde smirks devilishly down at the tabby, before closing the door behind her and banishing any further thoughts of Regina before her cheeks can flush a damning scarlet.

"Want one?"

Ruby asks as she holds out a bag of sherbet saucers, and Emma answers her silently as she helps herself to three; firing them one after the other between her lips in quick succession before brushing sugar dust from her fingers onto the bare flesh of her thigh. Flesh that is only bare due to the fact her dress has ridden up slightly while driving, but it still covers her legs modestly halfway down the length of her thighs... Which is a lot more than can be said for her companion.

Something which she'd found rather amusing when entering Ruby's bedroom.

"Hey, you about ready to... What the hell are you wearing?"

"I could ask you the same thing!"

The brunette answers curtly- bright eyes flashing up to evaluate the younger woman's ensemble with a small smirk- before going back to coating her lashes with mascara.

"This is a 'dress'; so called as it fits within the proposed realms of covering my crotch."

Emma replies smartly, and the waitress snorts appreciatively as she shuts away her makeup and blots her lipstick on a small fold of tissue.

"You look like you're about ten in that sack, Emma."

"And you look like you could be about ten as well, dipshit! Dollars that is. Maybe even bump it up to fifteen if you threw in some extras."

"Oooh!"

The brunette crows, but her teeth flash in a wide grin, and she chides that the blonde might just be jealous.
"My fist, your face, Ruby."

"Your face, my ass!"

"Isn't that the other way around?"

Emma smirks, before dropping the subject in favour of padding further into her friend's room and adjusting one of the brightly coloured clip-in pieces that streak chocolate tresses crimson.

"Seriously though, how come you're all dressed up? Or down, as the case may be? We're going shopping, not hitting the bars for tricks."

Sighing theatrically, Ruby rolls her eyes and pushes the blonde gently out of the way as she gets up to locate her shoes- heels, of course- and takes a seat on the bed.

"I've never been out of town before, and I want to celebrate. You don't have to dress fancy, but that doesn't mean I can't."

She reasons, and Emma nods in agreement, although her eyes linger on the tight, black fabric of the waitress's impossibly skimpy dress, and the idea that she should explain that it's not so much a case of differing tastes, but rather a case of what is and isn't going to get them into more bother than it's worth when perusing the shelves in Barnes & Noble surfaces her thoughts briefly, before she discards it with a sigh.

After all, Ruby's a big girl, she can make those decisions for herself...

"You know, you really do look ridiculously cute with that little collar."

The brunette comments now, and Emma grins as she supposes they must have been thinking on the same wavelength.

"Good thing you know the truth, then, hey? And I'm only wearing this thing because it's like an oven out there and I didn't fancy being pasted to the inside of my jeans."

"... You have such a way with words."

"Thanks, I guess."

"Never said it was a good thing."

"Asshole."

"Sugar-pie."

Ruby smirks, before tugging uselessly at the short hem of her dress in a failing attempt to stop herself from sticking to the seats. Rolling her eyes as she catches the younger woman grinning at her less than comfortable situation, she desists in her efforts and flicks her hair coquettishly.

"You know, there's nothing to say we can't go and hit the bars after we go shopping..."

She reasons hopefully, and Emma pulls a face as she glances over at her apologetically.

"Not if you don't mind doing it by yourself... I won't get in."

She explains a little uncomfortably, before striving to appease the situation with
"I'm totally cool if you want to try and find somewhere to drink or hang out and stuff, but it will have to be a sports bar or a Diner or something; I won't get into one of the better places."

"Oh, you little baby!... It's fine; I was just joking anyway."

Ruby lies, but the smile she offers is entirely genuine, and she murmurs as she goes back to looking out the window that she doesn't care in the slightest that the blonde lacks several years on her, as she's still the most interesting person she knows.

"I dunno about that; your Granny has some pretty weird stories about the kids around town on a full moon and stuff."

"Yeah, but that's all just fairytale stuff. You know what Granny's like."

"Yeah, I guess... I'm still not sure I'm all that interesting, though."

Emma replies a little briskly, but Ruby is too used to the blonde's rather closed-off spats to pay this much mind. Instead, she grins widely as she stares pointedly over at the small crescent of bruises that line the younger woman's forearm, chiding breezily

"Oh... I dunno about that... Fell over, did you?"

"Yes."

The blonde replies once she's sussed the object of the waitress's interest, but she allows a small smile to find her lips as the air between them hangs thick with the stench of bullshit.

"Fell onto some teeth."

She elaborates with a breathless chuckle.

"Mmhmm... Your teeth?"

"Who else's?"

"Oh, I don't know... Say, you were back awfully late last night, and, hmmm... Weren't you headed to the Mayor's?"

Ruby asks with wide eyes, as though all the pieces are suddenly beginning to fit together, and the blonde opens her mouth—though to say what, she has no clue!—before the brunette snorts with laughter and shakes her head.

"Oh, Emma, I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't poke fun!"

"... Right."

"I mean, I know you like her and all, but the idea of Regina biting you is... Well, actually, it's not the biting part I have trouble believing. It's the rest of what was instigated."

"Insinuated?"

"Yes. That. That you've actually been, you know, fucking the Mayor! I mean, can you imagine?!"

"Oh, I'm not sure I need to imagine something like that."

"Ah, yeah, probably not a good idea if you don't want to feel glum and disappointed. Sorry, babe."
"...It's alright."

"So who did bite-"

"Hey, do you see that?"

"Huh?"

Ruby quits her smirking as she glimpses the look of sudden seriousness that clouds the blonde's features. It serves to make her appear strangely adult, and the brunette clears her throat uncertainly as she places a hand on her friend's thigh.

"What is it?... Emma?"

"I just thought I saw... I'm not sure..."

The blonde frowns, her gaze fixed on the glass of her rearview mirror. She narrows her eyes distrustfully—sure she'd seen something flashing behind them—before shaking her head and returning her attention to the road.

"Em?"

Ruby probes, before jumping as a shrill wail catches her by surprise.

"What is that?!"

"Cop car."

The blonde replies with her knuckles blanched white against the steering wheel.

"Is that Graham?"

Ruby frowns; twisting in her seat to peer out of the back windscreen with slowly mounting unease.

"I guess it must be."

"But then why has he got his siren on? What's he playing at?"
A/N: Oh dear... Regina's going to have some explaining to do... Fortunately, I imagine Madame Mayor might be quite good at explaining things and taking one's mind off of them... heh... hehe. Please review :)

"License and registration, please."

"What the hell, Graham?!"

Ruby snaps as she leans past Emma to glare up at the Sheriff.

"License and registration."

Graham repeats a little uneasily; the set of his jaw reminiscent of a grimace, though this is lost on the blonde who glares out of the front windscreen with her own teeth clenched in simple rage.

"Why? What was I doing?"

She hisses, and Ruby throws her friend an uneasy glance as she recognises the thin, icy quality to the younger woman's tone from the rather tempestuous time Emma had warned her to quit talking about raising a child.

"I'm going to need you to step out of the car, ma'am."

The Sheriff orders, with a look on his face that suggests he has little more clue as to why he should want such a thing than Emma does herself.

"Graham, what's your deal? Why are you-"

But Ruby pipes down when the blonde slams her palms irritably against the steering wheel, glowering up at the man waiting beside her car with ill-hidden anger.

"If this is your idea of a joke-"

"-Please, lower your tone, Miss Swan, and step out of the vehicle."

Throwing up her hands in disgruntled exasperation, Emma does as she's told; slamming the door shut behind her forcefully before turning to face the Sheriff with her hands on her hips.

"Seriously, Graham, what's this about?"

She snarls, briefly entertaining- and then swiftly dismissing- the idea that the Sheriff has somehow found out about her little situation with the Mayor and might be looking to pay her back for what she is almost certain has become a sudden dry spell. She finds the thought momentarily delicious but also knows the likelihood of Regina divulging anything about their recent explorations of each other's flesh is precisely nil.

Which begs the question of why Graham remains stood just a little too close- uncomfortably close- to
render her stuck staring defiantly up at him with the wing-mirror of the bug poking her uncomfortably in the back. After all, she has exchanged pleasantries with the Sheriff on numerous occasions, and is actually mildly fond of the often lost for words young man. He is often flustered, and usually unsure how to respond to her particular breed of sarcasm when she decides to lay it on him, but he has always met her words with a polite smile, and perhaps a slightly different variety of fondness in return. She knows a lot of that fondness is for what he sees, just as she knows it's the type of appreciation that is completely harmless. She also has some clue that Regina is aware of all this- and not just in the context of her rather disastrous little games- and is fairly sure that although the brunette doesn't quite match her feelings of amusement, she doesn't spare the situation any real concern either.

On the whole, their interactions have always been amiable yet formal.

She doesn't believe she has done anything to rile Graham up, nor are they friendly enough for this to simply be a rather ill-conceived prank.

It just doesn't make sense.

"Are you gonna explain what this is about?"

She demands, coming to the slow realisation that she doesn't much care for the curious fog that taints Graham's features.

"I'm going to need you to calm down."

The Sheriff murmurs without really looking at her, and the blonde frowns as she steps cautiously to the side to lessen the bruising prod of the mirror.

"Graham? ... Why are you doing this?"

**Tossing and turning beneath her covers, the brunette lets out an irritable huff as sleep eludes her. She refuses to attribute her restlessness to anything so foreign as guilt but finds that this is a losing battle.**

"I'm only looking out for her."

She murmurs to the shadows. 'Her', of course, being Emma, and taking up her usual position at the forefront of the brunette's thoughts. Still, Regina doesn't think she can be expected to feel too guilty for her call placed to the Sheriff half an hour ago.

Stop Emma's car. There's a faulty brake light.

A simple enough request, and nothing too dreadful... Surely?

After all, it will be the truth by tomorrow, as she'd placed a second call to Sydney to have him make it so.

"She'll be a little frustrated, and have to go get it fixed at the garage. An inconvenience, of course, but nothing overly upsetting."

She whispers to herself, dark eyes flickering over to the leather snare of her belt which still coils around the post of her headboard.

She recalls the way Emma had smiled at her as she'd played her fingers through soft curls with a
startlingly intense wave of affection.

"Only looking out for her..."

She repeats, and her sigh is one of relief when Henry begins to wail from down the hall. Pushing herself out of bed and pulling on her dressing gown, she pads down the landing to the boy's bedroom and flicks on the light with a low greeting.

"Shh, now. There's no need for any of that."

She smiles down at him, and large eyes blink up at her full of tears before tiny hands shoot up demandingly with their little fingers grabbing at the air.

"Oh, I see how it is."

She smirks; reaching down into the crib and lifting the boy into her arms to nestle against the gentle curve of her waist with a sigh.

"Couldn't sleep either, Henry?"

She asks, walking over to the large window that overlooks her lawn and gazing out into the night. She supposes Henry might simply have gotten his fair share of sleep earlier and is rather grateful for this fact. She doesn't imagine things would have gone quite the way they had if he'd chosen an hour or so earlier to cry out for attention. Remembering the excruciatingly slow way the blonde had spread her legs to tease at straddling her, she swallows and gives the boy an affectionate squeeze of gratitude.

"What a mess."

She sighs, looking out at her apple tree, and she is unsure just what exactly she's referring to.

The unspoken issue that niggles in the back of her mind of the blonde and her relationship to Henry? Her own relationship with the blonde?

Her unsettling, yet exhilarating spectrum of emotions since Emma's arrival in town?

Her fear- a sharp, white fear- that letting the girl cross the town line with the waitress in tow might be a bad idea?

That it might be a very bad idea indeed...?

It is not something she knows for certain, but it isn't something she isn't about to put to chance, and she tells herself once again to desist fretting and that Graham will take care of things.

He'd been dubious on the phone, but he had agreed to tail Emma out into the woods as a personal favour, and she trusts that he will do as she asks.

"This is ridiculous... I'm going back to sleep."

She murmurs resolutely, before walking from the room with Henry in her arms and padding down the stairs.

Fifteen minutes later, as she sits behind the wheel of her Mercedes. Looking out at the nondescript stretch of road that rolls out just beyond the sign to her right, she glances down at the babyseat
strapped into the passenger side and finds that Henry has once more fallen asleep.

It's alright for some.

Stepping from the car and into the biting chill of the night air, she pulls her dressing-gown closer to her slim frame and stalks over to the invisible border between Storybrooke and the rest of the world.

There are markers, sure, but only that she can see. The broken yellow lines dividing the sides of the road go on indefinitely, and she doesn't imagine that if any of her fellow neighbours were to take it upon themselves to stray this far towards the edge of town that they would pay the slightly flared edge of one of those monotonous lines any mind. Nor does she imagine they would think twice if they were to glance to the side and spy the stunted branches gracing the north side of an old fir tree.

Or the small row of rocks neatly piled either side of the road.

Or even, perhaps, the nondescript wooden stake hammered into the dirt on the other side of grey tarmac to mirror the town sign.

These are things that only she might notice, and she looks from one marker to the other now with a thoughtful expression.

She finds herself wishing for the first time that things could be a little easier.

That she could shed some of the responsibility the curse has landed her with.

That- and she surprises herself as the thought crosses her mind- she could just get on with life and forget about Snow and Charming and the others, and enjoy her time with the blonde and simply let go of the title that sits like a lump in her throat every time she reminds herself that Emma will one day go by another name.

The Saviour.

The thought has crept up on her once or twice- like a cloaked threat lingering in the shadows- that she has no clue what their current defiance of the laws of magic might have upon the curse, but each time the matter has entered her head, she has shied away from it with her jaw clenched and her knuckles blanched.

She has resorted to her darker self when accosted with such hateful thoughts; recalling the bloodshed and hatred that had marked many years of battle between herself and the Fair Queen, and smirking cruelly when thinking of the shy way Snow's princess had murmured against her lips to ask for permission to make her feel all of the pleasurable goodness her mother had refused to let her have. It is a thought that has recently been followed with a dull sense of guilt, but old habits die hard, and she has been miserable for much too long to be able to let go of everything at once.

When she and Emma are alone, she has begun to feel like she might just be able to do so. She feels good and powerful, but in control of herself. Sure of herself.

"That should be enough..."

Yes, it should be. And she realises with a sense of surprise that beneath her whirlwind of thoughts and confusion lies a deep, black anger.

An anger she is slowly coming to realise is trained towards Rumplestiltskin.

Towards The Curse.
She had grown up to the words- had been conditioned to the words- that all magic comes at a price...

But no one had ever really explained to her what that might mean.

She'd simply thought it was an archaic and terrible saying. Something to do with good and evil and the forces of the world.

Something huge.

And, it might still be all those things, but she imagines she understands it better now than she ever had when sat in her throne with blood on her hands and a crown on her head.

Because now, she has a secret. She's confused. She has Henry. She has Emma. She has lots of wonderful, brilliant things, but decisions made in a time long gone when in possession of a power she no longer even has have made it so that all of those good things- those things she cares about so deeply- are muddled together and coated with a slick, poisonous tar of her own making. They are tainted and fickle, and threaten to slip between her fingers as she has made them tricky to grasp and keep a hold of.

And... She has a terrible, sinking feeling that once one of those things she holds dear breaks free- screaming and with fingers outstretched uselessly as she knows in her heart she won't have the power to pull them back to her- the rest will unravel.

This intricate web she has worked so hard to weave.

A wind will come and pluck the flies caught in the strands from her one by one.

"Don't be ridiculous."

She scolds herself, but her voice wavers slightly, and she doesn't think that the fact she's shivering has anything to do with the cold.

"You think too much..."

Her mother's words, and she bites her tongue angrily as soon as they escape. Pursing her lips and stalking resolutely back to her car, she pauses as she catches a faint glint from the dirt at the side of the road. Telling herself not to- somehow sure that she doesn't want to see whatever it is that's catching the moonlight- she walks hesitantly over and bends down to pick a small sliver up from the mud.

Glass.

The curve to one side suggesting it might once have belonged to a small, soft-edged square mirror.

Something like a wing-mirror.

Say, of an old Chevrolet truck...

...Blood runs down Mikey's face and paints his hair into ludicrous, terrible spikes; blotting the collar of his shirt a sticky crimson as his mouth opens and closes uselessly. His top lip is nothing but an open gash from where the glass of the windshield ruptured against his weight, and his right arm hangs at a queer angle that no merciful god would have ever created. He-...

"-No."
Regina snarls, and she tosses the glass into the shadows of the trees as though it were a diseased thing.

"No, no, no."

Stalking back to her car and sitting rigidly behind the steering wheel, she strives to slow her fearful panting, before fumbling her keys into the ignition.

"It's not safe. It's not enough!"

No, she doesn't believe it is... A broken tail light? She's going to bet the blonde's safety on a broken tail light?

"I'm doing this for your own good, Miss Swan."

She mutters as she punches the buttons of her cell with shaking fingers.

"H-Hullo?"

"It's me."

"...Regina?"

A similar sense of confusion as she'd sensed from the Sheriff earlier on, now mixed with the definite grogginess of sleep.

"Listen, Graham, about what I asked you to do... There's been a change of plan."

And she goes on to tell him what she wants; growing more and more agitated as her demands are met by question after question- the Sheriff sounding increasingly dubious as their conversation plays out.

When he asks her if she's sure she's alright, she knows she's lost him.

Knows he's not going to do what she wants.

So she hangs up.

That's okay... She has other ways to make the Sheriff do as she wills of him. She's done it before, and she will do so now.

And, just like that first time- that terrible, confusing time when all she'd really wanted was to clutch something to her, to keep Owen safe, to keep him with her- she's only doing it because she cares.

Only doing it because all she can see when she closes her eyes is a sliver of glass glimmering up from packed dirt. Only this jagged piece has a rounded side that matches the curiously sunny shape used for the mirrors found on a VW beetle.

And, rolling down the broken, fractured side of the shard, she watches again and again as a bead of blood splashes onto the cold, wet mud.

"Why are you doing this?!"

Emma repeats with her temper swiftly rising.
From the passenger seat of the bug, Ruby watches through the window with growing nervousness as she reads the fluctuating body language taking place outside. At first, Graham had kept the blonde pinned against the car with his proximity, and- more so- his authority, but now the younger woman's stance has gone from rigidly uncomfortable to threateningly hostile, and the waitress fears that her friend might be about to do something stupid.

"Talk to me!"

Emma snaps, but her anger is laced with unease as something about this situation doesn't seem right at all.

Silence.

"Will you just fucking-"

"-I asked you before to tone down your attitude, Swan, unless you want to be liable for threatening an officer of the law."

"Threatening?! Just tell me what in the hell I'm liable for to begin with! That car's mine, and you fucking know that already because the goddamn Mayor sorted out getting it here! You think they didn't need some kind of proof for that?! It's my name on the papers, and my gas in the tank! I was driving way under the limit, and-"

"-Were you?"

"Yes!"

"Can you prove that?"

"Well, no... But can you?!"

Emma snarls angrily, and through his dull haze of confusion, Graham feels a slight pang of revulsion as he is dimly aware that he is seeing a side to the blonde that she has kept well hidden since coming to town. He is seeing something feral- an animal biting and thrashing with the intent to hurt, to kill, to make up for being caught in their miserable trap- in the girl that scares him.

Mostly because he absolutely doesn't want to be doing this.

"Speaking of limits... How much have you had to drink?"

He continues, knowing full well she hasn't touched anything more than orange juice since rolling out of bed this morning.

"What?!"

She hisses venomously, and he frowns as he wants to take a step back and give her some space, but he can't.

"Answer the question, please."

"Nothing! It's eleven in the fucking morning! What kind of crap are you trying to pull!?"

"I'm afraid I'm having trouble believing your story."

He sighs; believing it completely.
"Well, that's too fucking bad for you then!"

Emma yells, and a small voice in her head tells her nervously to stop- tells her that she's only making whatever crazy situation this is worse- but she doesn't want to listen. Because this is just complete bullshit, and there is no way in hell she's about to allow the goddamn assholes of the law punish her for something she didn't do.

Not again.

And especially not here.

She baulks momentarily as she suffers the thought of what Regina might think if she was seeing all this, before she lays it to rest with a defiant shake of her head.

Regina wouldn't insult her with such a ludicrous accusation.

Regina would know the truth.

"Emma...?"

Ruby asks nervously as she slips from the car and glances from the blonde to Graham. She has been unable to hear the words shared between the two, but the way that Emma has her hands curled into tight fists doesn't fill her with much faith.

"Get back in the car, Ruby."

The younger woman snaps, and the waitress shakes her head while playing with the flimsy fabric of her dress with shaking fingers.

"Nah, I don't think I should. I think you should probably just listen to Ruby and keep your cool. I'm only doing my job, and-"

"-He's calling me a fucking drunk!"

"Miss Swan, I never once called you anything of the sort. I believe you need to listen to Ruby and keep your cool. I'm only doing my job, and-"

"-Well you fucking suck at it!"

The blonde shouts, but her words are wet with salt as she battles with rage and confusion; not understanding why what had promised to be a good day should be going so wrong, and why- yet again- she's being backed into a corner where no amount of trying to argue the simple truth of the matter will do her any good.

"Okay, I'm going to have to ask you to come with me."

Graham sighs uncomfortably, and he reaches out to the blonde- not entirely sure what he plans to do- and frowns unhappily when she pulls away with such ferocity that she smacks her hip into the bug's wing-mirror.

"The fuck I am!"

She growls bitterly, and Ruby swallows as her eyes water with sheer confusion, and she calls over the rood of the car to Graham nervously

"Look, Graham, come on! She hasn't done anything wrong! I've been with her all morning; she's not
drunk anything! And I don't get why you would think so in the first place! This is... You're just being mean!

She laments a little childishly, but she doesn't like the way Emma's behaviour has turned for the worse and doesn't understand why Graham is making up stories. She'd kind of thought that he liked the blonde... Had even been a little jealous... And this whole situation just doesn't make any sense.

"Whether she has or hasn't, she's still assaulted an officer, and -"

"-Like hell I have! You're a fucking Sheriff, okay?! And you're accusing me of something you have no fucking proof of! I never assaulted you, and I don't get why the hell you're doing this to me!"

"Well, those are all things we can discuss in more detail down at the Station."

The Sheriff continues robotically, and this time, when he reaches out to take Emma's wrist, she simply looks down at his hand with a throbbing sense of rage, before letting her shoulders slump and tugging herself free.

"Fine. Whatever you say, Sheriff. But I can come along of my own accord. You don't have to make me."

She snaps spitefully, and Graham swallows with a nod and walks over to the cruiser and holds open the door to the back seat.

"Get in, please."

He requests; wishing more than anything that she wouldn't as he has no idea in hell what he's arresting her for... If he's even arresting her...

"I'll send someone to fetch your car."

"Ruby can drive it back."

Emma replies monotonously, and the brunette looks from the car to the blonde with an unhappy scowl.

"Look, Graham, this is some crazy misunderstanding. You know that, right?"

"Ruby, I think you should go home."

The Sheriff replies heavily.

A misunderstanding? Not quite. But I know something's not right about this mess. I just can't seem to do anything about it. I have to take her in, don't you see? I have to. So that you two don't drive any further. So that you don't leave town together. I don't know why it's so, but I have to.

"Go on, Ruby, I'll see you later."

Emma sighs from the back seat, and the waitress wrinkles her nose before swiping a tear from her cheek and turning back for the car.

"You're an asshole, you know that, Graham?!"

She sniffs over her shoulder, and the Sheriff baulks regretfully at the tone of anger in the ordinarily chirpy brunette's voice and hangs his head.
Sure... He knows that. Doesn't know why, but he knows that.

And he slips behind the wheel and waits for the bug to disappear back the way it came. Glancing up into the rearview mirror, he studies the blonde uncomfortably.

"You don't really have to sit back there, Emma. You can come up front if you like."

He suggests cautiously; not liking the way she looks sat back there like she’s the bad guy in all this.

After all, that's where the guilty sit.

"Just drive."

She hisses, training her attention out the window, and refusing to say any more on the matter.

"Okay... I am sorry about this, though."

Graham confides as he puts the car into drive; absentmindedly massaging his chest where a low, strangely empty pain bothers him the way it always seems to when he's confused.

Snapping awake with a cry, the brunette only just misses sending her coffee flying as she jerks in her seat behind her desk. She had sat down to read and try and take her mind off things, but her sleepless night had taken its toll, and when her phone had begun its shrill ringing, she'd been dreaming fitfully with her jaw rested in the upturned palm of her hand.

A good thing she'd been woken too.

The last, hateful wisps of her dream escaping her mercifully.

Something about a car wreck. Smoking. Scarlet.


Red.

Snarling teeth and a full moon and a nightmare unleashed and the broken screams of a young girl devoured by the insanity of her destiny.

"Hello?"

She croaks, sweeping her hair back into place and taking a calming sip of coffee which has gone distastefully cold.

"Madame Mayor, it's Graham."

"Oh?"

"I'm at the Station. I have... Well, I have Emma here. Emma Swan. I think she might be under arrest..."

The Sheriff explains; confusion hanging off his every word.

The Mayor closes her eyes and smiles; not a cruel smile, but a relieved smile.

"Thank you, Sheriff, I will be right there."
Placing the phone back in its cradle, she calls up to Johanna to let the maid knows she's going out for a while, before grabbing her keys and hurrying for the door to go and put Graham out of his misery.

She almost feels bad for him.

She doesn't imagine Emma will be taking things all too well.

She imagines, in fact, that Emma might have some wonderfully colourful things to say about her current situation.

She smiles again.

And this time it is a smile tainted by cruelty.

A cruel, doting amusement, and a dangerous wave of affection.
A/N: This was another one of those 'oh crap I wrote stuff and now I have no idea what to do with it' chapters, but I hope it worked out alright :D For those of you saying you miss a little touch of drama, I'll get next chapter out of the way (heh..) and then see what I can do, as there is a lot that needs to be addressed :) Please review and hope you enjoy!

Stalking up the path to the Sheriff's Station, Regina smirks to herself as she imagines it is a good sign that the place is still standing. She pushes open the door to the main entrance and supposes it is an even better sign that she is not met with the outraged hollering she had half been expecting.

No, and when she enters the main office that overlooks the two cells that make up all their small town has to offer in terms of law enforcement- all their small town has ever needed in terms of law enforcement- she finds the place calm and surprisingly quiet.

Glancing over at the cell on the left, her heart jumps into her throat for just a second as she spies the blonde lain strewn upon the mattress on her back with her hands limp and a terrible slash of crimson painting her side. Shaking her head, she blinks, before realising that Emma simply stares up at the ceiling moodily with the sleeve of the ghastly red jacket she seems to have taken an inexplicable liking to draped over her stomach.

"Regina..."

Graham welcomes her gratefully as he looks up to spy her in the doorway, and the blonde rolls over onto her side with her brows raised, before pushing herself up to perch on the mattress with an audible huff.

"Look, Regina, I-"

"-Hello, Sheriff."

The Mayor cuts the younger woman off mid-sentence, but she glances over at the girl and offers her a small, secretive smile of greeting that begs of Emma to trust that she's on her side. Green eyes narrow with understandable irritability, but the blonde holds her tongue out of respect for the Mayor. This new take on events has the Sheriff frowning in confusion- having asked the young woman first politely, and then, as an exasperated last resort to shut up when the blonde had reacted rather vocally to being led towards the cell in which she waits- as he hadn't imagined Emma had it in her to indulge such a courteous breed of obedience. After all, she had been stonily silent for their ride back to the Station, and had actually nodded compliently when he'd opened up the car door and asked her to follow him inside, but as soon as he'd pointed to the small cot waiting behind iron bars, that irritable
silence had become a snarling rage, and he'd worried for a second or two that he might have to physically force the woman into the cell.

Such an idea hadn't sat well with him at all.

For one, he'd remained entirely unsure why he should want to shut her behind lock and key in the first place; some inner voice simply asserting firmly that this was how it was to be.

For another... He'd been a little scared when looking her in the eye that she might lash out at him.

That she might punch or hit him.

* Bite me.*

Yes, that, although he had told himself once safe of her wrath that a young woman- even one with the wild glint in her eye the Swan girl had favoured- would never do anything so animalistic as to bite.

Not a nice young woman with such pretty fair locks.

Why, such a notion was almost as ludicrous as Regina herself possessing the smallest hint of malice beneath her strict composure.

* Or, like Snowy...*

Snowy, one of the little Dutch dwarf rabbits owned by the school; one of three that had been found abandoned at the bottom of Granny's garden and taken in by Mary Margaret much to her students' delight. Snowy, who had gotten free of his hutch somehow and run off into the woods only to be found by the town Sheriff whilst on patrol; caught up in the barbed fencing down by the bridge. The rabbit's fur had been matted with gunk and gore, and the sounds it had emitted had been chilling.

* Who would have known that rabbits could scream?*

He'd hurried down the bank and stretched out a hand to try and untangle the little thing- having stopped by the hutches just outside the bike stands to offer up a carrot or two in his time, just like so many members of the town- and the ordinarily friendly creature had looked up at him- eyes wild and rolling- before biting his reaching fingers aggressively to the bone.

Yes, Emma had reminded him of Snowy.

Not that it matters now. Now, Regina's here, and the blonde has switched her eventual murderous silence for a more respectful version of the same.

"What's going on here?"

The Mayor demands irritably, and the Sheriff pulls himself from his thoughts and glances up at her uncomfortably.

"Yeah, Graham, what the fuck is going on here!?!"

Emma pipes up from the cot, and he looks from her to the brunette bashfully as he doesn't have a clue how to answer either of them. Addressing Regina cautiously, he clears his throat and emits what seems to be just about all he's been able to offer on the subject since entering the Station.

"...Well..."
"Well, what?!

The blonde snaps angrily, and Regina glances over at her with casual intrigue, before holding up her palm in a silent gesture that Emma should bite her tongue. Looking back to the Sheriff, she studies him with carefully veiled amusement, before giving in to the small wave of humorous pity she feels for the poor fool and smiling gently.

"A word in the hallway, please, Sheriff."

She requests, and Graham nods compliantly; eager to retreat from the blonde's chilling glower.

Following Regina out of the room- the dull thud of his boots echoing the sharp rapport of her heels- he leans against the wall outside and worries his scruff nervously.

"I don't really know what to say, Regina..."

He admits with a nauseating sense of confusion. Looking into the arresting darkness of the brunette's eyes, he finds he is having trouble recalling the events of the day with any real clarity at all; the time between leaving the Station this morning- around about the time he'd considered popping into the pharmacy to pick up something for what he'd sincerely hoped was heartburn and nothing more serious- and locking the young Swan woman up in her cell a hazy blur.

"Oh, I don't imagine you'd have anything of any importance to impart, Graham."

Regina shrugs genially, and she watches as his hand goes to his chest to massage the flat plain below his collarbones absently.

"No. You're probably right."

The Sheriff agrees with a surprised chuckle; not quite remembering what they'd been talking about in the first place.

"I generally am."

The brunette smiles salaciously, before placing a gentle hand on the man's forearm and speaking to him kindly.

"You don't look well, dear. I suggest you take the day off and redirect your calls. It's a weekend after all, and I'm sure the town will cope with you being on call but wrapped up in bed."

"I... I guess..."

Graham frowns uneasily, and the Mayor shakes her head with her fine features falling into a parody of concern as she places the back of her hand against his forehead.

"Shhh... Don't be stubborn. You clearly need to get some rest."

"Yes. I need to get some rest."

He agrees monotonously, and she offers a winning smile before pointing towards the office pleasantly.

"Go. I'll clean up your mess, Sheriff."

"I'll go. Yes. I need some rest."
Graham repeats, walking down the hall, before turning around with his hand pressed against the door and calling out to the Mayor with a frown.

"Did I... Did I really arrest Emma?"

"You did."

The brunette sighs.

"... Why?"

The Sheriff asks with a puzzled frown.

"That's what I'm wondering too, dear."

The brunette conspires solemnly.

"It seems you just weren't yourself today."

"Well... I'll be."

Graham mutters with his brow furrowed deeply as he takes his leave.

By the time he's made it two blocks down towards the woods to clear his head, he finds he doesn't even quite recall what had caused him to patrol the streets so far from the town centre to begin with.

"You, Miss Swan, are quite a handful, did you know that?"

Regina smirks as she stalks back into the Sheriff's office and regards the young woman sat sullenly on the thin mattress of the cot bed with a sour expression.

"I didn't do anything!"

Emma cries- outraged- before frowning irritably when the brunette chuckles darkly at this.

"No, I know."

Regina sighs, and she smiles pleasantly as she assesses the scene before her with great intrigue. There is something infinitely titillating about the image the blonde creates as she sits caged up with the cruel black bars of the cell slashing linear shadows across their pale relief.

"You... What? You know?! Regina, what the fuck is going on?!"

Emma yells, and suddenly she's up on her feet and gripping the bars as she seethes angrily at her forced predicament. Observing the blonde carefully, the Mayor comes to the tentative assumption that the girl's rage is in no way directed towards her, and she sighs as she debates how to go about the necessary damage control caused by her fears.

With Graham, it's easy. She knows that by the time the Sheriff next sees the blonde he will suffer a twinge of apologetic regret, but no more recollection of the events of today than he would of a particularly vivid dream. Even the waitress should understand what she'd witnessed with anger, but overall acceptance of any obscurities as has always been the way of the Town's folk.

*Emma, though.*
Well, Emma doesn't have to play by the same rules as the others, and so Regina hopes that what she can't count on in the blonde's case with The Curse, she can hope for due to the sheer inexplicability of what had happened earlier. Confusion is a wonderful catalyst towards forgiveness she has found, as the less one understands about the roots of their anger, the weaker their grasp on the situation seems to be.

She understands that Emma is angry.

But she imagines also that the blonde isn't even entirely sure what it is that she's angry about.

That she should be shut away in her cell, yes, of course.

But... Would she be able to repeat word for word the insanity of Graham's riddled accusations?

Might she now begin to question herself as to what in the hell had actually gone on between them?

"You tell me, Emma. What happened?"

Regina asks tentatively, and she feels a great wave of relief when confusion shadows doe-eyed features darkly.

"The fuck if I even know!"

"Emma!"

"What?! You want me to talk better, then you'll just have to wait 'til I'm sat somewhere better!"

The blonde snarls, and Regina considers this point before nodding that the girl should continue and answer her initial question.

Sighing, Emma rests her cheek against one of the bars and grumbles.

"I have no clue what the hell happened. Graham pulled me over when I was in the bug with Ruby and told me to get out. He asked for my papers and asked if I'd been drinking, and then I don't even know what happened. It just escalated."

"I see... And, had you been drinking?"

"What do you think?!"

Emma snaps, and the brunette nods as though mulling this over, before shrugging amiably.

"Well, that's good enough for me. I see no reason why you should remain cooped up in there. So far as I see, no harm's been done."

"You think?!"

The blonde snarls, before reminding herself that Regina has nothing to do with this and struggling to regain her temper.

"I didn't do any harm. Graham did. He shouldn't have put me in here."

She explains sullenly, and the Mayor nods as she recognises unease as well as anger in the girl's eyes and feels a small pang of guilt as she'd known this last part of her plan would be rather upsetting for the blonde, what with her recent past. Still, she hadn't wanted to risk Emma winding herself up into a rage and doing something that would make the situation worse. She can appease the blonde- she
hopes- and trusts that the curse will take care of the others, but if she'd allowed Emma a chance to
give in to her defiance and get straight back in the car once she'd caught up with the waitress, or,
more likely, lash out and spill blood when confronting the Sheriff, things might have been a little
more complicated.

She is silently apologetic that she has allowed the blonde to be wrongly incarcerated.

But, she doesn't imagine she'd have as much control over the situation should Emma have given
Graham a reason to lock her up with just cause.

"The Sheriff doesn't appear to be feeling well at all."

She broaches carefully; not at all surprised when this is met with a careless shrug and roll of green
eyes.

"And I should care for why now?"

"Oh, I don't imagine you should nor do, Miss Swan-"

Regina smirks

"But I've sent him home as the man really didn't seem like himself. Rest assured, I shall be getting to
the bottom of this when he's feeling a little more coherent, but by my understanding, if there is
anyone that shouldn't have been out on the road today, it's our dear Sheriff."

"Damn straight."

The blonde mutters, but she seems to have calmed down a bit, and the brunette nods in agreement.

"I'm sorry your day was ruined."

She sighs truthfully, and the girl shrugs apathetically, before rubbing at her temples.

"I just have fuck all clue what happened."

She repeats again, before allowing the Mayor to let out her nervously held breath as she puts an end
to the situation without even knowing she's doing it.

"I hope Graham's okay, I guess. I'm pissed, but that was just nuts and a half, you know?"

"I am unfamiliar with that particular saying, dear, but I imagine I know what you mean."

"Bite me."

Emma sighs, and the brunette laughs softly as she plucks the keys to the cell from Graham's desk and
stalks towards the bars. Regarding the blonde thoughtfully as the latter waits expectantly on the other
side, she suffers an unexpected wave of relief at the younger woman's safety and reaches through the
bars to pull Emma to her with some difficulty; pressing painted lips firmly against pale ones.

"Regina..."

The blonde chuckles in surprise as the bars of the door dig into her cheek uncomfortably, but she
allows the brunette to deepen her kiss with marginal surprise as she feels her body react to this
sudden change of events quite, well, slickly. The idea of being locked up has never been one she's
relished- particularly of late- but there is something inexplicably delicious about the way the bars
press against her forbiddingly while a soft hand rests against her stomach before trailing slowly-
"D-didn't think this would be your thing, Madame Mayor... Didn't think you'd have much interest in bad girls."

Emma grins, and the brunette regards her with a sinful smirk and reasons

"Ah, but you're innocent..."

"Then, no offence, but if we're gonna do this, could you at least open the door?"

The blonde reasons as, she hadn't believed five minutes ago she'd have any wish to do anything other than punch the living shit out of Storybrooke's fine Sheriff, but now all that anger and outrage seems to be channelling itself into something else, and she steps back from the door pointedly with her breathing audible as she waits for Regina to unlock the cell.

Catching the fire that flickers in ordinarily cool eyes, Regina swallows; nothing tentative or subservient about the girl now, despite her submissive position at the mercy of her curious captor.

"That is a devilishly adorable dress."

She muses- feeding the flames- as the innocent navy number contrasts shockingly with the blonde's dark expression.

"Open the door."

"Too bad you insist on pairing it with that thing."

Regina continues- pointing towards the red carcass of the girl's jacket- as though clueless that the tension between them is rising palpably; inwardly just a little nervous of what might happen when she gives Emma what she wants given the heat sparking between them and the way the bars and concrete calls remind her of the dungeons back home.

"Yeah? What if I was only wearing the jacket?"
"Yeah? What if I was only wearing the jacket?"

Emma challenges and Regina smiles maliciously as she weighs the keys to the cell in her palm as though deep in thought.

"I might just call your bluff on that, dear..."

The brunette smirks, and she watches curiously as the younger woman throws a glance at brash red leather before repeating her previous irritable demand

"Open the door."

"Give me what I want."

The Mayor counteracts, and she raises a brow when the girl does no such thing but instead curls her fists around the bars and regards her angrily.

"Quit fucking around, Regina."

"Watch your tongue."

The brunette snaps, but she smirks widely, and Emma loses some of the aggressiveness from her stance as she looks once more to the jacket and sighs.

"Look, I'm all up for a little fun, but let me out first, ok?"

She bargains in what she hopes is her most reasonable tone, and her eyes fall to the keys in the Mayor's hand as the darker woman fingers them playfully. Sensing that the brunette has her own ideas on how this is all going to go, she shows her teeth angrily; ordinarily happy to play by Regina's rules, but unable to shed the venomous fury her altercation with Graham has fired up in her.

She can read the lust in the darker woman's eyes, and this along with the lingering taste of Regina's kiss has awoken a hunger deep within that she'll admit she needs sating... But the conflict of her unease and the loathsome spark of fear that knots in her belly as her fists close over unforgiving iron make it hard to concentrate just on lust, and not the blackness seething in her chest.

"Open the door!"

She shouts, but her words are tainted with a pleading quality and this only serves to rile her up more.

"Shhh..."

Regina soothes; stalking the last couple of steps back towards the cell's entrance and studying Emma intently through the bars. The situation strikes her with an almost nauseating sense of deja vu. After all, how many times in her past has she been beseeched to do just that?

*Open the door!*

*Let me out!*

*Please!*
Oh, she has heard such things a thousand times before. Looked into countless faces filled with the same blend of uneasiness and rage as Emma's is now, and laughed back at those hopeless requests. She remembers the pure darkness that had consumed her while stalking the wet, echoing stones of the dungeons, and the sweet and satisfying knowledge that all power over the fate of those worthless wretches within was in her hands. She remembers playing them. Getting them to kneel, beg, grovel, kiss her very feet through the iron embrace of the bars... To no avail.

Of course, once or twice she'd listened to their woeful requests, but had it really been mercy? Had it really been mercy that had led her to letting those odd few prisoners free on the request that they be escorted up to her chambers?

Probably not.

"Take off your clothes and put the jacket on."

She orders now, as she finds herself matching the younger woman's palpable intensity with bittersweet memories and a small bridle of guilt that she discards distastefully for control.

Control over the situation.

Control over her emotions.

As, staring raptly back into fiery emerald and the glittering danger of bared teeth, she realises something truly horrifying.

Truly dreadful.

Utterly divine.

She realises she doesn't just tolerate the blonde.

Doesn't just like the girl.

She loves her.

She loves the Saviour.

And doom has never tasted so sweet.

"Do as I say..."

She snarls with great intrigue as to how Emma might respond. She knows with the blonde, it could easily go either way right now, and she supposes that plays its own part in her attraction to the girl. It has been a terribly long time since she hasn't known exactly what to expect from those around her. The welcome element of uncertainty she is offered by Emma is no doubt dangerous, but the unknown is something wonderful after so many monotonous years. To figure out and anticipate one so similar and yet vastly different to herself...

It is why she had gone back for the girl.

Care, fondness, remorse, but also a deep-seated need.

And, if she hadn't taken Emma up on her relentless proposals to turn the curious pull between them into something physical- something intimate- already, she imagines she might well have forced such a thing upon them now.
Because, the kind of electricity that exists between them in this room needs release, and she swallows audibly when the blonde throws her one, last arresting glower before turning her back and pulling the navy shroud of her dress up over her head in one swift, rough motion to reveal the lightning shock of her flesh.

"Good girl."

Regina breathes, and she smirks as she senses a growing aura of rage emitting from the younger woman's svelte frame; her muscles tight, and her body language as she kicks off her shoes the sort she imagines might well suit a caged lioness.

"Don't call me that in here."

The blonde hisses, but she complies with her order nonetheless; shedding the plain, cotton swatch of her underwear carelessly before leaning over the cot to snatch up the crimson hide of her coat, and the brunette bites her lip as she muses upon the fact that, while Emma has- thankfully- lost the frail, underfed look she'd worn when they'd first met, her legs are still remarkably slender, and the gap between her thighs as she bends over remains vulnerably inviting.

"Open the door!"

The younger woman demands for the last time, as she turns around and shrugs on red leather as though it were her crown. Her coat of armour. Her second skin. Her long curls lie trapped beneath crackling crimson which cuts off just above the dangerous shards of her hip bones.

"As you wish."

The Regina agrees huskily, and she slips tarnished brass into the black eye of the keyhole and allows the door to creak slowly open.

"Well, do you have anything to say for your earlier use of lang-"

But the Mayor's mocking admonishment is cut off by a broken cry of equal parts surprise, pain and disbelief as the blonde slams her hard against the bars; pinning her against unyielding iron aggressively. Sinful velvet slips forcefully between her shock-parted lips as pale hands wrap around the bars that play her assailants, and she tastes the nervous adrenaline on the blonde's tongue as she feels sharp hips pressing into her own.

Finally, she breaks from the momentary spell of Emma's rage and retaliates against such inappropriate behaviour with her own breed of venom.

"Ha-a!"

The blonde growls, as eight red lines of fire blaze down her back- courtesy of the Mayor's nails- before she finds herself being backed up across the cell with such swift dominance that she catches her legs on the lip of the cot's mattress by surprise. From there, all it takes is a hard shove of her shoulders to send her sprawling onto the threadbare sheets with a yelp.

Scarlet lips find her own with aggression rather than relief as they had through the bars, and in response, she threads her fingers eagerly into the soft waves of the darker woman's hair as the latter pins her down in a rather favourable fashion.

Manicured nails- the culprits of the raw, red lines that sting against the sheets- trail maddening patterns of lust and possession across her flesh; their journey a swift and meandering one lacking any sanity or forewarning, and she pants into the brunette's ear as she embarks on her own exploration.
beneath the light- but always respectable- material of the Mayor's skirt.

"Don't you dare mark me..."

Regina warns dangerously before biting down hard on the sparsely freckled flesh of the blonde's shoulder, and Emma yelps as she imagines the Mayor might not have taken all too kindly to being manhandled against the bars. The irony of the situation as her shoulder smarted and her back stings is not lost on her, yet she relishes the fact as perfect teeth close over the fragile bow of her collarbone with unbridled irritation.

She briefly entertains the idea of arguing that their current tryst reeks of double standards, before she gives in to her desires rather than her pride- a rarity, but then, Regina seems to bring out surprising parts of her every day- and she caresses the brunette's cheek gently until the latter eases up her painful grip and replaces her teeth with the soothing stroke of her tongue.

Such tenderness swiftly gets discarded once more for heat, as adrenaline runs through each woman's blood like treacherous fuel, and what has in the past been calculated and considerate becomes rough and desperate. Fingers fly through hair and slide against sex-slick skin as lips crash and moans are swallowed.

It's quick and almost painfully intense, and the blonde cries out first as her pent up confusion channels itself into something tactile and fervent. The darker woman dampens her ecstasy with parted lips, before letting out her own choked moan as sly fingers curl up slickly to leave her shuddering on top of the girl.

"Oh, god..."

Is all she manages as she buries her face into cornsilk tangles and waits for her heart to slow its frantic beating. The younger woman lies spent beneath her; half hanging off the mattress with her eyes closed and several long curls dangling towards the floor. Regina swallows exhaustedly and spies the blonde's precarious position with a smirk before pulling Emma fully back up onto the cot with a sigh and regarding her amiably.

"F-fuck."

Emma stammers, before laughing as she realises she lies beneath the Mayor in just her jacket in a fucking jail cell of all places.

With the door open, she suddenly feels much less threatened.

"That was pretty intense."

She grins, and the brunette nods with a small hint of trouble painting her brow as she spies deep, red marks dappling the girl's clavicles and shoulder that she knows will bloom purple by the morning.

"Thank you for sorting stuff out. I was mostly just confused as all shit- hell, I still am!- but... I was also a bit... Well... I mean, because of what happened to me before, you know..."

"A bit what?"

"Scared, I guess."

Emma admits with a shrug as she lies beneath the Mayor with her jacket splayed open to leave her vulnerable.
"I'm sorry."

Regina sighs, and when the younger woman shrugs once more and informs her that it's not her fault, she feels a small pang of guilt overshadowed by a great veil of relief. This latter blessing is shortlived, as Emma closes her eyes and utters just a few simple words.

"I *did* want to ask you something, though..."
"I did want to ask you something, though..."

Emma murmurs, and the Mayor's breath catches in her throat as she remains draped over the girl's bare flesh; dark eyes flickering uncomfortably over serene features before she pulls the lapel of the blonde's jacket into place to hide the cruel crescent indent of her teeth.

"Yes?"

She asks; striving to keep her tone light. She has little clue what it might be that weighs on the girl's mind, but given the day they've each had and the growing unease she finds when thinking of the past, she struggles to keep her nerves in check.

"What might that be?"

She prompts when Emma remains frustratingly silent, and she flicks at the vulnerable cavern beneath the younger woman's jaw to force a response.

"Hey!"

Emma snaps, but she grins as her long lashes flutter shadow across her cheeks and brunette frowns.

"I wouldn't have done that if you'd answered me."

She points out irritably, but it plays uneasily on her mind that perhaps her instinctual resolution to cause pain in the face of things not going her way might not be as reasonable as she'd once believed.

"I was thinking."

Emma sighs- not in the least bit bothered by the dull sting beneath her chin, nor the Mayor's inner turmoil- and she smiles when she opens her eyes to regard Regina curiously.

"I just... I mean, if I'm not allowed to ask or whatever then that's ok... I guess from some of the stuff you said the other night when we spoke, before we, well, you know, you might not want to... But, I've been wondering, see, and-"

"-For heaven's sake! What is it?!

The brunette snaps; alarm bells going off in her head as she starts fretting over what it might be Emma wishes to know.

*Have you ever done that with any of your other prisoners, Your Majesty?*

Or, perhaps

*Can we discuss Graham again? Doesn't it seem strange that no one here has ever left this town, and the second I try, things start to unravel?*

Or, maybe even

*Do you imagine you're wearing your crown when you're touching me? Do you find your mind wandering just a little and relishing the fact that I'm writhing at your mercy in a way that would just about break my mother's heart, and then hate yourself for such crass thoughts?*
Or, and this one's really the winner.

_Do you ever look at me when we're together and remember the knife you were going to bring with you to Boston?... Say... When you cut my throat in your dream, was that honestly the end of your plan to choke the weed before it could grow? Just how much of our time together has been spent with you knowing somewhere in the back of your mind that might still kill me if I-

-No! I saved you. I would never! I-

"Hey. Earth to Regina..."

Emma chuckles as she raises a brow and regards the brunette coolly. The darker woman remains leant over her with her eyes wide, staring at her with such intensity that the blonde imagines she can feel her cheeks beginning to sting from the fire emitted by those dark coals.

"Excuse me?"

The Mayor murmurs, and she tosses her hair irritably when the blonde raises a hand to touch soft, chestnut tresses.

"Look, I just... I just wondered... is all... Have you ever done anything like this before?"

"You mean the jail cell?"

"No... I mean, like... The way we... You know. I really hadn't figured you for the type to have, uh, _girl_ experience and stuff, just because from the sounds of it you've been here and in charge since you must have been, well, shit, I don't even know! I mean, you're pretty young _now_, but then it sounds like you've been here _forever_! And, it's not exactly the kind of place I guess that I would think you'd have, uh... That kind of experience. I guess I'm not really making much sense- my brain isn't really functioning at full capacity, what with our last little adventure!- but I just sometimes wonder about you is all. You run this town and it's just as sleepy and orderly as you said it would be, and you're this smart, accomplished, _panty-droppingly_ attractive woman... But every now and then I just get this feeling like there's _more_ to it. To you. Like that, you're not just Regina, but you're this darker, dominant, demanding person that sometimes comes out when we're together. Like you've done this before and you know you're good at it. I don't know _when_ and I don't know _where_, and I guess it's just all in my head, but when you tell me what to do, I just get this feeling like something kind of... Switches _on_ you. Does that make sense?"

"I..."

But the blonde doesn't catch the brief flash of naked fear that dances across ordinarily composed features- the Mayor (_the Queen!_) simultaneously terrified and furious as she thinks again of the knife and of how she doesn't _want_ to do it, please no, she doesn't _ever_ want to do it, but if the Saviour somehow knows the _truth_ then this could be the end of _everything_, and her world will surely crumble- as she pulls the brunette down to taste the devilish curve of her jaw.

"Or, you know, I guess I'm curious about the jail cell, _too._"

Emma smirks against hot flesh, and the Mayor swallows as she suddenly understands that the blonde knows _nothing_ of the darkness in her heart and simply muses idly in the way she has read that lovers do when coasting the comfortable highs of their endorphins and pleasure.

_She doesn't know_ anything.

_She's just read too many fairytales._
"No, Miss Swan, I have never before fornicated in a jail cell. Nor do I imagine I shall ever do so again."

Regina snaps icily now, and, because she still suffers the aftertaste of her fear, she enquires cruelly

"What about you?"

The blonde regards her coldly as she pushes herself back up to look down into green eyes with bitter intrigue, before Emma sighs the long-suffering sigh of one who isn't really angry but plans to act that way for a little while longer, and replies moodily.

"No, Mayor Mills, I have never been fucked in a jail cell before."

Her tone is decidedly irritable, and Regina smirks as she meets the challenge in the blonde's eyes easily- Emma's lips pulled into a smile, but the hardness behind sooty lashes daring her to come out and say more on the matter- and she muses silkily

"Well. That must have been a frightfully boring eleven months."

Sharp teeth snarl up at her, before the blonde chuckles softly; shaking her head and letting her anger bleed out with her laughter.

"Yeah, that was the downside, Regina. Other than that, it was fucking Disneyland."

"I see."

Regina smiles; noting to herself that this is the second time she's heard this strange Land mentioned but paying her ignorance little mind. She has learnt over the years that smiling- even when one has no clue what they're smiling about- works almost as well as the confusion of others when met with questions she can't answer.

"And I'm not saying I'm not pissed as hell that you just asked that and that you kept the door locked so long, but... I guess I forgive you."

The girl grins as she slips a hand beneath the Mayor's- rather creased- shirt, and Regina sighs, before looking thoughtfully around the cell when Emma seems lost in her own thoughts.

"...I've never done this before."

She states quietly.

"No, I know, we just established-"

"-No, I mean... This. The way I am with you. I've never been with anyone the way I am with you."

"Oh."

Emma replies softly; suddenly seeming completely absorbed in a small mark staining the floor as Regina's words sit heavily in her chest in a way that is both terrifying yet exhilarating.

"You have?"

The brunette enquires stonily as she would have expected more of a response, before she reminds herself to read between the lines and she plays her fingers thoughtfully through long curls as the blonde keeps her eyes cast down at the floor.
"...No."

Nodding as she accepts this quiet response for the weight she knows lies beneath it, Regina pushes herself from the cot briskly and picks Emma's dress up from the floor.

"Come on. The likelihood of anyone coming in is pretty slim, but it never pays to be reckless-"

*Oh, but don't I know that!*

"-and it's getting cold. Johanna will wonder where I've gotten to, also."

She sighs as this last comment is met with another careful examination of the floor, before tossing navy cotton at the blonde and watching her get dressed with casual interest.

"I guess I need to go and talk to Ruby..."

"Mmm."

Regina offers with a tight-lipped frown, before Emma puts her mind at ease- not showing any inclination to get immediately back on the road- as she slips on her underwear and swiftly follows suit with her shoes.

"You know, just so she knows I'm not secretly on America's Most Wanted or something, with posters across the nation bearing my ravishing likeness."

"Ravishing?"

Regina scoffs, though she is met with the uninvited memory of several such posters commissioned to put a stop to the blonde's own mother.

"Unequivocally beddable."

Emma agrees, and the brunette chokes on her thoughts and rolls her eyes.

"It's really a *shame* that while your vocabulary is undoubtedly impressive, your thoughts fall so grievously short."

"Tongue laced with silver, mind in the gutter."

Emma shrugs, and Regina laughs softly and speaks before she realises she means to do anything of the sort.

"Come on, I'm hungry. I'll get us lunch."

"Really?"

The blonde raises a brow in surprise; Regina's offer so casual and friendly that the memory of the fire that had blazed between them just moments ago seems almost impossible. The Mayor shrugs as though unfazed either way, but inside she matches Emma's surprise whole-heartedly. Before she'd opened her mouth, she'd envisaged taking her leave and heading back to her mansion to see Henry. Perhaps she'd even ask Johanna to join her for a bite to eat in the kitchen.

She remains ever so slightly bemused at the irresponsible swiftness of her tongue as she follows Emma out of the Station and down the sun-drenched path to Main Street.
"Thanks."

Emma smiles as Regina takes a seat beside her outside a small cafe near the school- Granny's silently vetoed for a number of undiscussed but agreed upon reasons- the darker woman handing her a brimming glass of coke.

"It's not good for you, you know."

Regina frowns, and Emma grins as she watches the Mayor sip at her sparkling water primly.

"I'll live."

She assures the brunette, and the latter purses her lips to hide a smile.

"Yes, I suppose you probably will. Although, I would suggest that your food orders might benefit from becoming a little more adventurous."

She offers with amused disdain, and she throws Emma a pointed look when their waitress- rather less chirpy, but a whole lot more clothed than Ruby- comes out and places their lunch down with a murmur that they should 'enjoy', followed by a curious glance over her shoulder that the Mayor doesn't quite care for as she heads back inside.

"Grilled cheese is good for you. It's natural, it comes from cows."

"Well, by that token, one could say wine was good for them as it started life as a grape."

"Ah! And she has seen the light!"

Emma laughs, and Regina glowers at her irritably as she skewers a piece of broccoli with her fork and shakes her head.

"You must drive that poor cat of yours mad with the amount of utter nonsense that falls from your tongue."

"Oh, Cass doesn't mind. She likes my tongue. Just the same as you do... But probably for different reasons-"

"-I am eating, Miss Swan."

"... You really suck at trying to deflect innuendo, don't you, Madame Mayor?"

Emma grins, and Regina shoots her a murderous scowl as she hisses that she sometimes wishes she'd never set foot in Boston.

A bemused roll of green eyes that belie a slight glimmer of hurt in return.

"... That's not true."

The brunette murmurs- surprising herself at the complete honesty of this admission- and she points to the blonde's lunch amiably as she reaches across the table for the pepper grinder.

"Now, come on, eat your heart-attack-waiting-to-happen and give your tongue a rest."

She scolds, but she does so with a knowing wink, before hastily putting a piece of potato in her mouth in the hopes that she'll stop chatting away to the girl that has troubled her so deeply and for so long.
Before she comes right out and tells her exactly how she feels.

Before she can blurt out 'Emma, I'm happy', because those words have never once crossed her mind before, and she is terrified of what they might mean.

She is saved from her dilemma as a familiar figure approaches slowly from up the street. He is instantly recognisable by his limp and his reliance on his cane, and she feels a sour taste lurking on her tongue as she finds herself suddenly wishing they'd asked for a table inside. What's curious though... Well, what's curious is that when she glances over at Emma, the blonde seems to be studying the old pawnbroker with a distasteful frown that mirrors her own.

"He's weird, isn't he?"

The blonde broaches in a hushed tone, and Regina considers this question thoughtfully before answering with controlled caution

"He's best avoided if you ask me, dear."

"You two do a lot of business together, don't you?"

"We do. Out of necessity... It has always been that way, but I do not relish the fact."

The Mayor replies, choosing her words carefully, and she raises her hand with clipped politeness as Gold limps past; not caring for the long, studious look he offers her, nor the smile that plays across his lips. Watching him go on his way, she shakes her head when Emma asks if he's ever 'tried anything funny'.

"Not exactly. He's just a man that will stop at nothing to get what he wants... That is not someone that you want to put your trust in."

"No, I guess not."

"I-"

"-What does he want?"

Emma frowns, and Regina looks at her long and hard- somehow sure that the answer is sat right in front of her, but not knowing why or what to do with this certainty- before answering with another version of the truth.

"I don't know."

"You know, Gold said something weird to me the other day."

"Yes, you mentioned the two of you spoke..."

"He asked me if I'd noticed anything funny about this town. Also about you. He told me to think about it."

"I see... And have you?"

"Plenty."

Emma shrugs, and the Mayor swallows audibly as she studies the girl for clues on what she might mean.
"Oh, yes?"

"Yeah, but I think anywhere this quaint and set away from the hum of things will have its quirks."

Another small shrug, and the brunette allows herself to breathe again as she watches the girl finish her meal.

"I would guess that that's true."

She nods; suddenly losing any interest in her own food, and pulling out her purse with an air of dismissal.

"I really should get back, dear... And you best talk to Miss Lucas, although I wouldn't worry too much... I'm sure she's already forgotten all about it."

"I doubt that! I was fucking arrested!"

Emma points out, and Regina thins her lips as she doesn't much like the thought of the blonde disappearing off to discuss the rather odd course of events that have taken place today. Still, there's nothing she can do about it, and she takes some comfort in the way Emma had seemed entirely dismissive of Gold's unfavourable questioning.

_Please... Just let everything pass... I only wanted to help her today... Please._

"I'm sure Ruby understands."

She smiles, and Emma raises her palms with a look of 'who knows?', before grinning amiably.

"Thanks for lunch, Regina."

"You're very welcome, dear."

"Sorry that you got dragged out to my rescue."

"Yes, well, you paid me back quite splendidly, so I shall never mention it again."

"I should get into trouble more often!"

"I would very much prefer it if you didn't."

"Aw, spoilsport."

Emma laughs, turning to leave before calling after the brunette thoughtfully.

"There is one thing, actually."

"One thing?"

"That I don't understand."

"Just one?"

"I mean about the town, smart-ass."

"...Oh?"

A facade of disinterest, but the blonde doesn't miss the way the Mayor fails to reprimand her for
name calling, and she frowns as she points to the looming face of the clock tower up ahead.

"I don't understand that."

"...It's a clock. If you haven't quite mastered telling time, I appreciate your confusion, but fear not, as that thing's never worked anyway."

Regina responds with a curt air of mockery and an obvious wish to call an end to their discussion.

"Okay..."

Emma frowns, accepting Regina's bid to wish her farewell, and she *almost* elaborates, but she is insightful enough to know that she has been dismissed.

Offering a small wave, her brow furrows when she turns away to head back to the Diner and her thoughts return once more to the clock tower.

*That thing's never worked.*

Except it *has*...

It worked when she first arrived.
A/N: Sat down for a beer and to read... and then the first paragraph came swimming in my head and the next thing I know... this chapter happened. 40 minutes of hectic typing. That could either be a good or a bad thing! You decide! :)

By the time the blonde makes her way up the steps of the Diner, several fat, white clouds have broken up the blue relief of the sky, but the sun still blazes, and the town retains the lazy haze that has blanketed it since this morning. It's still early enough in the afternoon that only one or two loyal patrons sit at tables and booths inside, and she glances over toward the counter to spy one of Granny's part-time girls popping her gum and looking less than thrilled that she's cooped up inside watching the ice melt slowly in the soda glass to her right.

Granny herself greets her curtly in the hallway as she wages her continual war with spiderwebs that only she appears to be able to see, and from the indulgent nod and steely twinkle in old- but eerily sharp- eyes, Emma guesses that Ruby hasn't mentioned anything about her earlier run in with the Sheriff.

And that suits me just fine!

"You got some sun today, girl; you look well."

"I was sat out for lunch with the Mayor."

The blonde explains- silently amused over the fact that only Granny can make what is almost a compliment sound accusatory and laced with suspicion- and the older woman offers her an amiable enough 'hmm' and tells her that Ruby can be found outside worshipping the rays.

Heading down the back steps- rather more rickety than those out front- into the small garden behind the Diner, Emma plucks a long blade of grass stealthily between her thumbs and blows on it to elicit a loud rasp.

"Fuck it!"

Comes a shrill shriek from one of the old deck chairs pulled out of storage and placed in prize position beside the bird bath, and Emma laughs appreciatively as Ruby glowers at her while going about brushing spilt ice and root beer from the pale expanse of her stomach. The waitress has traded her out-of-place black cocktail dress for a skimpy scarlet bikini, and Emma supposes she now has the answer as to why she had spied two young boys trying to peek through the hedge on her way in.

"Sorry."

She grins as she takes a seat in the grass beside the chair, and Ruby rolls her eyes as she chucks a chunk of ice from her glass at the blonde and shakes her head.

"Like hell you are."
"Would I lie to you?"

"Definitely."

The brunette grumbles, but her tone remains light enough until she pushes up her sunglasses and regards the younger woman severely.

"So you're not locked up or anything, then?"

"Observant."

"What the hell happened?"

"That, Ruby, is the question of the hour! Hell, the whole fucking day!"

Emma sighs, before smiling her thanks when Helen- she of the pink bubblegum and apathetic expression- comes skulking out with a fresh glass of root beer for Ruby and a fizzy apple-ade bubbling around a fluorescent pink straw.

"Thanks."

The blonde smiles, and Helen nods and hands her the glass before sniffing pointedly at Ruby and turning back for the door.

"That girl does not like me."

The brunette muses with no great display of concern, and Emma smirks as she drinks in brazenly exposed flesh and the shit-eating grin that settles on cherry red lips.

"No, I don't think she does."

She agrees, and she sips at her drink while contemplating the fact that she can both see why, and not understand it one little bit just the same. Ruby is... Well... Ruby, and she comes exactly as you see her. She can be loud and a little overwhelming at times, but her heart just about bleeds daily, and all in all, she doesn't mean any harm.

"Oh well. So, go on, what happened? What did the asshole want?"

"I dunno... Regina says she doesn't think he's feeling well."

"Regina?"

"Yeah, well, Graham called her to come over. It was all a bit weird really, but at the end of the day, I'm free to terrorise the streets, and I even got lunch out of it."

She grins, relishing the knowledge that she got a whole lot more than a grilled cheese and coke out of the Mayor's heroic jump to the rescue.

"You two are such an old married couple."

Ruby giggles, and Emma glowers at her before shrugging when she realises she doesn't much give a shit about that insinuation.

"Bite me."

"Nope."
"I'll tell you *this* much; next time Graham comes in for coffee, there's likely to be some spit in it."

"Well, that's probably as close as you're ever gonna *get* to any nasty business with him, but either way, maybe not super grown up. Sounds more like something *I* would do."

"And you're a *terrible* influence."

The brunette muses, before sighing and sipping from her drink moodily.

"I'm still bummed out we didn't get to go to Portland, though."

"Yeah, me too."

"I know it sounds crazy, but I was almost *waiting* for something like that to happen."

"What, for me to get falsely incarcerated?"

"Course not, I just mean like... Something that would stop us from going. I just kind of *knew*."

"There's no *way* you could have known."

"No... I know. Like I said, it sounds crazy, but then so does Graham- who's probably never written up a citation in his life- chasing you down with his siren blaring. For one, you didn't *do* anything and he fucking *knew* it... For another, he looked like he was just about ready to *wet* himself. I think you made him nervous- hell, back there you made *me* nervous, you're a hard chick, you know that?- but he also likes you just fine usually, and that whole deal just stank of something fishy."

"Yeah..."

Emma agrees, and her brow furrows a little as she doesn't recall *half* of what the Sheriff had said, but she remembers Regina's words on the matter just fine. Regina had told her she'd known she didn't do anything wrong, before even *attempting* to get to the bottom of things. It would be a pleasantly naive assumption to believe that her certainty on the matter had come down to the bond that has sparked between them, but the blonde isn't really the naive sort when it comes to such things.

*Not any more.*

Regina had seen where she'd come from. She's been on the receiving end of being ditched after her tour guide climbed out of a window and onto a dumpster. Regina has had to bail her out of a number of situations to date, including one that had presented itself as the result of a -perfectly amicable- break-in and entering while in possession of a stolen bottle of gin. In short... Regina doesn't really have any reason *not* to think that she might have been up to something, however innocuous.

And yet she'd taken up her defence with no questions asked.

*No questions at all...*

"Was Regina pissed?"

Ruby asks lazily as most of her attention has returned to the sun, and the blonde shrugs her shoulders in the downy grass as she ponders over the same thing.

"I don't think so. Not with me, anyway. She seemed to think it was just a big misunderstanding."
"Hmm."

"What?"

"I just didn't think Regina knew there was such a thing as a misunderstanding. A muddy footprint on the floor is always an act of purposeful malice in that woman's eyes, and an unanswered phone call is a sure act of treason."

"She's always been pretty good to me."

Emma points out, and she surprises herself as she recognises a definite protective note to her voice, but the waitress either doesn't hear it or ignores it as she giggles slyly

"Yeah, well, she loooooves you though, doesn't she?"

"Does not."

The blonde scoffs, but she feels her cheeks flush lightly as a small voice pipes up wickedly

Do you think maybe she could ever-

but she shuts it off sternly and crunches a sliver of ice between her teeth.

Opting to change the subject for something that doesn't involve her feelings for the Mayor- that is, if they could even be called feelings, I mean that's a very strong word, and not really your style, and fuck it to hell, they're definitely feelings, Swan, and you know it- she squints up at the mossy edge of the birdbath and shoots for a random topic in the dark before Ruby can mention the 'L' word again.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"You know the clock tower in town?"

"Hard to miss it."

"Sure, but like, you know it doesn't work?"

"Yeah, that thing's never worked that I can remember. Faulty cog or something."

"Okay, but you know it worked for a little while, right?"

"Hmm?"

"After I came to town, I noticed in the morning that it had started working. I only really paid attention to it because when we drove past on our way into town, it said it was eight fifteen, and it wasn't even six yet."

"Oh... Yeah, I suppose you're right. It did work for a bit, didn't it?"

The waitress shrugs disinterestedly, before speculating

"Maybe Marco looked at it or something."

"Maybe... But that's the thing..."

"What is?"
"Well, a little while after I got here, I was at Regina's and she asked the Sheriff about it and to take a look at it."

"There you go, then."

"But she asked him to look when it was working. And then it stopped."

"Yeah? That's weird..."

"Right? I mean... Regina is super particular about everything in this town, but a massive great clock that pretty much acts as the feature point on Main Street doesn't work, and she just lets that slide?"

"I guess it is a bit odd now you mention it. Why don't you ask her?"

"I did... Kind of. It was weird, it was like she didn't really want to talk about it."

"Well, that's probably because you were boring her by talking about a dumb old clock, Emma."

Ruby smirks, and she smacks the blonde's raised knee lightly when a piece of ice soars up to land above her navel.

"Ass."

She grumbles appreciatively, before turning in her chair and peering over the armrest at the younger woman with excitement glittering in her eyes.

"So, I feel we really struck out today, and need to regroup. I told Ash that I'd go down to the Rabbit after my shift, and I'm taking you with me."

"Granny won't mind?"

"Is she your mother?"

"Well, no, but she still terrifies the crap out of me."

Emma grins, and Ruby nods in solemn understanding before shrugging with a smile.

"Don't drink if you're worried about it. Then she won't mind a bit."

"Okay, cool, that sounds good."

The blonde agrees happily, and she will later suppose that at the time, she'd genuinely considered doing just that.

"Regina..."

Gold glances up from his study of an intricately engraved thimble with mild surprise as the afternoon sun streams into his shop in narrow, hazy shafts, courtesy of the shutters that leave the place filled with shadows and oddly cool.

"We need to talk."

"Do we? Why, whatever about? I was unaware you and I had any pressing matters of business betwixt us?"

"As was I... But I'm beginning to think I might have reason to be concerned on that count..."
"You're concerned that you and I have business together?"

Gold asks softly, and he points towards a curtain to their left which leads through to a poky back room in which two, baby-puke green Chesterfields lie in wait.

"What if someone wants to look around your shop?"

Regina frowns, following the little man behind old velvet.

"Oh, they rarely do, as you may have noticed. What I sell... Well, I imagine one day it might be of interest, but I wager that won't be for quite a few years yet. At least, I imagine so, but as of late, I do find myself lying awake and wondering... As for the material and the sensical; the here and now... It seems the patrons of this town do not find my wares to be of any desire. In fact, a number of them have expressed distinctly negative feelings, if you would believe it; they claim the artefacts that line my many shelves seem haunted. That they awaken curious thoughts- impossible memories- of times that could never have existed. Not in this world, anyway."

"...And why's that?"

The Mayor breathes uneasily as she sinks into the mothball stench of the grand old chair; her complexion pale and decidedly unhealthy in contrast to the sun-kissed glow Emma had silently envied not an hour ago.

"You would understand if you heard some of their lunatic mutterings... There is no magic in this world you see, Madame Mayor."

The old pawnbroker explains gravely, and the brunette nods as she licks her lips which seem suddenly devoid of moisture.

"No. Such fancies are preposterous."

"Indeed... Now, what is it that you felt the need to seek me out for?"

Gold smiles- a courteous enough smile, but it sends a ripple of revulsion down the Mayor's spine- and he brings over a thermos of iced tea before taking up the seat opposite his guest.

"I'm not sure."

Regina replies truthfully, and the old man grins as he sips at his tea and points a gnarled, yellow-nailed finger at her with an obscene breed of amused affection.

"That's not like you, dearie."

"No."

She agrees, and her eyes travel over the numerous objects spilling and lurching around the small room that make up the overflow of those crowding Gold's shop. One particular item of interest is an old mobile hung just behind her host's head; and she can't help but inwardly feel that its positioning is anything but random. Delicate glass blown clear and blue to create a stampede of lazy unicorns suspended in a never-ending, serene canter from the mobile's web. She recognises it- of course she does- and recalls the seething anger that had boiled her blood when she'd enclosed a fist over one of
those tiny, fragile beasts upon understanding the newborn Princess had escaped her fatal wrath.

"It's not like you, but then, little I've seen has been in character lately."

Gold prompts, and the brunette rips her gaze from Emma's mobile and regards the old man cagily.

"How do you mean?"

"Oh, I think you know..."

"I assure you that I do not. Enlighten me."

"The amount time you spend with that girl, dearie, it really is rather fascinating."

"...I presume you're referring to Miss Swan?"

"Emma."

Gold corrects, and painted lips thin distastefully as the brunette finds she despises hearing the blonde's name on the golden imp's lips.

"She works for me."

"Not today she doesn't, and yet-"

"-And yet I chose to spend time with the young woman when not behind a desk? That's your point? Is it so inconceivable that I might socialise outside of my duties now and again?"

"It is a first... Well, a first that you should do so quite so candidly, but then I suppose your late night trysts with our fine Sheriff are not the sort you may want to celebrate by sharing breakfast."

"Excuse me?!"

"Oh, was that rude of me? I apologise. Would you prefer I feigned ignorance?"

Gold grins, and Regina feels rage building up in her chest, but she knows better than to rise to the bait. She's come here for a reason, and it certainly isn't to discuss what she may or may not have been doing with Graham. She has no idea how the little imp has come by this particular nugget of information, but she knows by now not to find herself surprised. Gold has always made it his business to know everything...

She just needs to know if it's Gold she's really speaking to.

Because lately... Impossibly... Worryingly...

She's been beginning to wonder.

"I would prefer that you not redirect our conversation on unsuitable tangents."

She sniffs, and the little man nods, before offering her a sly smile.

"But of course, dearie. I shan't mention the Sheriff again... But am I right in thinking that young Emma is your reason for coming to find me?"

"... What makes you think that?"

She asks silkily, refusing to allow any expression but calm serenity to grace her features as she
doesn’t want to give the pawnbroker any sense of the upper hand. Gold- always one step ahead- ignores her futile attempts at dominance entirely and breezes over their stoic tango without blinking an eye.

"You like her, don’t you, Regina? You like her a lot. More than you feel is appropriate."

"I can assure you my feelings- thoughts about Miss Swan are entirely appropriate."

She purrs, and Gold smirks as he shakes his head.

"To any other than you and I, perhaps. But, I’m not talking of any fanciful, salacious feelings- ah, I apologize, ‘thoughts’- about the girl- although, that said, I would also find myself unsurprised; you have always had a taste for the beautiful and the breakable, haven’t you, Madame Mayor?- I simply mean that given who she is... Who you are... I imagine the bond you have so clearly made with dear, sweet Emma might have caused you some sleepless nights."

Dark eyes flash with cautious fire, and Regina glances once more up to the mobile dangling above the Pawnbroker’s head. She recalls a story Emma had told her a little under a week ago, which the blonde had claimed to be a well-known legend- at least in this world- about a man called Damocles. Emma had conspired that she enjoyed the tale immensely, but the Mayor had found herself much less enthused.

She had privately found herself empathic rather than fascinated.

She imagines she has a fairly good idea of just how that young fool Damocles might have felt.

And now, staring up at the mobile, she understands in a strange way that it only dangles above the pawnbroker physically. In reality, that hateful relic of the past is suspended precariously over her own dark locks.

"What do you mean... Who she is?"

She continues; her words raspy as her throat feels suddenly much too narrow.

"Why the little wretch is Henry’s mother, is she not? His real mother."

"I am his real mother."

"... For now."

Regina opens her mouth to bite back, before understanding something that has never been obvious to her before now. Not before she’d started spending her days with the girl in question.

"Diversion therapy is pretty much the dirtiest game in the book."

Emma grins when the Mayor scolds her for turning her initial demand to know where the last pastry bought for lunch has disappeared to into a lengthy discussion about baking techniques used during the French Revolution.

"Like putting lemon in your eyes."

The blonde elaborates, only to be met with the nonplussed request that she explain.

"Well, okay, that was quite specific. When we were travelling north in Oregon, we stayed in this motel one night and Neal broke a bottle and sent most of the glass right into the palm of his hand. He tried to get it out, but there was a lot of it and it hurt, you know? I tried to help, but he kept
pulling away and freaking out, so in the end, I told him I had a plan, and he said he didn't much like the sound of that, but I asked him if he trusted me, and in the end, he said he did. So, I told him to lean his head back and tell me how many blades the ceiling fan had- asked him to count them and just to humour me- and then I squeezed the lemon we'd been using for our drinks right into his eyes."

"... Of course, you did..."

"Hey! It was all part of the plan! So, Neal starts yelling all shades of hell and shaking his head, and his nose is streaming and he's coughing like crazy and choking about how he's gonna stone cold murder me, you know, when he can see again..."

"I can sympathise..."

"In the meantime, I have his hand right there in mine, and I get all of that glass plucked out without even a flinch of his fingers. It was a distraction, see? A diversion... That one was obvious, but usually, it's not. People are great at having a whole bunch of other stuff they suddenly want you to do or lend your ear on when they don't want to play along with what you're asking. If they're kind, they prey on your interests. If they're not... Anger works just as well. Probably better, actually, but it's still a sly move."

"I am his mother."

Regina repeats now- calmly- as she knows that Gold is simply stoking the fire. Putting lemon in her eyes.

Or wool, doesn't the saying state that one pulls the wool over one's eyes?

Perhaps, but I like Emma's better.

And I'm not about to give him that satisfaction.

"I see."

The little man nods, and the Mayor regards him shrewdly, before playing a little more dangerously. After all, the conversation with Gold that had sent her looking for Emma in the first place had been riddled with obscurities and insinuation, and she is certain that since she's brought the blonde back with her, those strange little quips pertaining to royalty and magic have become ever more frequent.

Not to mention Emma's own admission as to what Gold had spoken to her about.

He'd asked her if she'd noticed anything strange.

About the town.

About the people.

About the Mayor...

And that is not something a simple proprietor or landlord- even one as slippery as Gold- would ask of a young, worn-around-the-edges young woman.

"You say you find my acquaintanceship with Miss Swan to be of interest... Because of who I am. I am Henry's mother, and she is the girl that gave birth to my son... But that has nothing to do with your interest, does it?"

She challenges quietly, and her heart beats a manic rhythm in her chest, and she knows that if her
suspicions turn out to be founded—if the man she speaks to isn't just Gold to his own awareness, but someone with knowledge, someone with a cruel mind, a dark mind—she has every reason to be afraid, but she needs to know. Needs to know, because with each day that she finds herself growing closer to the younger woman, she has more questions about what effect that closeness might be having on the spell cast over the sleepy town.

After all, The Curse came with a failsafe.

It came with a Saviour.

And all magic doesn't just come with a price, it comes with rules.

The girl was never supposed to come here as a girl.

She was to be a woman.

She was to find them and wage some untold war upon her people's disgraced Queen and enslaver ten years from now.

The light coming up against the dark.

Black against white.

According to Rumplestiltskin, Emma was to come to her on her twenty-eighth birthday and rip her world to shreds.

So what happens now, when her nemesis—her foretold arch-enemy—looks to her as a friend, a mentor, and lies with her willingly?

What happens now that time has started again? Oh, she has managed to stop the clock tower from tolling away the hours, but jammed cogs mean nothing, and she knows in her heart that the clock is once more ticking, but it's started too early and things are going too fast, and before long they're apt to explode.

So she needs to know.

But, most of all...

What happens if she's right about how she feels?

What happens if she falls in love with the Saviour?

True Love.

Of course, it's not that!

No. Maybe not. But what alarms her is that she believes that such a thing is more a matter of time than possibility, and she has no way of knowing what hell might be unleashed in the process.

No way at all.

But if there's one person who might know...

"You're interested in my favourable association with Emma because of who she is."

"And who is she, Regina?"
"I think you know. I think you know who she is, and I think you know who I am. So I will ask you, now... Who are you?"

"Mr Gold."

"... Mr Gold..."

"Yes, dearie. So long as I have lived in this world, my name has always been Mr Gold."

"... But what about in other worlds?"

"Go talk to him!"

Ashley grins, pointing to the sandy-haired man sat talking to Billy at the bar, and Emma shakes her head uncomfortably.

"Nah, I'm okay."

She shrugs. She isn't entirely sure why Ruby and her friends seem adamant that she go and talk to Josh, or any of the other men pointed out since they've taken up their seats around the- slightly sticky- bar table in the corner, and it isn't a situation she's enjoying.

At first it had been kind of fun- kind of exciting- as she'd hopped up onto one of the stools with careful consideration of the shortness of her borrowed dress and watched the waitress saunter off to buy a round of drinks. She'd suffered a brief moment of nervousness- sure someone would come up to her at any moment and ask her to leave or show some form of ID- but it had turned out to be unfounded. Ruby had come back balancing four, tall glasses in her hands, and had handed Emma hers with a grin and a quip of 'I know you're being a good girl, but just have one, babe!'.

Four drinks later and she imagines she'd feel pleasantly buzzed if not for the deep wave of unease gnawing at her gut as she feels very much under the scrutiny of the others. From Ruby, she can abide such mischievous attention with little mind, but from Ashley and Isla- a pretty, young girl with constellations of light orange freckles dappling her face and shoulders- it's just a little too much. She has never been one for giggling and gossip, and it has become apparent all too quickly that the main interest for the others in coming to the Rabbit lies within its assortment of male patrons. And, with Ruby knocking down her uneasy response of 'dunno, not really thought about it' when asked if she's found any men of interest in town with 'Emma's just shy', the evening is slowly becoming a nightmarish matchmaking session.

This is why I don't do girls... Well, ordinarily!

She's tolerated it with a grin up until now and politely refused several offers of introduction, but, as the alcohol begins to do its job and the others get a little more persistent, she finds her good humour is wearing thin.

"Seriously, he's a good guy! In lots of ways, if you know what I mean!"

Isla urges with a gesture in the bar's direction, and Ruby smirks as she chips in 'Illy, you say that about all of them, but I guess you speak from experience!' to be met with hysterical laughter that has the blonde furrowing her brow as she feels the beginnings of a headache coming on.

"I'm not doubting that, I'd just rather drink and chat with you guys is all. I'm not really in the mood to go and mingle."
She growls, smiling just a little too wide, and Ashley shrugs, while Isla rolls her eyes and plays with her straw.

"What's the point of going out and dressing up and stuff if you're not gonna go talk to anyone? You've been here a while now, and we're just saying you should get to know people."

"I am... I'm drinking with you lot."

"Not us. Guys!"

Isla giggles, and Ashley smiles at her impishly and nods.

"We're not saying you have to go and do anything with them if you don't want to, just that you should get out there and see what's on offer and you might find things more interesting."

"Well, I don't want to. And I don't find immaterial small-talk and feigning interest to be interesting."

The blonde scowls, and Ruby glances at her warily and places her drink down.

"Emma..."

But Isla rolls pretty, blue eyes once again with a low mutter that goes mostly undeciphered, but definitely contains the words 'pathetic' and 'little girl', and suddenly Emma is down off her chair and onto her feet; slipping from their little corner with an irritable huff.

"Hey, wait, Em, come on!"

Ruby calls after her, but the blonde ignores her in favour of stalking for the door and the waitress sighs and grabs her bag before hurrying off in the younger woman's wake.

"Babe, come on... Don't be like that!"

She appeals when she catches up with Emma outside the bar, and the girl shrugs slim shoulders moodily before turning to her friend with an exhausted sigh.

"I'm not being anything but myself. I don't want to go talk to that guy because I don't know him, and I don't have any reason to talk to him!"

"So don't! Come on, we were just having a little fun, you don't have to-"

"I didn't find it fun. I said I didn't want to do it. I said it about him and I said it about all the other guys you were all pestering me about."

"I know, Emma, but don't be mad. They just didn't think you were being serious, I guess-"

"-But what about you? Why would you keep on at me like that when you know full well I'm not interested?"

"Because I don't know that! And come on, you've been sneaking around something rotten, you've got bite marks all over the place and you're always coming in late... I just figured you wanted to come out and have some girl-time and see a little more of what happens outside of Granny's. I figured you were up for a laugh!"

"I am! But that wasn't a laugh for me! It wasn't funny! It wasn't amusing!"

"Well, I'm sorry! I didn't mean for it not to be! I just figured-"
"-You figured what? That I've been sneaking out and having mindless, dirty fun?"

"Why would that be so wrong?"

"Because you know I haven't! You know I don't want to go talk to a bunch of random guys at the bar while you lot all watch and giggle and get off on it as it fulfils whatever meaningless crappy gossip you all seem so desperate for!"

"Oh, come on, Emma, that's just way below the-"

"-You know I don't fucking flirt, and you know I don't want to! What the hell do I want to go and indulge you all with that shit for, when you know how I feel about-"

But the younger woman's angry outburst- as much a result of feeling uncomfortable and backed into a corner as it is logical irritation- cuts off sharply as Emma catches herself just in time and bites her tongue as the waitress seethes at her furiously.

"Feel about what?! Feel about who?!"

Ruby shouts; similarly fuelled by her discomfort as she slowly comes to the realisation that she's spent the best part of the last hour watching her old friends obliviously bullying her new friend into feeling what she now understands was vulnerable enough to storm off.

"Who?"

She repeats with a little less venom, but Emma simply shakes her head and adopts a brisk pace as she strives to acquire the old safety net of distance that has always served as the safest option when she just wants to slam someone into a wall and scream at them until they fucking understand.

"Look, I'll see you at home, ok? I'm tired, and I'm gonna go to bed."

She replies dismissively; raising her voice slightly as Ruby remains stood uneasily outside the Rabbit with the music blaring behind her. She doesn't want this to escalate, and the brunette feels exactly the same way. She isn't sure if Emma would agree with such behaviour, but she knows that her own conscience tells her to trot off after the younger woman, offer her a hug, and tell her she's sorry for whatever part she's played in her discomfort- and that she gets it, sort of- before proposing they go home to chat amiably while sprawled out on her bed.

She almost does, too.

But, she's had a few drinks more than she usually indulges in, and she'd been enjoying the company of her friends, and it's really not her fault that Emma can be such an excruciatingly tiring problem child, and she never fucking asked to be put on babysitter duty, anyway!... And, oh, dear, she knows she'll regret it, but her lips are opening and before she knows it

"Is this about your thing for Regina?!"

She calls after the blonde with a disbelieving shake of her head.

"Please do not tell me you're losing your crap because you still have the hots for the fucking Mayor!"

"Ruby, stop it..."

Emma warns, but the waitress only finds the blonde's lack of denial to be all the more frustrating.

"Wake up, Emma! It was amusing for a while, and no one's telling you who you can and can't have
a thing for in your head! But *that* particular scenario is always *just* going to be in your head! She's the Mayor! She's like *the* most unattainable person in this whole fucking town, and you're just-..."

She reels herself in just a little too late, and holds the blonde's gaze as the latter glares at her angrily, before golden curls whip in the breeze, and the younger woman turns on her- borrowed- heel and stalks off without another word.

"Emma! I didn't mean it like that! I just mean that it's *crazy* to bail out on good-natured fun because of a stupid crush!"

Ruby calls out, but her words sound lame even in her own head, and she takes a couple of steps in pursuit of her friend before giving up with a glum shrug of her shoulders. She turns back for the bar with a brief feeling of anger at the two women waiting for her inside, but she discards it almost immediately.

They'd just been messing with Emma the same way as they mess with each other.

She should have just taken up the younger woman's side and turned the tables and things would have all been just fine.

Their argument seems ridiculously *foolish* now that it's over, as she knows neither one of them means the other any ill-will.

Pulling her phone from her bag, she taps at the keys a little tipsily before sighing and making her way back into the thrum of last orders.

*Hey, I'm sorry :( Please don't be mad. I wanted you to come out with us because I think you're FUN, you idiot. Just cuz we're bored of chatting to the same old dudes and sharing the same old stories doesn't mean YOU have to. And if you're still gunning for the Mayor, then you know I've got your back. I DON'T think you stand a chance in hell, but I'm with you all the way. I mean, it makes MY life more interesting! Get home safe, I'll see you there. xoxo R.*

Rereading the Waitress's text as the wind rallies her hair to cascade around her face, Emma sighs.

*Don't be mad.*

She's not. Not really.

She *had* been back at the bar, but mostly because anger has always been easier for her to access than most other emotions, and the emotion that *had* sat heavily in her chest while discomfort and irritation had warred upon her tongue had been foreign to her. A strange and very particular breed of revulsion. Of duty.

She hadn't wanted to talk to any of the men in the bar, because they hadn't interested her.

She hadn't wanted to talk to any of the men in the bar, because she'd been a pawn in the conversation of the others.

She hadn't wanted to talk to any of the men in the bar, because the others had meant for her words to be coy and her intentions to be questionable and for there to be a silent *offer* in her approach.

And that *offer-* even when teasing- is off the table.

Because she's already got everything and anything she ever *could* offer earmarked for someone else.
"Shit."

She groans, and she smiles as she doesn't quite know what *exactly* that eloquent assessment is aimed at. A useless fight with her friend born out of nothing but tension and irritation? The fact that she's slowly realising she's really rather tipsy and that she stands out in the street in a scrap of a dress lent to her by Ruby and heels two sizes too large?

Or, the fact that she's just admitted to herself that she wants to belong to Regina and *only* Regina...?

As if they might really, actually, *genuinely* be 'together'.

It is something she's only ever discussed once before- with Neal- and it had been a discussion that had ended in several heated words and opinions. He'd wanted her to vocalise how she felt and that she loved him enough to promise to be loyal. In turn, she had told him to go to hell. And the *bitch of it*- the real *punchline*- is that she'd been totally *fine* with how things had been and hadn't spared anyone else any interest at *all*, but the demand that she wear her heart and trust on her sleeve like that had been too big of an ask. Running away, scheming, stealing, holding up her end when times got tough; those were all things she could do. But simply expressing her feelings? It had been too much.

*But with Regina?*

Well, she silently wagers that with Regina she might be able to say what needs to be said when the time comes.

Sighing with a self-deprecating roll of her eyes, she traipses down the street to Granny's, only to find that she hasn't brought her keys with her as she'd anticipating returning with Ruby. Resting her head- a little woozy- against the wood of the side door, she raps her knuckles against flaking varnish lightly without much hope. She supposes she could pound incessantly at the door, and that sooner or later Granny might wake up and come down- if only to give her an earful and a smack on the wrist- but she doesn't imagine finding out to be wise. The fact that she has forgotten her keys might receive an irritable response and bitter scolding, but the fact that she smells quite strongly of *alcohol* is something she is smart enough to know will end up in an argument, and worse; disappointment.

And so, casting a glance behind her and finding the street to be empty, she accepts her situation and goes and takes herself on a moonlit walk.

And, maybe it's the alcohol, or maybe it's simply that irrepressible, burning breed of curiosity that she has never learnt to shut off, but *whatever* the reason, she soon finds herself stalking down Main Street, with her size six feet slipping around in size eight shoes, and she knows pretty much as soon as she mounts the sidewalk where it is that she's headed.

And, when that small voice of reason speaks up breathlessly and tells her to back away as she cups the sides of her hands to her face in order to peer through a gap in newspaper-pasted windows, she disregards it habitually and slides free one of the four bobby pins holding her hair back in a pretty, elfin style, and pulls its narrow mouth wide open with her teeth.

*After all... Who the hell boards up a library?*
"Weird."

Emma whispers- her voice still seeming obscenely loud as it breaks through the eerie silence of the place- and she pushes the old book in her hands back amongst its sisters on the shelf. So far, she hasn't recognised any of the titles emblazoned upon old dust-jackets, and this in itself surprises her almost as much as the names printed down the spines. The underlying theme here seems to be fairytales, but the weird thing about the pages she leafs through is that several of the heavy volumes appear to be guidebooks and manuals.

Cookery books for preparing game she's never even heard of.

Language guides for tongues she can't place.

A curious little book with detailed depictions of various knots; not that weird, until realising that they all seem rather, well, pirate specific.

"No wonder this place got shut down."

She sighs. It's a shame, but then that's life. Just like with the old store a couple of blocks from her first brief dwelling in Phoenix- appropriately named 'The Dark Star'- with its creepy little figurines and fantasy role play sign-up sheets pasted up on the doors. A great number of the available name slots had generally been taken up by cuss words and threats pertaining to some poor unknown soul's mother, but here and there, there would be a hard to pronounce name too obscure to be anything but genuine. It had been a certain kind of person that would bustle in and out of that narrow little haven, and she'd felt uncomfortably different when giving in to her curiosity and browsing the shelves. Still, it had been an interesting enough place, but it hadn't exactly surprised her when the window outside had borne spray painted letters proclaiming CLOSING DOWN.

Magic, sci-fi, dragons and crap are great on the pages of a book, but that's really where the majority of the public believes they should stay.

Herself included.

A shame, for sure, I mean hell knows I'd have killed for my letter to Hogwarts, but that stuff's not real, and you only need to sit and take a good, hard look at life to buy that. There's no magic in this world, and out here, the good girls drink and cuss just like the village folk. Out here the villains command fleets of men, the court jesters run the White House and the heroes sometimes die without anyone even sparing a breath. I get why kids seek refuge in places like The Dark Star, but I also get why they get shut down. It's the smell. The smell of hopeful naivety and foolishness, and that blend of despair that is so easily snuffed out when corporations want to spread their roots and feed those stupid, doleful kids salt, grease and the American Dream.

Oh shit.

Rather bitterly dramatic, Swan?

She grins as her mind continues its quiet muttering- too used to the dry, cynical conversations going on up there to pay them much mind- and scuffs at a litter of dustbunnies with the toe of her shoe. The husky murmuring in her skull is almost a relief, to tell the truth; it really is almost unbearably quiet amongst the shelves, except-
"Huh..."

Frowning, she holds her breath and waits, before raising an eyebrow when she hears the small, wet plink of a droplet again. Stalking over towards the back of the room—her borrowed heels clicking loudly to mark her slow strides—she runs her hand curiously over an ornate set of doors. They feel oddly cool beneath her palm, and slot together with no give when she pushes against them experimentally. Noting a series of buttons to the side, she realises that they make up the doors to an elevator, and her curiosity only grows when she sees the only option from her current level appears to be down. Pressing the button experimentally at first, before jabbing at it impatiently, she is met with no response from the doors themselves but notes a low, mechanical clicking that sounds very far away.

"Must be busted."

She remarks to no one in particular, but her intrigue has been sparked, and she's not about to turn away now. After all, the fact that Storybrooke hosts a strange, fantastical selection of books and calls it a library is one thing, but just what further obscurities might be waiting down below?

Very far below, from the sounds of it.

Bracing herself against the doors, she claws at them with a grunt of exertion as she tries to pry them apart manually, but they refuse to yield beneath her strength any more than half an inch. Still, it is enough for her to draw back in surprise as an unpleasant, slightly damp smell emerges from the small gap of her making. The stench reminds her of old caves by the sea rather than anything that might be expected from a basement—even a flooded one—with an undertone of something neglected and rotting. Pulling herself together with an irritable shake of her head, she tries the doors again, and almost begins to feel some give, before she falls back with a scream and places her hand over her heart; her breathing ragged.

Seconds later, and the sound that had almost sent her falling onto her ass comes again, and she laughs nervously as she realises it wasn't a roar—how strange to have thought such a thing!—but thunder; accompanied by a flash of lightening that flickers eerily through the newspaper covering the windows; shocking the room with shadowed letters and long ago faces.

"Get a grip."

She murmurs, but she takes a couple of steps back from the old elevator and that dank, dark smell just the same. Shivering as thunder rolls up in the heavens, she looks down at the slinky black dress Ruby lent her a couple of hours ago and sighs. She doesn't imagine it will be all that cold out—not yet—as the air has been thick and muggy all day threatening for a storm, but she can hear the torrential pounding of the rain against the glass and imagines by the time she makes the short trip back to the Diner even her underwear will be soaked through.

Weighing up her options—supposing she could try and wait out the worst of the rain before heading off—she looks around the room for somewhere to sit and perhaps read, before finding that her attention falls on a small door to her right. It is understated and profoundly ordinary, and she imagines she hadn't noticed it sooner since it is just about the only thing in the room that is. Testing it curiously, she finds it to be unlocked, and she pokes her head through to find a narrow, dusty smelling hallway. Large panes of glass line one side—stretching from waist height to the ceiling—and she watches the rain lashing through the darkness, before pulling herself together decisively and stalking down the hall to test the door on the other side.

The second door turns out to be locked, but she figures she's come this far, and so slips another clip from her hair—the remaining two hanging on for dear life; struggling against thick curls—and works
the little trick she has come to know so well over the years; hunkering down with her tongue nipped between her teeth in concentration and waiting for the telling click of the lock to meet her careful probing.

"Ha!"

Victorious, and never once bothering to ask herself what she's setting out to achieve, she pulls open the door to be met with a surprising gust of wind and staggers back in surprise. Opening the door fully with her hair whipping about her face, she drinks in steep iron steps that coil upwards in a nightmare of vertigo and rusting handrails, and she understands suddenly that it was never the library she'd come here for at all.

It was the clock tower.

Hissing irritably as she turns her wipers on full, Regina cruises slowly through the rain.

It's late, and the streets had been empty even before the first roar of thunder, which suits her just fine. She'd arrived home after her talk with Gold- Rumplestiltskin- shaken, and worse; afraid.

Despite her suspicions as to her old mentor's knowledge of their lives before coming here, it had come as an unwelcome shock to have those fears confirmed. Of course, the little man had taken her on a whole journey of twists and turns to achieve the simple truth, but they'd gotten there in the end, and she had felt anger deep in her gut as she'd watched the relish in his eyes as she'd come to terms with what he was telling her.

He'd known.

Of course, he'd known.

Known who he was. Who she was. Who Emma was.

Known about The Curse. The Savior. The prophecy.

And, in her reaction, had guessed at several other things, also.

"You've grown to like her, Regina."

The little man repeats, and it is not an accusation, simply the statement of a fact, and after a moment's hesitation, the brunette simply nods.

"She calls me a friend."

"I see... That is something in which you were always lacking, I recall. Hoping for, but lacking. I imagine hearing her say those words must have felt bittersweet."

"You imagine a great deal..."

"Well, it would be arrogant to call it 'knowing', even if that's the case."

Gold replies dryly, and Regina sighs as she catches cruel delight flickering in dark eyes.

"A great deal of my relationship with Emma has been bittersweet."

She admits- seeing no sense in denying it- and he nods with the curious breed of understanding that she's never quite managed to get her head around.
"She's damaged, as you are yourself. You see that in her, and you want to help her as though in doing so you can rectify the wrongs you yourself suffered. Oh, it might be more than that- she is no spitting image of her mistress, that is clear- but you understand her better than she has been understood in the past, and this makes her loyal to you. More so, it makes her dependent on you. She seeks you out with no demand on your part to do so. I daren't say it is a situation that had been calculated by yourself, Regina, but I will point out her admiration- for that is what it is, that much is plain to see- for you is rather favourable."

"I helped her... Not because I saw myself in her, but because it struck me as necessary to do so. We work together, we spend time together, and we have formed a friendship in that time. That's all there is to it."

"If that's how you wish to see it..."

Rumple replies cryptically, and the brunette purses her lips irritably, finding that she loathes the imp's ability to see into her heart just as much now as she had when under his teaching.

"I like her."

She offers in order to put an end to their dance, and he nods once again and sips at his tea.

"And this worries you."

"The fact that I like Emma is-"

"-Oh, the fact that you- Madame Mayor- enjoy Emma's company is not anything worth discussing. The fact that you- Your Majesty- care for the Saviour... That is why you've come to me. Correct?"

"... What happens now?"

"Now?"

"With this mess you made. With your curse. What happens now that Emma is here ten years before she should be. What happens now that she doesn't seek to ruin me as you once warned she might?"

Regina demands- fear lacing the edge of her words, which otherwise come out clipped and confident- and the old pawnbroker grins as he shakes his head in amusement.

"Oh, no, dearie. Not my curse. Yours. You cast it."

"You told me to."

"Did I?"

"... You told me how."

"Yes, and you listened to me. It was a choice, and one you were desperate to make."

"... What if I've changed my mind?"

She whispers, and Gold regards her shrewdly, before looking thoughtfully out the window.

"My, my. You must be quite enchanted with the girl. You regret your decision?"

"No. But I no longer feel empowered by it. I feel bound by it... Emma's starting to ask questions. Questions I don't have an answer to. Questions I'll never have an answer to that she will be able to
accept. It has been a long time since the curse and its particulars weighed heavily on my mind—some
days I would spare it no thought at all—but since bringing Emma here, I have found myself dwelling
on the past more and more, and wishing my decisions could mirror the ways I've changed.
Vengeance has lost its appeal and become dull after eighteen years. It's hard to remember the thrill
when all I am faced with are the complications of keeping things running as they should."

"Ah, but you remember that there was a thrill?"

"Of course."

She replies simply, and this time when the imp smiles, she responds with one of her own.

"I've not forgiven them. I've simply grown tired of being owned by them."

"Imagine how they must feel about you, dearie."

"They don't feel anything about me. They don't think or feel or do anything other than what I want
them to. All except for Emma."

"Hmm... If I recall, that seemed to be your reasoning behind wanting a child. Not his mother."

"That's neither here nor there."

"It's circumstantial. You'd be surprised how much of our fate comes down to circumstance."

"Forgive me if I don't appear thrilled by this."

"Forgiven. Fate is cruel."

Gold sighs, before steeping his fingers beneath his jaw and continuing in a business-like manner.

"So your reason for coming to find me was to ask how the Saviour's early arrival might affect The
Curse."

"And I imagine you'll want something in exchange for that knowledge."

Regina muses stonily, and the little man laughs softly and holds up his hand.

"As a matter of fact, I'm willing to let you have this much for free. You have nothing I want, dearie,
not for the time being. Your question is one I have asked myself recently, and after a great deal of
research—so much harder in this world—I don't believe what I have discovered would be aided by
any favour I might ask of you if you are to be left in the dark and blind."

"So, Emma being here will change things?"

Regina jumps right in, and Gold shrugs as he contemplates the young woman whom he has helped
to create.

Much like the girl she frets over.

"It already has, dearie. It's changed you."

"I mean as far as The Cu-"

"The Curse? But those are one of the same, Regina. You. Your wants, your wills... The Curse.
Those things are so intricately bound that they are woven together in all realms. Just as the Saviour
was created to break the curse, you play your own vital role as you were the one to cast it. The Curse is as much a part of you as it is of Emma. It needs to feed, you see?"

"To feed?"

The brunette's voice comes out husky and broken; the thought so hideous to her that it makes her stomach turn. To be in control and to have cast her magic- however dark- is one thing. But to think of the curse as a living thing; hungry, with its own desires, is an abomination. That it should thrive and breathe... That it should feed...

"In a sense."

Rumple nods, and the gold glint of his upper incisor catches the hazy sunlight odiously.

"Young Emma's arrival has disturbed it in its sleep. Has poked and prodded at something which was supposed to lie dormant until the time was right. Time has begun once more- despite your best efforts to stop it- and the hold the sleeping beast has over its prey becomes more precarious by the day."

"You're saying Emma might be able to break it now? Already!?"

"No. There are rules. Prophecy is fickle and open to interpretation, but it is ironclad just the same. The time hasn't come for Emma to do what she was made to do-"

"My little? Oh, Regina, nothing about this is 'mine'. And nothing about this is 'little'. Emma was born, true, but she is a product just the same. All children are. Some of love- like the Saviour- some of anger. Some of foolishness, some of rape, some of nothing more than a bottle of bad decisions and defective contraception such as your own little piece of joy-"

"Don't you dare-"

"Emma is a product of faultless design because of something out of her control. Her parents' love, and, more importantly, the demons each was able to face in order to create the child you sought to destroy. She is a cog. She is flesh and bone, and able to think and feel and touch others around her, but that doesn't change her ultimate purpose.

To overthrow your design."

"...She won't fight me."

"Who said anything about a fight? She will right the wrong you caused because it is what she was made to do. She will do so when the time comes."

"But what about before that time?... What about now? You say Emma's being here has put things in motion. What does that mean?"

"It means The Curse is vulnerable. It means that it will seek strength to keep the lightness out."

"Seek strength?"

"Feed."

"... What will it feed on?"
The brunette asks; dreading that she already knows the answer.

"Why, you, dearie. You. Or, rather, the version of you that cast it. It needs that darkness, that power, to maintain its grip. To remain. To fight."

"I don't want to fight..."

"Perhaps not, Madame Mayor, but once upon a time you did. Once upon a time you wished for the world to fall to her knees before you and expose her vulnerable, naked belly for you to bloody. That darkness and that hate that went into your thirst for revenge and creating The Curse, that is what it feeds off. It requires that version of you to battle against what the Swan girl has brought into its midst. Her innocence requires your cruelty. Her lightness needs to be dampened. The longer she stays here, Regina, and the longer you give in to the light, the hungrier that darkness becomes. It won't consume you- it did that long ago- but it will find that version of yourself- it will pull the Queen out of hiding- and it will do everything it can to destroy what threatens it."

"You're saying I'll become like I once was? That I'll become the Evil Queen here in Storybrooke?"

"Well, fewer feathers and less lace, dearie. I'm saying you will become who you once were... And I must say, that version was much more fun-"

"I won't. I know what I was, and I know what I am. I don't want The Curse to break and I don't want those idiots messing with my life once again! But I will not ever- ever- hurt that young woman, whether she's supposed to be the Saviour or not."

"Oh, it's not just Emma I fear for... You wore darkness as a shroud, just as that young girl wears ice as hers. You've let her in to shine some light, and in return, you've thawed some of that ice and have been rewarded with her friendship. But friendship is fickle, Regina. Darkness is not. You've witnessed darkness and what it can do. You learnt from some of the best. Do you think your mother never regretted ripping out that stable boy's heart? Even a little? She was cruel and wicked, but she loved you, Regina, and I would wager that there were times she wished things had turned out differently. That she'd not been so quick to ruin something good as it stood in her way. I trust you remember how quick that hate and spite was, dearie? You carry that same wickedness in your blood, and you used it to cast The Curse. You may regret it, Regina, maybe even instantly, but that's not to say that in a brief moment of darkness you won't do something you can't take back."

"...I've changed."

"Yes. And therein lies your problem. Did you really think it was Emma that started the clock ticking?"

"Of course it was..."

"Oh yes? Funny, that you should see it that way."

"You said yourself it was because she came here!"

Regina croaks, and the little man smiles- not unkindly- and studies his hands.

"Oh, absolutely it was because she came here."

"That's what I said! Stop speaking in riddles! I-"

"Two things happened that day, though, Regina. Emma came to town, yes, that's true... But I believe what really started the clock ticking again in this instance is that you invited her. That girl
was supposed to go to bed that night hot, hungry and used. That was simply the way her story was written. Instead, she fell asleep fed, comfortable and painlessly. All because of you. That lightness only began to shine because somebody lit it ten years too early. And now it shines more brightly than it ever could have if things had gone as planned. You would have stood a chance, you know? Ten more years would have made you less susceptible to your emotions, and it would have gone the same way for our dear Saviour. By rights, she should have gone to bed hot, hungry and used that night. And the next night. And the next. Winter would have come and changed her burden, but it wouldn't have given her any peace. She would have come to you hardened, bitter, and with the possibility to crack, but instead, you held out your hand and beckoned her and you've continued to hold on ever since. You've changed, Regina. But magic doesn't play by those rules. Would you look into the eyes of a beast trained upon your scent, obeying some impossible master, and plead that you be spared because you've changed? Magic doesn't heed such requests, dearie. It only takes what it needs and does what it was created to do. It only feeds."

"Well, it's not going to make a meal out of me."

The brunette snarls now as she indicates left onto Main Street. She'd argued with the pawnbroker a little longer, but her words had been empty and shellshocked, and she'd only been able to think on them for so long back in the confines of her mansion before she'd had to call Johanna so that she might venture out into the storm to clear her head.

She had gone to Gold expecting lies. Expecting riddles. Expecting confusion and a lack of knowledge of that other world.

She doesn't believe he's lied to her.

Doesn't believe he has anything to gain out of doing so.

And, he'd asked her before she'd left if she'd not found herself troubled more and more by feelings from the past, and she'd snapped instantly 'no'... But she believes she might have been a bit lenient with the truth.

After all... Hasn't she found her mind wandering when playing with the blonde? Wandering even before they'd begun such games? Hasn't she pictured the scene as it could have been- should have been- back in her castle. In her mind, she's punished the girl, stripped her, whipped her... Killed her. In her mind, she has played the Evil Queen more and more often. She'd fretted about it, debated it, even- to some extent- told Emma about it... And the blonde had simply beckoned her forth and trusted her to do her worst.

Like she would ever know what that means...

"She'll never have to know what that means!"

Regina snaps at her mind's irritating fussing, and she nods as if this settles the fact before her Benz swerves and screeches to a halt.

"No."

She repeats the word hollowly for what must be the fifth time, but she is no longer able to deny what's right in front of her. The door to the old library swings on its hinges- creating a high and piercing whistle that gets eaten by the wind- as the rain puddles at her feet. Bending down stiffly as she catches a curious glimmer when a bolt of lightening streaks across the bruised, midnight sky, she plucks up the ruined remains of a silver hair pin and encloses it in her fist with a snarl.
"Oh, you sneaky little minx..."

Pushing open the door, she watches as the wind causes its twin further in to sway, and she understands with a wave of dread just where the young woman - who is after all the only person foolish enough to go snooping around where she shouldn't - has gone. Hurrying over and making swift work of the hallway, she throws open the door to the winding staircase of the tower and spies the blonde about halfway up, before the heavy wood thrust by her palm crashes against the wall and Emma loses her footing with a surprised shriek and tumbles down onto the first available platform.

Flying up the stairs to meet the girl head on - the latter pushing herself dazedly up into a seated position - the Mayor finds her mouth opening and closing in pure, unbridled, white rage - a flash of lightening painting the two of them momentarily silver - before she clears her throat and speaks calmly.

"Why is it, that any time I happen upon something out of place, you're the first person on the scene?"

She scolds quietly, and Emma blinks up at her as she remains sat with her elbows locked and her legs gently splayed to show the flash of her underwear before she breaks into a guilty grin and pushes herself onto her feet with a wince.

"Curiosity killed the cat."

"Hmm... If that's so, one must wonder why the cat seems so keen on tempting fate."

Regina muses silkily, as the thought of just how easily she could push the blonde off their shared platform flashes unwelcomely through her mind.

_No. I could do it, but I never will. I could have lashed out at her, but I didn't. Look at me now. Look at me and tell me I'm the Evil Queen! I should be angry - I have a right to be angry with her, to punish her! - and look how I have chosen to react. Look how I am able to react!"

"Are you alright?"

She asks, gesturing towards the steps above them from where the younger woman made her ungainly descent, and Emma smiles wanly and shrugs.

"Yeah, you just shocked me is all."

"Catching you where you shouldn't be?"

"Well, I mean... I just figured it was a library and I got... Well..."

"Curious."

"Yeah. It's not, uh... It's not been the best night, to be honest. I don't have my keys, so I went for a walk, and I guess I just got sidetracked. Then it started to storm and I started poking around a little. I didn't think anyone would mind."

"Boards and locks say 'please enter' to you, do they?"

Regina growls, but she smiles a little, and Emma licks at her bottom lip nervously and chuckles.

"They ask more questions than they answer."

"And you just have to know everything, don't you, dear?"
"I really didn't know it would be a big deal."

Emma sighs, and she holds on to the railing that guards them against the dangerous drop down below and removes the Waitress's heels with a relieved groan as she evens the height difference between them.

"It's not."

The Mayor lies, before catching the knowing look Emma offers her and responding with a sigh.

"There's that look that says you knew you were up to no good again, Miss Swan. Do you not remember what I told you when I brought you here?"

"I shouldn't cross you."

"Right... I didn't want you coming up here."

Regina admits truthfully.

"No one's been up here to check on the state of these stairs for years. It might not be safe."

She reasons- aware that she's lying, but suddenly wondering if some truth doesn't lie in her words as she studies rusting iron and missing bolts- and her smile is suddenly a lot more vulnerable as she looks wistfully down at the safety of the ground.

"You're lucky you didn't fall sideways."

She points out; suddenly acknowledging this possibility and flinching away from it.

See... I've changed! I would never-

"-Come on. Let's head back down."

She suggests in a tone that doesn't allow for an argument, and Emma nods, glancing briefly back up at the peculiar slice of shadow she'd spotted between ancient cogs and debating whether to mention her discovery to Regina, before discarding the matter and following the brunette back down the rickety old steps.

"What's with the dress?"

The Mayor asks as they make their way down the hallway, and Emma grins a little shyly and pulls at the hem in an attempt to pull the thin fabric down to cover more flesh.

"It's not mine."

"No, I figured as much."

"I went out to the Rabbit Hole with Ruby and some of her friends."

"But you say the night didn't go as desired?"

"It was okay, I guess... Just... I dunno..."
meets her gaze inquisitively.

"I'm sorry I snuck in here. I really didn't mean to piss you off."

"...That's alright, dear. I saw the door open and figured it was probably you. I'm just glad you're alright."

Regina sighs, and she thinks again on Rumple's hateful words. Thinks again on how she's fantasised about hurting the girl and forced her to beg. Thinks again on how her first thought when stood on the stairs with the blonde had been how easily she might push her off, and she grabs at the younger woman's hand tightly.

"I'm sorry tonight wasn't the fun you'd hoped for in the end... But perhaps we could try and rectify that?"

She keeps her tone light and nonchalant, but when Emma grins at her and whispers

"You're gonna be the death of me, you know that?"

The smirk that finds her lips is both full of promise and strained.
As they mount the steps to the Mayor's mansion, Emma casts a curious glance to her side to study the brunette. The ride here had been short but sweet, with Regina listening thoughtfully after convincing her to divulge a little about what had soured the mood for her back at the bar. Her reply had been carefully devoid of any mention of her feelings towards her current companion- lamenting only her distaste for being treated as an object of entertainment by three giggling young women- and she had smiled gratefully when Regina had offered a quiet word or two of measurable comfort. It had not gone unnoticed that dark eyes had strayed now and then to her thighs during their conversation, but she had given such perversion no more response other than to smile knowingly the one time the Mayor's fiery coals had flickered up to meet her own.

For weeks I haven't known where I stand, and now I'm invited back to her place for a "nightcap" under no pretence?

The notion twists and strives to take shape in her mind; the simplicity of the fact so alien to their usual dalliances that she isn't quite sure what to make of it.

"Johanna will be in."

Regina warns now, as she slots her key into the lock and spares a glance up at the blonde. She drinks in the provocative cut of the latter's skimpy black dress coupled with the complete lack of reason Emma might be joining her at her home after midnight and shrugs such things aside. She imagines that the truth is so far beyond what the old maid might be able to comprehend that she needn't fret. And, anyway... Johanna will simply accept whatever story she's given.

That's the way it's always been.

"Oh..."

Emma replies a little uncomfortably, and she pulls at her dress self-consciously in a way that causes the brunette to smirk. Regina almost opens her mouth to comment on the fact, but her follow up had been to ask what Emma might have thought she'd do with her son whilst out the house, and in the end, she simply shrugs and leads them into the hallway.

"Why don't-"

The Mayor begins as they pad quietly into the drawing room, but she breaks off and holds a finger to her lips as she spies Johanna lain out on the sofa with her mouth slightly open and her shoes placed neatly to the side. To the left, a travel-seat rests in front of the empty hearth, with the small boy the maid had been called upon to watch over sleeping peacefully inside.

Looking from Henry to Emma, Regina sighs as the latter stills in her tracks halfway into the room and freezes up. Still, green eyes study the sleeping child intently as sharp teeth close over a pale bottom lip, and the brunette swallows awkwardly- looking from boy to mother several times- before sighing and speaking softly to the blonde.

"I'll wake Johanna and see her off."

She murmurs, and before Emma can respond, she turns to do just that; bending over the old redhead and shaking her awake gently, only to lead her from the room without another word spoken to the younger woman. Catching her gaze just briefly as she glances over her shoulder at the threshold, she
offers a small nod of her head before closing the door behind her and conversing with the maid in a series of pleasant, low melodies that sound like nothing but music through painted wood.

"Regina!"

Emma croaks desperately, but she can hear the darker woman bidding Johanna goodnight, and she realises she has been left without backup in this most obscure of situations. Looking back to the seat by the fire, she edges over cautiously until she stands over the sleeping infant with her heels dangling from one hand and the other caught nervously in her hair.

"Henry..."

She whispers- the name feeling strange and somehow magical as it creeps across her lips- and she wonders for a second what name she might have given the child, before hastily taking a couple of steps back as though this might aid her in fleeing such dangerous territory.

Tiny brows knit together in response, but ease up as the boy carries on dreaming, and the blonde gathers herself slowly and creeps a little closer once again. She finds, as she looks down at infant features, that the memory of walking into the baby's room to stop his crying seems like a lifetime ago. Back then, she'd had her mind on other matters and had been blind. Now... Well, now she's studying the little kid with a sense of knowledge that's tying her stomach into knots, and she licks her lips nervously as she doesn't have a clue what to do with herself.

Extending trembling fingers hesitantly, she freezes once again as Henry opens his eyes blearily and begins to fuss. Clenching her jaw but acting on instinct, she closes the gap between her reaching hand and the raised carry-handle of the seat and rocks it gently. Curious eyes look up at her nakedly-seeing her with the beautiful lack of judgement of the young- before they close drowsily, and the boy allows the gentle movement of the car seat to lull him back to sleep.

"Something about the rocking motion must be soothing. Some nights it's the only way to get him to settle."

Regina muses quietly as she slips back into the room, and Emma staggers back from the boy as though burnt and glances at the Mayor with visible anxiety.

"Don't."

The brunette scolds gently as the girl backs even further away, and she sighs heavily when the blonde looks at her with a strained expression.

"It's okay... Well, no. It's not. Not really. But what you were doing was okay. He likes that, see?"

She explains as she stalks further into the room and takes over at rocking the seat.

"Yeah... I guess he does."

Emma agrees huskily, and she watches with her limbs held in tight and rigid, but she is relieved that so far there has been no yelling. As if sensing the tension between them and the sour remnants of memory in the air, Regina shakes her head and points to the door; her tone gentle when she speaks, as she recalls the hateful things Gold had told her earlier and pushes them stubbornly aside.

"Go on upstairs, dear. I have to put Henry to bed- his real bed- or he'll start fussing."

"Is it... Is it not good that he's in that seat too long?"
Emma asks shyly, and the brunette shrugs.

"I'm not a paediatrician, I couldn't say. But I imagine a cot might be more comfortable."

"Yeah... I guess so."

The blonde nods, and Regina has the strangest sensation of knowing as she imagines she can hear the girl's thoughts.

And that's why he's better off with you. I could only offer the car seat

She glances up to study Emma shrewdly, but the younger woman simply gives an awkward little shrug of her own and disappears hastily from view.

"... Come on, sweetheart."

Regina offers the sleeping boy once she's ripped her attention from the door, and she bends down to lift him into her arms with practised care to avoid waking him.

Letting herself into her bedroom, Regina looks over at the younger woman silhouetted by the moon and sighs.

"Everything okay?"

She asks softly, and the Emma nods stiffly and turns to face her fully; offering a smile that doesn't quite hide the high pull of her shoulders. Not knowing what else to say on the matter, Regina simply casts her gaze out at the thundering sky and listens to the heavy pounding of the rain, before she stalks over towards the girl and closes the distance between them.

She'd meant to meet the blonde's lips and sate the tension thrumming between them- making the air seem alive as though the storm might be brewing in the very room they share rather than outside- but, when she stands in front of the girl and meets her gaze, she finds herself pulling the blonde into her and holding her tightly with her face buried into thick curls.

Emma smells like rain laced with smoke from the bar, and she places her arms tentatively around the Mayor and allows the darker woman to clutch onto her in a way she's not used to, but doesn't altogether mind. Her nervous thoughts as to her feelings for the brunette dance maniacally around in her skull, but she closes her eyes and presses her face into the darker woman's shoulder and allows herself to relax just a little.

She thinks about what it had been like last time she'd seen the boy, and how it had ended. Thinks about letting herself back into that old, hateful apartment with a foot full of glass and her head full of midnight and the way she'd screamed- actually screamed- at Denny to get the hell out after she'd made her mistake.

Just another mistake of many.

Thinks about how confused she'd been when Regina had shown up- because people weren't supposed to come back and apologise!- and the limbo of frustration and nervousness that had riddled the next couple of days spent holed up in the guest room just a couple of feet down the hall from where she stands now.

She thinks of the way Regina had stalked from the room after cooking them dinner and how her
lashes had been wet as she'd explained she couldn't be permitted to find herself in a position where she might ever hurt her.

Lamenting the mild ache emanating up from her tailbone from her small tumble down the stairs, Emma allows herself a grin and tightens her hold around the darker woman's slim waist as the latter buries her nose deeper into tangled curls.

Regina swallows as she thinks on the way Emma had served up breakfast back in Boston with all the blasé pride of a performance artist.

Thinks of the way the girl had smiled sheepishly when handing her the drawing that still hangs up on her noticeboard in the kitchen.

Thinks of the way the blonde had spread her legs slowly- so slowly- to lower herself down in order to straddle her on the cold, tile floor, and thinks of the easy conversation she'd been offered leading up to this favourable experience.

She thinks of the fear that had crept up into her heart when she'd kicked in the door in Boston and found the girl balled up beneath damp sheets, stinking of whisky and not moving.

Thinks of how she'd entertained- just for a second- pushing the younger woman from the platform halfway up the clock tower to serve her right for trespassing.

Thinks of when she had told her guards that under no circumstances were they to leave the Princess alive.

Shivering, she plunges a hand into soft tresses as the other keeps the blonde pressed flush to her, before she digs in her nails and breaks the spell over them with a snarl and a kiss.

After all, it wouldn't do to remain stood holding the girl, or she might decide she doesn't want to let go.

"Hey!"

Emma laughs- and, if there's any salt tainting her words, they both respectfully pretend not to notice- as the brunette pushes her back and points towards the bed demandingly.

"You take issue with my approach?"

The Mayor purrs playfully, and Emma shakes her head with a grin and falls back onto silken sheets with the scarlet flash of her underwear winking beneath the scant black swatch of her dress.

"Thought not..."

Regina smirks as she slowly goes about stripping off her clothes and folding them neatly over the chaise lounge in the corner, and her eyes glitter with promise as she crawls up onto the bed, clad in nothing but moonlight, and leans over the girl intently.

"Now, Miss Swan... What am I going to have to do to you to teach you to mind the rules...?"

She whispers into honeyed curls, and the younger woman chuckles huskily; unaware of the way the brunette plays back her own words with something akin to horror.
"...Regina?"

The blonde murmurs as she frowns up at troubled features; the Mayor's nose an inch from her own, while dark eyes glitter with disquiet.

"Hey? You okay in there?"

"... Of course."

The darker woman snaps, shaking her head as though ridding herself of invisible demons, and full lips spread into a sultry smile that has the blonde grinning sheepishly as she swallows. Regina recalls the jail cell they'd shared earlier today, and the way Emma had taken it upon herself to release some of her anger only to be paid back royally for her insubordination.

Royally?... Do we have to use that term?

Diving in to brush at the girl's lips hungrily, she grazes her hands slowly up pale thighs to push up the black dress that hugs the younger woman's slim frame invitingly. Nipping at the blonde's bottom lip gently, her head still spins with the kaleidoscope of emotions born from their embrace, and she sinks her teeth in a little deeper as slender fingers find her bare hips. Emma hums quietly in response, and massages the base of her ribs with her thumb, allowing her a moment to think upon the terrifying closeness that has developed between them despite her clear, inarguable position of dominance. It is not something so basic as one on top needing a submissive and vice versa, it is merely a mirror of their relationship as a whole and comes down to simple trust and appreciation... And in those things, they are entirely equal.

Equal? That's not something I would have ever thought of before... Not something I-

"-Ah!"

She hisses breathlessly as a finger curls slyly up to tease her, and she studies the blonde sharply as the latter remains fully clothed- if you could call it that- and prettily windswept beneath her. A brief flash of fury at the girl's bold move and the decision that she might make that move first ripples hotly through her blood, but she swallows it away as she closes her eyes with her breath quickening shallowly, telling herself to focus instead on the swiftly building pleasure she's done a fair job in teaching the blonde to facilitate.

"Aren't you the one that had a rather rough evening?"

She growls down into impish features, and Emma grins as she slips in another finger to be met with a low moan while running her tongue across her teeth in a crass pantomime of thoughtfulness.

"Well, this is doing a fair job of making me feel better."

She chuckles, and she watches with great intrigue as the Mayor's face works helplessly as sly fingers seek out all her most sensitive spots. She understands that they are both still fairly new to each other in a carnal aspect, but she is also almost certain that she is the first to whom Regina has entrusted what she really likes. It is a situation with which she can empathise, but she imagines her own reason for keeping her wants to herself differs greatly from the brunette's. For herself, it has mostly been a matter of awkwardness, and an inability to open up to people, especially in a manner that might leave her vulnerable. Conspiring that she might like to be treated a little roughly- provided an element of
respect remains in place—had seemed just about as vulnerable as a person could be, and so she had mostly shied away from this admission in the past. Exploring her desires further would also have required finding someone who fully respected her in the first place, when another warring part of her psyche had forbidden that kind of behaviour vehemently.

Because that, too, could make you vulnerable.

For Regina, it's the very opposite. For Regina, it's pride, and self-worth. For Regina, she's never felt the need to explain to another what she wants and how she wants it because, in her eyes, any not able to offer her at least a taste of those inner fantasies is so far beneath her that they don't deserve the right to even try. It has occurred to Emma a few times to ask what makes her so special—always coming back to the scene in the darker woman's drawing-room; knelt between slender thighs while the latter had coaxed and tutored her indulgently just where and how to touch—but she has decided against doing so each and every time. After all, she supposes it might not be so much a case of being special, but rather the only fool the Mayor has encountered willing to endure such an idiotic quest of seduction that it had involved breaking in, robbery, and almost choking on chunks of ice.

This thought causes her to grin, and she laughs when Regina opens her eyes and calls her out primly despite the raspiness of her breath.

"What's that smirk for?"

The brunette snaps with respectable authority for a woman on the edge, and the younger woman laughs harder as she continues her ministrations under the sharp glower of fiery coals.

"Emma!"

"Sorry, sorry, just thinking..."

The blonde chuckles, and she brushes a teasing circle over the Mayor's most sensitive spot with her thumb to try and gain back favour. Dark eyes flutter closed as scarlet lips form an open flower of pleasure before the brunette finds her voice again and leans over to nip at the girl's poked out tongue bossily.

"Put that away and behave yourself, Miss Swan."

She warns, and Emma grins at her and raises an eyebrow.

"Is that what you really want?"

"I-"

But whatever response the Regina might have planned to give becomes a choked sound as the younger woman rolls them a little clumsily so that she bares down on incredulous features with a sharp flash of teeth; her dress caught up around her hips in a crumpled mess of midnight.

"You sure you want me to behave?"

She asks coyly, and Regina huffs irritably for dramatic effect, despite the fact that she savours the soft brush of the blonde's underwear against her sex, as bare thighs splay lightly over her own.

"Tell me what you were thinking about."

The Mayor challenges, curious to know what has the younger woman so amused. She has observed and caused a great spectrum of emotions from her lovers in the past, but Emma is the first to greet the
situation with laughter, and it intrigues her as it's not just during sex that the sound has been lacking from those in her presence. Politeness and a slight nervousness tainting clipped words tend to be what she is offered- and she has worked hard to make it so!- but with the blonde, a great deal of the time seems to be spent laughing, and it is a curious, yet exhilarating thing.

"Oh, it's stupid."

Emma sighs as she begins making her way down the brunette's svelte frame, and the latter shakes her head- dark locks spilling like silk over the pillow- as she allows gentle palms to push her thighs apart.

"That may be, but I still asked you to tell me."

Regina points out, and the blonde seems to think on this for a moment and then smiles as she tucks her hair behind her ears.

"Yeah, that's kind of the thing. You tell me what to do a lot, you know?"

"And you don't like it?"

The brunette snaps tersely, not really in the mood to discuss such minor details of their interactions when she lies promisingly splayed out for the girl, glittering with anticipation.

"No, no. I was just thinking I like it... I really like it."

Emma explains, before elaborating a little shyly

"I was thinking that this is still all kind of new to me, but it's fucking intense. It's not just messing around to tip over and enjoy a nice dose of endorphins to make the day go faster. It's like way, way over the edge. I was thinking that you showed me what you liked- what you really want- rather than just settling. I was wondering what made me so special that you even bothered, and then figured you were probably scared shitless of what I might take it upon myself to do as an alternative way of finding out."

The younger woman grins bashfully, and Regina studies her thoughtfully as the latter shrugs and lowers herself down to get comfortable. Swallowing, she interrupts the blonde quietly.

"I don't 'settle'."

"Yeah. I guess I know that."

Emma replies with a faint blush colouring her cheeks, and the Mayor nods in favour of this obedient agreement, before speaking up once more, this time a little huskily.

"I was fairly thorough when talking you through what you were doing that night, Miss Swan. I would find it polite if you were to extend me the same curtesy..."

She raises a shapely brow as she challenges the girl, and the latter looks up at her as she strokes her fingers lazily over silken flesh.

"You know what I like."

"I do, to a point..."

"Well, I mean... I guess you know I kind of like it a little, um... I don't mind it when you push me around a bit or tell me what to do."
Emma murmurs as she seems suddenly enthralled in the darker woman's navel so as to avoid meeting her arresting gaze. She can feel the Mayor studying her intently, and it's Regina's turn to smile as she drinks in pale skin and downcast eyes that serve to make her stomach clench as she relishes the younger woman's shyness.

"I do know this, yes, and find it fascinating. Perhaps I would like to know a little more?"

"How do you mean?"

The blonde whispers, recalling the conversation endured with Neal about what her sexual tastes might include that had ended in her wanting to join a nunnery and swear off the act altogether for the sake of avoiding ever having to face such an excruciatingly uncomfortable discussion in the future.

"I mean that I know you like those things dear, but I'd love for you to let me in on how you like them."

"Well, I..."

"Show me."

"Sh-show you?"

Green eyes flash up uncomfortably, and the Mayor nods indulgently and spreads her legs a little wider.

"It's a demanding request, I know this, just as I know I'm making you nervous. I won't lie and tell you I don't enjoy that fact just a little bit, dear, but, I allowed you the kindness of knowing how to make this an experience that sends me, hmm, how did you put it, way, way over the edge... I would appreciate it if you might trust me enough to do the same."

"I trust you, I just... I really don't think I can like... Talk you through stuff."

Emma mumbles; wondering just how in the hell Regina has hit what she was thinking about so squarely on the nose. And she's telling the truth! She does trust the brunette enough to let her intimately in- it's just... She doesn't think she can guide the darker woman in the same way as she'd been guided. Her mind and her words don't work that way, and the idea of playing teacher herself just about quells any arousal the rest of the scene offers.

"Then don't talk me through it."

Regina reasons, and she smiles salaciously as her sex clenches with the idea, and she swallows silently as she regards the blonde intently.

"Uh..."

"Show me."

"Show you?"

"Show me how you want it."

The brunette orders, and she shivers slightly, and meets the widening of the younger woman's eyes with an authoritative nod that suggests Emma would do well to get down to business and do as she says.

"I can't do that!"
The blonde hisses as she stills in her gentle stroking and shakes her head.

"You might not like it!"

"Miss Swan, if I had such concerns, I wouldn't have suggested it."

Regina explains irritable- uncomfortably aroused now, and wishing the girl would at least go back to touching her in that heavenly, distracting way- but she speaks in a gentler tone when arched brows furrow together, and the younger woman tenses up. Licking her lips thoughtfully as her gaze lingers on the way the waitress's dress allows a fair hint of cleavage, she purrs quietly as she aims to put the girl's anxiety to rest and get back to business.

"Emma, I'm not asking for the grand feature show. I'm not asking you to whip out any kind of rope, chains, or actual whips, or God knows what else! I'm not asking you for everything, just the tip of the iceberg. I'm asking you to return the favour I extended you. We can discuss other matters at another time- and I look forward to it- but right now, I am permitting you to do this your way.

I'm asking you to taste me as you would want me to taste you."

She finishes hoarsely, and the blonde stares up at her, stunned, before nodding slowly and submitting to the Mayor's request.

"Okay... But if you don't, uh... If it's not... You have to tell me if you don't..."

"Emma?"

"Yeah?"

"Shut up."

Regina sighs, and she allows a small, secretive smile when the younger woman drops her gaze promptly and gets down to business.

The blonde's concerns are on the whole unfounded; the brunette closing her eyes and biting back a moan as hands that have always been gentle before, push at her thighs much more firmly to allow a pleasant burn to flash down the muscles of her legs, accompanied by sharp teeth grazing the side of her knee playfully. Now and then her brows furrow a little as the soft caress of fingertips she'd coaxed from the girl previously has been replaced by a much more forceful grip, and the sweet whisper of the flat of her tongue is replaced by the occasional cruel nip to the vulnerable flesh of her inner thighs.

But this is an experiment.

When she'd suggested it, it had been entirely for the reasons she'd vocalised. She has watched the younger woman go over numerous times, and imagines she sates the girl's needs perfectly well. But, it is still something else to be shown just what another might fantasise about when thinking on such things alone, and the blonde's current electrifying dance between cruelty and teasing doesn't wholly surprise her. What it does do, is anger her ever so slightly, and therein lies her experiment.

Teasing nails skim her sex-slick flesh in a way she finds she quite enjoys, but then sink in to garner a flash of anger that she hastily swallows away. That anger belongs to the Queen, and she lets out a shuddering breath of relief laced with euphoria as she is able to cast that darkness aside with relative ease.

*I'm letting her in.*
Offering myself up in a way I never would have.

And I'm not going to give Gold or The Curse the satisfaction of acting according to my role.

"Ah!"

She gasps, and her eyes shoot open as the girl brings her palm down sharply over wet flesh, and she almost breaks and pushes Emma off of her, but then pointed velvet soothes any pain and she shudders against bruising fingers and teasing open mouthed kisses to her sex.

Nearing the brink swiftly with the vague thought that she feels curiously vulnerable yet exhilarated (rather than degraded, as she might have expected from such treatment), she supposes a part of that has to do with the fact that throughout this experience, the blonde has left her tortured need- so mercilessly stimulated; desperate and aching- in favour of brushing at full lips gently with her own to juxtapose any roughness, and the Mayor doesn't imagine this is simply due to Emma feeling guilty or nervous that her actions might get her into trouble. She is fairly sure this is a continuation of the younger woman showing her what she wants, and she appreciates this juxtaposition as it is a secret to her own desire she's only ever let Emma in on. What the girl enjoys is rough and to be dominated, and what she herself enjoys comes close to worship and a divine service, but that human element of closeness exists for the both of them, and it makes it all that much sweeter.

"Oh god..."

She groans as the blonde administers just such a gentle kiss, only this time to the trembling flesh of her inner thigh, and she grips at the sheets beneath her as she readies to go over, when all attention where she needs it suddenly ceases.

Cracking open her eyes as her breathing comes out in ragged pants, she stares down at the younger woman incredulously only to find Emma looking up at her shyly.

"What are you doing?! Don't stop now!"

She scolds, as the blonde nips at her lip awkwardly, and the brunette comes to the hazy understanding through the scarlet thrum of her adrenaline that the girl is still holding back just a little. Throwing her head back into the pillow, she growls aggressively

"Just do it!"

And Emma's lashes flutter, but she does as she's told; leaning in to taste the brunette's inner thigh at her apex where the web of muscle leading to her sex strains wantonly, before biting down with measured force.

The Mayor's eyes shoot open as she clenches her own teeth, and she grips at the sheets with blanching knuckles as the blonde increases the force of her torment slowly. A thousand thoughts shoot through the darker woman's mind as she tells herself to endure this final part of the girl's lesson, but what for Emma might well be pleasure, to her is just pain, and what starts as tears of smarting discomfort welling in her eyes soon becomes salted anger, and as sharp teeth sink in deeper, she cries out and strikes.

"Ow!"

Emma yelps, sitting up swiftly and rubbing at her cheek in surprise.

"You smacked me! I-"
She stammers, but the rest is a choked cry as Regina tops her roughly and bares down on her with blazing anger.

"Regina, I-

The blonde frets nervously, licking the taste of the Mayor from her lips as she stares up into glittering eyes that promise a darkness she can't even begin to conceive.

"You...

The brunette breathes furiously... But, as she pins the blonde beneath her and glares down into wide-eyed, nervous features, she slowly comes to the realisation that her thigh only really aches a little now, and even that pain is starting to subside. Dark eyes flickering to the bruises left by her own teeth that colour the younger woman's shoulder and collarbone, and recalling the litter of fingerprints dappling pale skin on the girl's arrival, she sighs, coming back to just the Mayor- just Regina- and letting all notion of power and treason subside.

"That was a little much...

She sighs quietly, but she offers a flicker of a smile which the blonde drinks in uncertainly.

"I'm sorry."

Emma whispers, and the brunette shakes her head and settles so that she straddles the younger woman heavily; moving her hips and nipping at pale lips as she murmurs that everything is fine. Despite her anger and the bolt of pain instigated by the blonde's use of her teeth, it is still a quick and beautiful journey over the edge; the Mayor's thighs slick with her excitement and moving over the delicate friction of the girl's underwear with guttural moans into the latter's light curls. Sinking her teeth into the blonde's clavicle as she shakes with pleasure, she listens as this garners a sharp gasp that she deciphers easily to be one of approval, and she closes her eyes and remains for just a moment with each of her senses overwhelmed by the younger woman.

Finally, pushing herself up, she regards the girl affectionately as she relishes the content, satisfaction of her orgasm, and shakes her head when Emma apologises once more.

"That's why I didn't know if I should do it... I didn't think you'd want me to, but then you said you wanted to know, and in the end, I just went with it and... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-"

"-Shhh."

Regina admonishes gently, and she ignores the girl's uncomfortable expression in favour of fussing with the material of her dress and stripping her down.

"You did as I asked."

She points out, and Emma nods shyly before breaking into a grin.

"Yeah, and I'm good with us keeping it that way."

She smirks, and the brunette laughs softly before raising a brow with deviant promise and nodding.

"I would have to agree. But thank you, dear. Thank you for trusting me."

She smiles, before lowering her attention to bare, globed flesh before Emma can say more on the matter and nipping at a sensitive bud to garner a throaty gasp. Slipping her fingers into the shadows
of damp cotton, she enters the girl with a little more aggression than she has in the past, and moves back up her body to kiss her softly.

"S'ok."

Emma replies huskily, and the brunette laughs down at her in amusement before biting affectionately at the blonde's wide grin.

Taking a hold of the younger woman's hand, Regina coaxes her to bring her arm up above her head; stretching the girl in order to accentuate the delicate ripple of her ribs beneath pale flesh. Running her tongue teasingly down the outer curve of the blonde's breast, she pushes down on the latter's palm to get her to tense up, and bites down with measured cruelty while her other hand continues to work inside skimpy cotton.

"Fuck."

Emma chokes, and perfect teeth sink in more forcefully until she yelps and shakes; the tendons of her wrist straining against the darker woman's grip.

Regina eases up the wrath of her jaw slowly; keeping her fingers in place as the younger woman's inner muscles flutter tellingly and the blonde's thighs twitch beneath her. Pushing herself up, she runs her thumb pensively over the angry, purple mark now tainting delicate ribs, and she admires the twin crescents that create an imperfect circle; the indent of each of her teeth visible and damning.

She has seen that same pattern countless times before; the shape the same, but its relief a rainbow of varying flesh and limbs. Its relief simply whatever had taken her fancy.

This is the first time she's taken the time to study it up close. To watch the slow ebb and flow from red to purple to pink. Leaning down as she keeps the girl's hand raised above her head, she lowers her lips to those cruel crescents and brushes against them softly; Emma watching curiously with an almost nauseating wealth of tangled emotion brewing in her gut.

She opens her mouth to thank the darker woman, but what comes out takes them both by complete surprise.

"I love you."

Her wrist tenses in the brunette's grasp and the latter eases up her hold slowly; pushing herself up to look down at the girl with a stunned expression. Emma stares back up at her as though slapped for a second time; the colour draining from her face as her lips form a hard line and she readies herself to be told not to be ridiculous.

Her own full lips trembling, Regina leans in and brushes them against the blonde's slowly, pushing tangled curls gently back from the girl's forehead as she kisses her deeply.

"Emma..."

She whispers against salted flesh, and she holds the younger woman close to her as she continues to play with long hair gently while burying her face into the comforting darkness of the blonde's skin.

When the Mayor awakes, she finds herself alone, but this doesn't wholly surprise her. It's half nine, and later than she's managed to sleep in for as long as she can remember. She recalls waking up once in the early hours of the morning struggling to breathe as she'd found herself lying on her side with her face nestled into thick hair and the delicate ripple of the blonde's bare spine, while the latter's own
breathing had been tellingly slow and even. It surprises her that Emma had managed to fall asleep with their limbs tangled and her admission weighing heavily between them, but it is something that causes a smile to creep across her face just the same.

A smile which falters somewhat as she catches the low tones of Johanna murmuring pleasantly to Henry.

It's half nine and she's still in bed, unwashed, and naked as the day she was born. Two of those things she can- and will- rectify before leaving her room, but it is still very much unlike her and the chances are that the old maid will ask her if she's feeling alright.

She feels fine.

*Better* than fine.

She feels... Oh, she can't even *explain* how she feels!

But, she can't tell Johanna that.

Can't tell *anyone* that.

And, that *shouldn't* matter, as she doesn't see any reason why her feelings are anyone's business, and she is *entirely* sure that Emma isn't exactly one for proclaiming her emotions to any willing to listen, but...

"It's *never* going to be easy. It's never going to be something we can simply enjoy, however much we both deserve to do so. It's something we're going to have to fight for again and again just to relish the very basics... And we've both fought so hard and for so long already."

She laments quietly.

And, none of what she realises means that she isn't willing to do just *that...* It just aches a little.

Speaking of...

Pushing the covers from her bed-warm flesh, she parts her legs and studies her thigh with a frown. Tainting pretty, olive-toned skin, she presses a finger against a broken oval of regimented marks with growing disquiet.

The fact that the mark should *exist* doesn't perplex her at all; the blonde had bitten down *hard*, after all.

No, what *bothers* her, is the fact that she has seen countless bruises and marks of the same ilk littering the blonde's flesh. Littering her maids' flesh. Littering her lovers' flesh. And all of those marks had differed- of course, they had- in colouring and in lividity. They'd ranged from blue to purple, from midnight to sunset, from fading yellow to violent indigo... But never before has she seen anything like *this*.

Frowning, and looking up, she gasps as she catches her reflection in the mirror; certain for just a second that she's seen a ghost.

Certain she'd seen the heavy canopy of her palace bed and the deep mauve and onyx lace of her nightgown. The one she'd ripped at the hem with her fists in anger upon finding out for some uncountable time that Snow White had slipped through her fingers once again.
Shaking her head distractedly, she studies short waves just touching her shoulders and elegant features hinting at aristocratic breeding but softened by an easy, yet dangerous smile.

Ripping her gaze from hateful glass, she pushes herself from the bed and pads over to the bathroom; starting up the shower to rain down water almost hot enough to scald.

Cleansed, dried, moisturised and with her hair hanging in glistening sheets of burnt cocoa against her naked flesh, she pulls an outfit from her dresser; buttoning up creamy satin to allow just a peek of the lace of her camisole, before pulling on crisp, linen dress pants to hide the stark, troubling circle of impossible white branding her thigh.
A/N: Well, I can safely say that NONE of this is what I had planned to come out of my fingers, but... It happened, and so here it is! Hopefully it works, but I figured after what Emma let slide last chapter, some reflection was probably wise. Please review and hope you all are having lovely weekends :)

"Oh, shit, Cassie."

The blonde groans as she lies curled up on her bed with yellow eyes trained lazily on her own, and she sighs heavily before rolling onto her back and smacking her head lightly against her pillow a couple of times.

"Shit, shit, shit."

Caskett scolds her language with a low mewl, before settling lightly on the girl's stomach and rubbing her face affectionately between her breasts.

"Oh, well that's real classy of you."

Emma chuckles- dropping a hand gently onto soft fur and finding the sweet spot behind the old tabby's jaw- and she stares up at the ceiling as she tries to get a handle on her thoughts now that she finally has some time to herself.

Time without Ruby grinning at her moronically.

This morning had been a curious dance of slipping from Regina's while the darker woman had slept soundly- sparing just a moment to study the Mayor without having to answer to the curious breed of knowing that usually burns within dark coals- and knocking sheepishly at the door of the Diner to be let in by a rather confused looking Ruby.

"Hey! What are you doing out? I thought you were upstairs?"

"Nah, I forgot my keys last night, so-"

"-You what?! Why didn't you call me?! I'd have come back straight away, you idiot, it was storming like crazy! Are you-"

"-I'm fine."

Emma grins as she reads the Waitress's next question easily from the furrow to her brow, and Ruby sighs as she drinks in creased black fabric and high heels that don't seem quite right at this time in the morning, even to her. Still, the blonde looks well rested and seems to be in a favourable mood, so she shoos the girl upstairs with the promise that this should by no means be taken as an end to their conversation.

Sticking resolutely to this threat, she jumps straight back to her interrogation as soon as Emma reappears; buttoning her shirt with one hand and grabbing a mop with the other.
"Are you still mad at me?"

Ruby asks, getting the most important point off of her chest first, and she rolls her eyes when the blonde pretends to think on this question for a moment with a poorly concealed grin.

"Nah. I wasn't really mad, anyway, I just got tired of the conversation is all, and uncomfortable with what you guys were asking me to do."

She shrugs, and Ruby nods as she starts sorting cutlery and napkins into neat piles.

"I know. I'm sorry. Did you get my text?"

"I did, and I would have replied if I'd known I wasn't gonna be around. I got back and realised I hadn't brought my keys out with me, and then I just completely forgot about the text as I tried to think of what to do."

"...You were locked out, with your phone, and my text awaiting a response... And you weren't sure what the next step to your dilemma might be?"

The waitress raises an eyebrow with a bemused smirk, and the younger woman shrugs a little awkwardly.

"It's still kind of new to me, this whole 'oh, I can just call for help' thing."

"Well, get used to it."

Ruby growls irritably, but her eyes glitter with a hint of unease and she brushes a hand through long curls as she passes the blonde in an affectionate manner.

"Oh well. I guess it's good I thought you'd just gone to bed and didn't want to talk in that case, or I'd not have gotten any sleep at all knowing you were out."

"I'm not a child, you know..."

"That has nothing to do with it. I wasn't suggesting I thought you were out there with a can of spray-paint or getting lured into windowless vans, I was merely referring to the fact that it stormed horribly last night and I wouldn't have liked the thought of you being locked out. I'd think the exact same thing about anyone else! Well... Maybe not about Miss Ginger. She really grinds my gears."

"Yeah, always complaining when you don't get her order right and stuff... What a bitch."

"Oh, hush, you. She doesn't like you either."

Ruby snaps with a grin, and Emma laughs and nods, as several distrustful studies from head to toe leave her in no doubt that this is true.

"I wasn't out in the storm all that long, anyway."

She elaborates as she slips behind the counter and switches on the coffee machine and pulls back the dividing panel to the kitchen.

"I wound up by the library, and decided to take a look."

"We have a library? Since when do we have a- wait, you mean the boarded up little room under the clock tower?"
"Yeah, that one."

"But, it's not been open in... Well, I can't even remember when it was last open."

"Yeah, well... I, uh... It got opened last night."

"Emma!"

"What?! It was storming like a bitch, remember? You were all concerned about me not five minutes ago."

Emma appeals, but the brunette shakes her head despairingly as she doesn't miss the mischievous grin playing at the corners of the blonde's lips as the latter tries to offer her an earnest expression.

"Hmm... Perhaps I take it back."

"Oh! Ow! My heart!"

"Oh quit it, save that stuff for Granny who still somewhat buys that whole 'sweet little Emma' routine."

"She's a hardass, but I do like to think that Granny maintains the belief that I sneeze sugar and shit sunshine."

The younger woman nods, and Ruby snorts with laughter, before taking a seat in one of the booths and bouncing her foot pensively; patent kitten heels catching the light.

"You shouldn't go sneaking into places though, Emma. You could get into real trouble for something like that, and given the whole... Whatever it was that happened with Graham, you don't want to be caught sneaking around where you shouldn't be on the same day!"

The brunette points out, but a strange shadow of confusion clouds her eyes for a second, as she tries to recall just what exactly had gone on when they'd come up against the Sheriff the previous day. Something to do with Emma's car? Or had it been something else? She-

"-I wasn't planning on getting caught."

The blonde chips in wryly, before pouring them each a coffee and grinning a little sheepishly as she stirs in a healthy dose of sugar to the one on the left.

"Though I did in the end."

"Yeah? Who by?"

"Who do you think? Regina. I swear that woman needs to start wearing a fucking bell."

Emma laughs, and Ruby cocks her head with a polite look of cluelessness as she feels she's missing a joke, as she accepts the mug Emma offers her- sans heart-attack inducing sweetness- and takes a sip.

"Regina caught you in there? What was she even doing out at that time?"

"I don't know."

The blonde frowns, and she tries to recall if she'd asked the Mayor what now seems like an excellent question, but doesn't believe that it had even crossed her mind. Regina had kept her busy asking
about her evening and warning her about the safety of the clock tower- with its weird shadows up in the cogs, and hadn't it seemed like she wouldn't want me asking about those? Hadn't it just?!- before just keeping her plain old busy.

Blushing lightly, Emma glances up to find Ruby studying her with a peculiar expression.

"See anything green?"

She growls, before freezing in the act of raising her cup to her lips as Ruby's eyes suddenly widen and her mouth falls open.

"Regina found you wandering around last night... And it was Regina's that you ended up staying at, wasn't it?"

"Yeah... So what?"

"So, you might not have been smart enough to give me a call or simply come hollering at the door, but Regina would have no issue doing that. It's practically on her way home from the tower. But instead... She just happily invited you back with her?"

"Well, I mean-"

"-She found you doing something you shouldn't have been doing, smelling of stuff you shouldn't have been drinking, and wearing a dress that, well, you looked like you'd be up to no good wearing... And invited you home with her. And, if she'd been mad at you, you would have said. If you'd argued, you'd have said. But you didn't say anything-"

"-Well, you haven't really given me a chance! I-"

"-Because there was no yelling or telling off... Was there?"

"... She wasn't super stoked I broke in..."

"But she let it slide?"

"... What are you getting at, Ruby?"

Emma asks tersely, wanting to scoff at the brunette and wave her questions away, but not quite sure what answer to give to replace the fact that yes, she'd stayed at Regina's, and there had been little argument from either of them.

"I was wrong yesterday... Wasn't I?"

The waitress breathes.

"I told you not to be crazy and imagine you had any chance with the Mayor because of that little crush you had on her when you got here... But it's more than that, isn't it? And it has been for a while now!"

Ruby exclaims, and when Emma's only answer is to look down into the syrupy sweetness of her coffee and touch the sharp point of her tongue nervously to her top lip, the brunette crows with delight.

"Oh my god! Holy, mother-loving fuck! You and Regina?! Are you actually kidding me right now?! You and Re-"
"-Ruby..."

The blonde snarls, and she is suddenly aware that she's no longer in her seat but lent across the table with her nose inches from the waitress's and her teeth showing in a threatening flash of white. She retracts the hand that reaches for the brunette- not quite sure what it means to do, but experience has taught her it's unlikely to be anything that might better their friendship- and studies wary, bright eyes feverishly, before lowering her gaze.

She imagines if this had been a couple of weeks ago, she'd have punched her.

Why?

Well, because she doesn't know what else to do with the hot fire burning in her throat and cold stone crushing down on her chest.

Because there's too much at stake.

"... I have a good thing going. Please. Please don't ruin it for me."

She appeals softly, and Ruby studies her with wide eyes- still not able to get her head around what she's just found out- before answering sweetly

"Don't ruin what for you, pumpkin?"

"It is a good thing. A great thing. But I can't believe I said what I did."

Emma confides in Cass now, and the tabby rests her jaw on the delicate ripple of the girl's sternum and regards her pensively. She can smell uneasiness and a mild hint of fear beneath the familiar honey of her Girl's soap and shampoo, but it is a different breed to the salted iron that had seemed almost cloying back in Boston. This is subtle. Almost floral rather than metallic and poisonous. A wild rose growing up a trellis erected for its nurtured cousins, warily trusting it won't get plucked away. Her Girl has done something about which she now frets and ponders, but there is no sense of danger in the air, and Caskett remains splayed out over pleasantly warm limbs and blinks lethargically.

"I told her I loved her."

The blonde murmurs, and the words feel strange on her lips even now. She has said those monumental, staggering, overwhelming words three times in her life before now, and each of those times she'd lived to regret them. She won't butcher her past emotions and say that she had been wrong to think herself in love, but she will admit that she'd been blind.

The first time she'd said them, she'd done so to her gym teacher, much to the disgust and amusement of her classmates. It hadn't been a thought out statement, simply the comfort of having somewhere to go and someone consistently backing her up and asking nothing in return. Looking back, of course she understands she'd simply been one of the best- outrunning several of the girls on the track team quite a few years her elder- and she had been providing Miss Peters with something; she'd been providing her with a willing and able student that didn't talk back and promised a healthy bouquet of trophies to display to rival schools. Sue Peters hadn't known the first thing about her home life, and the words of encouragement yelled out from cherry-stained lips had been as mechanical as they had been kind. In the end, it had simply been the combination of entering an elite competition and achieving more than either of them had anticipated. Miss Peters had embraced her, told her she'd been proud, and the words had just slipped out of the blonde's mouth without warning. It had been a long bus ride home, peppered with some especially nasty little remarks from her peers, and, sat five
rows from the front of the bus, studying the pretty, auburn waves gracing the back of her adored gym
teacher's head as the latter had kept her attention carefully trained on the snowy road instead of the
bickering behind her, it had taken only that one trip for Emma to come to the realisation she didn't
love Miss Peters at all.

And, when the next gym session came around and Peters had cordially turned away when the
hollering and giggling had commenced as the blonde started to get undressed in order to shower,
she'd decided she hated the fucking bitch, and that she and the track team could go enjoy a merry
feast in hell.

The second time had been to one of her longer term foster parents. A tall woman with a handsome
face and ice-blond hair. She'd been kind but also stern in her own way, and apart from being a
complete and utter nut-job in the end, she had provided both friendship and a sense of security.

Then, of course, there was Neal. And after that disaster, she'd never thought she'd be capable of even
mistaking something innocent and confused for love again.

"Regina's different. Neal and I knew each other for like a year. It was fast and crazy and we just lost
track of things."

Yes, and you've known Regina for little less than a month.

"Does that matter, though?"

She asks Cass, and the tabby purrs quietly as her tail brushes against the girl's bare thigh like a silken
metronome.

"No, probably not."

Emma answers herself. She only needs to think back on the way Regina had come bursting into her
apartment back in Boston when she'd taken off. Only needs to think on the way they make love- the
first time, and the last- to know that things are special between them.

Only needs to think on the way Regina had spoken to her last night when finding her rocking Henry
back to sleep.

She'd let her in. It had hurt- visibly caused her emotional pain- but she'd let her in. She had been able
to understand through her unease that it was a terrible situation for both of them, and had ended up
asking her if she was alright rather than shutting her out. And, if there's any doubt in the blonde's
mind as to whether she'd meant those three little words or not- of course whether saying them had
been smart is something else entirely!- it's dampened out by that one, harrowing experience. The
difference between what had happened last time and this time astounds her. After all, the last time
Regina had been confronted with seeing her near Henry, they had already been close, that much had
been apparent in the Mayor's little ways of checking up on her and silently offering her a hand. It had
simply been too much. She'd snapped. And now... Oh, she had been on the verge of losing her
carefully honed, calm exterior- that threat had glittered dangerously within dark eyes- but she'd
refrained. She'd learnt from past experience and had been willing to grow. To feel out the blonde the
same way Emma had been tentatively trying to do with her as they'd stood uncomfortably watching
the sleeping infant, and that willingness to say 'well, okay, this is tough and it's going to be hard, but
here's the first step, right here right now, and I'm going to take it if you'll take it with me' is something
she's never experienced before.

She's read about it.
Watched it.

Wanted it.

But she'd ultimately discarded it as fanciful and a waste of her time. Discarded it as something the heroine gets at the end of a long and arduous tale. Or a kid that gets born into a family that wants them.

Same as happy endings.

Same as true love.

Swallowing, she pushes Cass from her gently and stalks over to the wardrobe in order to change out of her uniform. She shucks on some jeans and slings her skirt over the back of her chair, before hanging up her shirt in the hopes of getting another day's use out of it. Stilling when she catches herself in the mirror, she raises a brow and takes a step closer; studying her reflection before looking down at the pale expanse of her ribs. Touching her finger to her lefthand side, just below the cup of her bra, she fingers the flesh there curiously as she traces the unmistakable, uneven crescents that mar her flesh.

"Woah."

She has allowed Regina to bruise her on numerous occasions- as she has others before her- but the lividity of the angry mark she studies is something she hasn't come across before. She guesses the Mayor must have nipped down on some vein or artery or whatever the hell goes on in there, and that would then explain the thunderous bruising of deep midnight that bleeds slowly to indigo.

"Damn..."

She sighs, fetching a T-shirt and covering the curious bruise indifferently. Personally, she resides somewhere between the realms of intrigue and arousal, with just a small hint of pride, but she imagines Regina might have other thoughts when she sees what she's done.

Well, maybe... It depends if she's in her Madame Mayor mood or that other one she sometimes slips into...

The blonde grins, as she finds this latter guise to be terribly interesting, and she's willing to bet it's entirely unknown to any but herself.

And doesn't that thought just lend her a happy little shiver?

She-

"Smirking to yourself?"

A gruff growl heralds her from the doorway and she turns around with a sheepish smile and holds up her hands in surrender.

"Only a little."

"Hmm."

Granny offers, bustling in with clean towels and bedsheets.

"Oh, I can do those."
Emma calls as the greying woman disappears into the bathroom, and Granny studies her with sharp, blue ice as she comes back into view and nods briskly.

"You're darn right you can and will."

She agrees as she hands over the fresh linen, and the younger woman chuckles and places it momentarily on the chair so that she can strip off her old sheets.

"You want any help with the other rooms?"

"No need. I do the others every other week... Seems pointless doing them weekly when no one's using them."

"Seems pointless doing them at all."

Emma offers, and she grins when this is met with the predictable response that she's much too young to understand simple good sense and matters of a hygienic nature.

"Hey, I shower."

The blonde retorts, playing along, and Granny shakes her head and places her hands on the wide valley of her hips with a mixture of disdain and affection.

"I should hope you do! It's Ruby I worry about!"

She responds sharply, and Emma smirks as she disembowels her pillow and holds out the case.

"Oh, we all worry about Ruby."

"Hmm, if only that were true. You had fun last night then did you? I noticed neither of you were back by the time I headed upstairs."

"Oh. Yeah, it was okay."

Emma smiles, and Granny regards her shrewdly over the top of her spectacles as she purses her lips in a way the blonde has grown to think of as her 'don't feed me shit and call it pancakes' face.

"I also noticed you weren't back when my arm started playing up during the early hours as it always does when it storms. I could hear Ruby snoring away, but you..."

"I don't snore."

"But you presumably do sleep in your bed, dear, which was quite clearly empty, what with your door standing wide open as I have reminded you countless times not to leave it."

"Was it?"

"Mhhmm."

"Oh. Well... I..."

"Emma, come here now and you listen to me for a second."

The old woman growls, and she takes a seat stiffly on the blonde's bed and removes her glasses as she pats the empty space beside her. Wondering where in the hell this might be going, and torn between wanting to excuse herself and giggling helplessly, Emma perches on the strewn sheets and
"Now, what you get up to is none of my business, nor do I wish for it to be. But, I'm going to tell you something just once, as I don't know if anyone else has ever done you the favour of telling you it before, and while you're living under my roof, I have a sense of responsibility and I intend to keep my conscience clean. I know what Ruby and those girls get up to when they go out. They get up to what all you young girls invariably get up to when you find yourselves free from the watchful eyes of those who know better. I also know it's usually completely harmless... Still, I know you've moved around a fair bit, and things might be a little slower here than what you're used to, but if it's here you're resting your head at night, then it's here that I'm going to warn you about.

The folk here are good people, Emma. I've known some of them for what feels like my whole life. I believe we're lucky here in Storybrooke, as most folks mean well and look out for each other. That said, when girls like you young things go off into the night and talk to the young men out there doing much of the same, I might be old, but I know that talking's not always all that happens, though you might believe me to be ignorant in my years."

"I don't think that at all, I just-"

"-Now. I'm not going to sit here and tell you what you can and can't do. I'm just going to tell you to be careful. I don't need an explanation in regards to where you choose to lie down at night, but I want to trust that you won't go lying down with no fool. You're a good girl, and I think there's an awful lot that remains to be seen in what you might have to offer. You're finally starting to enjoy yourself, and you're a pleasant addition downstairs behind the counter and waiting tables so far as I'm concerned. Things are looking up for you, girl, and I'm glad. So you just make sure you keep it that way. You're smart, but sometimes smart girls become idiots if they're thinking with their hormones and not their brains. Men too, perhaps even more so. So you do what you want, Emma, and you enjoy yourself as you do it, but you do it just as smart as you do anything else, you understand me? The last thing you need right now is a mouth to feed, diapers to change and a relationship you never planned on having."

Sighing as she catches a hint of, well, something, flash icily in green eyes, Granny shakes her head and pats the blonde's hand kindly.

"I'm sure you think I'm a terribly old fart for talking to you about all this, but I've had the same talk as I'm having with you now with Ruby, and I hope you realise it comes from a good place. By all means, think me an old fool, but think it and humour me, what do you say?"

Looking down at the deep ravines of wrinkles lining the hand that envelopes her own, Emma nods slowly, before glancing up to meet periwinkle eyes she knows to carry a great deal of affection and even more wisdom, despite their hardness that matches the stern pull of the mouth below. She knows Granny means well. She's actually a little touched that the old cook has taken the time to talk to her in such a way, and she thinks back to earlier when she'd mused upon the fact that she might well have punched Ruby a couple of weeks ago for getting up close and personal, and knows that it is a similar breed of progress that allows her to appreciate Granny's words and not find herself reeling away from them with anger and distrust.

After all. Why be bitter about the fact others haven't bothered with her before when she can be thankful for the fact people are doing so now?

Why always fall so swiftly into a pit of fury, chaos and hatred of the world when it's possible to simply grow?

"I don't think you're a fool."
She confides quietly, and the older woman raises a brow and makes a 'psht' noise that suggests she isn't buying into whatever Emma's selling. Grinning a little, the blonde shrugs, before surprising herself as she opens up and meets some of Granny's concerns with a shy but honest response.

"I'm glad you talked to me. Don't worry, though, I wasn't really interested in any of the guys, to be honest."

"Ha, well, see, there you go! I told you you were a smart one. Pleasant men folk we have here in town, yes, but eligible and worth the time? Hardly. A pleasant lot with half a brain to share between them if you ask me. Still, you city lot may be able to go on home with a boy that meets your needs but doesn't peek your interests, but that's lost on the likes of me. You may find yourself growing interested one day, though, Emma, and-"

"-I don't think so."

"You don't, hmm?"

Granny asks with a wry smile

How like her age it is to believe herself exempt from such-

"-No. I don't. Not in any of the boys here. I'm not sure I'm ever really going to be interested in boys anywhere."

The blonde continues slowly, watching the older woman out of the corner of her eye nervously as she's not entirely sure now that the words are out how she feels about sharing this little revelation.

"Oh."

The old woman offers eventually in a clipped tone, before pushing herself from the bed and pulling the rest of the girl's bedding off and into her arms.

"I see."

Licking her lips timidly, Emma watches the old cook make for the door and calls her back awkwardly

"Do you, I mean, uh... Is that not okay?"

"Sorry? Oh! Well, of course, it is, I suppose. Like I said, I'm not going to tell you what you should or shouldn't do. I'll tell you one thing, though. This town, girl, the people are pleasant and good-natured, but there's not an awful lot of love and relationships that seem to flourish here. I can't tell you why that is any more than I can tell you why nothing worth the money to seed it ever grows in that bare patch down at the end of the yard. The soil there is plenty fertile, and the conditions are just fine, and yet nothing planted there has done more than struggle and eventually give up the ghost. Storybrooke seems to be a little like that when it comes to finding another. Lovely people, but they're broken, a lot of them. Separated, divorced, widowed, or simply bored to tears by one another. I can't tell you why, only that it's so. So, far be it for me to give two hoots who you're hot for. This town needs all the love it can get... No, I simply left the conversation at that, as there was nothing more to say. If you're laying with your own, then I don't need to warn you about protecting yourself. Not from a little one anyway. A broken heart, though... That is a danger we all have to face.

But, if the stories are true, then the danger is worth it. And hearts can be fixed. It might not always seem that way, but they can. Now, I've done my duty so far as I can see it and told you not to go running about and getting yourself in over your head. That done, I have ironing to do."
Granny sniffs dismissively, before letting out a surprised grunt when Emma pushes herself off the bed and hugs her fiercely.

"Now, now, get off with you. I'm a busy woman and if you can't get out of my way I'll put you to work after all."

She growls, but she squeezes the blonde affectionately before shooing her away.

"Well, I did offer! But if you don't need me, I might go for a walk."

"That sounds like a fine plan. Take one of the slickers from the closet, it's miserable out there and after the hot spell we've just had, you're just asking for a cold. I know I sound like-"

"-totally ancient"

Emma grins, and Granny shakes her head and bustles from the room with a loud comment lamenting the youth of today.

Fingering her side through the soft cotton of her shirt- the flesh below her left breast tender in a strangely pleasant way- the blonde turns to beckon Caskett out from her hiding place beneath the chair and pets her affectionately before pulling on her sneakers.

"Later, Cassie. I've got some thinking to do."
A/N: Clearly a hip-hop-happening weekend for me! This was... surprise surprise... again not really what I'd planned on it being, so apologies for that, as this story is probably four times as long as it needs to be :/ Hopefully some of the insight is interesting though, and you enjoy :) Please, please, please comment :)

Shaking her head when Ruby comes over to ask if she'd like anything else, Regina mutters under her breath that it's actually rather worrying that the waitress seems to be doing her job for once. Watching the younger woman retreat back behind the counter, she sighs and returns her attention to Henry who gurgles contently beside her. It has been quite some time since she visited the Diner with her son in tow, but she had decided at the last minute before leaving the house that the time has come to gain back some normality to her routine. She had been walking around town with Henry in his stroller when it had started to rain, and the Diner had seemed like as good a place as any to see if she might be able to wait it out; big, fat droplets pattering quietly against glass kept scrupulously clean at Granny's demand.

She had been fairly sure when stalking over to her favoured booth by the window that she wouldn't be likely to run into the blonde at this hour anyway, but the important thing- she reminds herself- is that they are able to deal with things either way. As it is, Emma is nowhere to be seen, and when she asks Ruby in what she hopes is a casual manner whether the younger woman might be around, she is met with the shaking of girlishly high pigtails and a small, inexplicable smirk. Since then, she has simply sat and enjoyed a strong coffee whilst skimming the pages of her book. It is another of Emma's, and she spends a good deal more time reading the blonde's cramped scrawl then she does the typed font; running her finger over sharp loops and messy curls occasionally before catching herself in the act.

It has been a curious morning. Johanna had indeed asked her if she was feeling alright after her late start to the day, and she'd simply smiled, offered the old maid some juice, and told her the truth; that she hadn't slept so well and so deeply for as long as she can remember, and she wasn't going to start questioning such a surprising treat. Johanna had smiled back indulgently and commented she looked well for it, and she'd thanked her and replied that she felt well for it, too.

She had- of course- left out the small factor of Emma's admission the previous evening, but she imagines this might have had a great deal to do with her late rising. Her dreams had been thankfully calm, and in each and every scene flickering behind her closed lids she had been herself as she is now. No leather, no extravagance, and- most importantly- no treatment of the girl as though she were a mere plaything. It had been curious. In several of her dreams, the blonde had been quite a bit older, as had Henry. That in itself had been peculiar, but the startling thing had been that they seemed to function just fine. It seemed natural. Not precisely easy, but accepted by all parties involved. There had been strange names she doesn't recall- and several more that she knows she recognises from that other land, but she can't for the life of her remember what they'd been now she's awake- and a curious reference to animals in a conspiring tone. The tone of allies. Some sort of snake and a mongoose, and she has a vague idea that the two might share some kind of meaning or symmetry in the natural world but isn't sure exactly what.
She imagines Emma might know.

She’ll have read it somewhere.

_Not that it matters, it was just a dream. Are you really going to become one of those couples that discuss the meaningless drivel of their subconscious?_

... One of those ‘couples’?

"_I love you_"

Yes. She swallows. 'Couple' is the right word. She has spent a great deal of time this morning thinking on what Emma had said, and it occurs to her now that she hadn't really given the girl any form of response.

She hadn't been _able_ to.

She'd been stunned, as much by the unexpectedness of those words as by their actuality, but more so, she'd been scared.

Scared to say them back.

She imagines that she is by no means the _first_ person to have ever been afraid of confessing their love—because she _does_ love the blonde, and she supposes deep down she had realised this fact quite possibly before the idea had even _occurred_ to Emma—but she is fairly certain that she _might_ be one of the first to be afraid to speak of their love due to dark and terrible magic that blackens the past.

"_It is a rather unique situation..._"

She whispers to Henry with a small smirk, and she imagines Emma would find that comment to be hilariously dry. Just her sort of humour.

Not that she can ever share in the fact.

"More coffee?"

Glancing up distractedly, she glares at Ruby before nodding and sliding over her cup.

"Is it fresh?"

"Of course."

The waitress replies with a touch of offence, and the Mayor smirks as she wonders what Ruby would say if she knew how like Granny she'd just sounded.

"Hello, little man."

The younger woman coos as she leans over to smile at Henry, but her lips feel suddenly dry as she studies the boy. She has missed Regina bringing him into the Diner with her as it had allowed for some reprieve from the Mayor's sharp tongue, and the little thing had been just about as sweet as pie. Now, though... Well, now she feels a little odd as she grins down at the boy; knowing the truth about where he's come from and finding herself looking curiously for any resemblance.

"He's getting so big now."

She forces as she returns her attention to Regina, and the Mayor nods as she sips her coffee and
adopts a theatrical grimace.

"Oh, dear. This might well be _fresh_, Miss Lucas, but it's not very _hot_.”

"Oh. Sorry."

Ruby sighs—watching steam whisper from the darker woman's cup—and she stalks back to the counter with the promise of something 'better'. Starting up an entirely new brew, she wipes down the counter habitually while she shoots sly glances at the brunette as she has done since she’d arrived. She is still somewhat stunned by what she is now _positive_ to be the truth, and she finds herself looking at the Mayor in a whole new light. It had been one thing to study her and toy with the amusing idea that her friend was entirely _enamoured_ with what she was seeing in a hopelessly doomed way... But it's another thing watching Regina reapply her lipstick with careful expertise and knowing that her friend would be able to tell her exactly what that rich red tastes like.

_Pervert._

She scolds herself with a grin, but hell! What is she _supposed_ to do with her newfound knowledge!? It's simply _insane_!

"Here, try this."

She offers as she hurries back to the Mayor's booth and hands her a fresh mug, and Regina touches her fingers gently to the sides of clunky ceramic before nodding her satisfaction.

"That should be fine."

"You sure?"

"Well, I'm not going to burn my tongue by finding out right this _second_, Miss Lucas."

She snaps, and when Ruby turns away with an insolent roll of her eyes at this contrary response, Regina smirks mischievously to herself before returning her attention to the window.

The street outside is predictably empty; Sundays always quiet in their little town, but especially so due to the weather. For the most part she simply watches the gentle drizzle of rain, broken up now and then by a lonesome figure making their way to wherever they're going.

Archie with his umbrella up and Pongo trotting at his side with his head down to keep his face dry.

Miss Ginger shuffling along in her obnoxiously luminescent housecoat and wrinkled, beige pantyhose.

Mary Margaret with an arm full of flowers and a compact, black umbrella, seemingly in a hurry and presumably on her way to the hospital to help out. She greets the rain with a pensive expression, and behind the glass, Regina frowns as she recognises that particular look alarmingly well from observing the blonde at work. Continuing her voyeurism, she observes as the schoolteacher comes to a halt with a raising of her brow as she fumbles around in the pocket of her coat and pulls out her phone. She glances at the screen, adopting a morose expression before she continues on down the street.

Continues on to spend this miserable Sunday sat beside her Charming without the faintest memory of his kiss.

Looking around at her fellow patrons sat huddled up here and there, Regina notes— not for the first
time- how many of them are sat alone.

In the corner by the counter, she observes a tired looking woman with a long, black braid go lethargically about mopping up her egg yolk with a piece of toast as she scans the glossy pages of a magazine.

Over by the door, the brunette's gaze flickers briefly to an old woman with Scotch tape holding together one side of her glasses, and she wonders if either of the two has ever studied the other up close and noticed the startling similarities in their bone structure.

*Of course they haven't, no more so than any of the others here in town have done, and even if such a thing had caught either of their attention, to follow the thought on any further would be madness.*

No. The tired looking woman with the thick braid will go home to her little room above the pharmacy, never knowing she'd been sat only a couple of feet from her mother, as she so often does on a Sunday.

Why?

Because her Queen had been angry.

Bitter.

Lonely.

And it hadn't seemed fair.

She-

"Excuse me... May I pay my cheque."

Regina calls out to Ruby suddenly, no longer wanting to sit in the Diner. No longer wanting to look at the sad wrinkles puckering around the older woman's mouth and the delicate strands of silver that adorn her daughter's once raven hair.

No longer wanting to be faced with what she's done.

When she spots the blonde mooching aimlessly across the field that rolls out below the old farmhouse, Regina isn't wholly surprised. She hasn't come here *looking* for the girl, but Emma seems to have a way of showing up, and it is something that had once been troubling, but now simply seems another piece of something beyond her control. She imagines they are out in the light drizzle for similar reasons- to think- and supposes there's no reason they can't do so together. She'd gone out walking after dropping Henry with Johanna with the notion that she wished to be alone, but she hasn't found any answers while roaming the woods solitarily, only more questions.

"Emma."

She heralds as she stalks across the unkempt field to meet up with the girl beneath an ominous cluster of clouds.

"Hey."

The blonde smiles, looking up, before casting her gaze to the grey skies above and sighing.

"Crappy weather, huh?"
"Welcome to Maine, Miss Swan."

Regina smiles, and the girl rolls her eyes and falls into step beside the Mayor as the latter begins the slow trek up the grassy knoll to the farmhouse.

"Isn't much different to a lot of the rest of New England. It storms everywhere."

Emma shrugs, and Regina nods- the unwanted memory of the purple clash of the sky that had heralded the coming of The Curse springing to mind- and pulls her coat closer to her slim frame.

"Your hair's a mess. Were you out here when it was raining hard?"

"Yeah, but it only rained properly for a bit. I don't really mind. There was a hood attached to the slicker but it kept blowing off so I detached it."

The blonde shrugs and she studies the limp fall of the Mayor's dark locks curiously as the latter nods her understanding.

"Wouldn't have thought it'd be like you to come walking around in the rain, though. Everything okay?"

She asks, thinking for a moment on the words she'd spoken the night before and swallowing nervously.

"Fine."

Regina answers curtly, before sighing and glancing at the girl pensively.

"I was just lost in my thoughts, I suppose, and some of them weren't all that savoury. I was thinking about how some characteristics are cruel and that some sayings hold an unappealing amount of truth."

"Oh? Like what?"

"They say that misery loves company. I was thinking about how accurate that statement really is. I bemuse myself, but I am as fickle as any other in that respect. I was thinking that when I am feeling low, I wish for everyone else to share that fate with me, as though their suffering will somehow make mine more bearable."

"... You're feeling low?"

Emma asks quietly, and the brunette shakes her head and offers a small smile.

"No. I'm not. Quite the opposite, in fact. It's the pleasant turn of events that landed me into thinking about how I used to feel."

"Well, I'm glad you feel better now-"

"-Of course you are. But arrogance is unappealing, dear."

Regina interrupts with a smirk, and Emma blushes with a shy grin and shrugs.

"Well... If I'm to blame, all I can say is you're welcome."

She winks, before continuing thoughtfully as they come to a stop at the low, stone wall that surrounds the abandoned farm.
"As for feeling shitty about wanting to share your misery, I think it would be foolish to start feeling too guilty. For one, it's somewhat human nature like you said- or at the very least it's much more common than most people would care to admit- and for another, it's something that goes way back in history to a degree so cruel you can count yourself absolved by mere comparison."

She smiles, and the brunette thinks on this curiously as she watches Emma hop up onto the wall to perch with her legs dangling down either side; her breath misty in the stormy air.

"It does?"

"Sure. You know, more than one ancient civilisation lived by the idea that when its leader, or its king or queen or whatever died, that figurehead would be buried with their entire servantry, sometimes alive, sometimes slaughtered, to keep them company in the afterlife. But it was also arguably because it was believed to be correct that they should suffer the same fate as their masters when the time came. Hell, I think it was the Egyptians that even buried the royal animals in there, too."

"That's barbaric."

Regina frowns, before pursing her lips as she recalls personally overseeing the shackling of three men and a young maid upon hearing they'd been debating her right to wear the crown and leaving them to perish outside the Palace gates. The youngest man had lasted the longest. Five days. And then their bodies had gone to the dogs.

"It was the custom."

Emma shrugs, and the Mayor nods her agreement as she wonders what Emma might have made of her rule.

"You've read a lot about royalty."

"I've read a lot about power. I find it fascinating."

"It is seductive, yes."

"In a way, I suppose. But, I think mostly it seems to be isolating. Even those dudes with all their servants buried up next to them. It's a different level. If you're the one on top, you're alone. That is if being on top is what matters to you. No one else can ever fully empathise, as no one else can experience what you experience. I think it's interesting, but I don't think it's anything I'd desire... Do you like it?"

She asks shyly, and Regina shoots her a nervous glance before realising that Emma's asking about her position as Mayor. The minuscule scale on which she now plays makes her want to laugh at the girl's enquiry, but she thinks again on the mother and daughter turned strangers back in the Diner and supposes she maintains a breed of invisible power even if her subjects no longer quake with fear in her presence.

"I like overseeing things. I like making sure that everything runs smoothly... I prefer making decisions than having them made for me, but, I will agree that it is a position in which one is often lonely. That said, I maintain my role, and yet you seem to have no qualms about treating me as an equal."

Regina smirks, and Emma looks up at her in surprise and shakes her head.

"I don't think that. I think we're different, is all. And we're friends. I mean, we're not anything like the ancient Egyptians or Romans or Greeks. I think some of that stuff about power is still true on a small
scale, but it's not like you're about to take my head off if I speak out of turn."

"No."

The brunette agrees woodenly, recalling the sharp flash of the guillotine.

"You'll scold me sometimes, as you do possess a sense of superiority that I myself find both amusing and often well-deserved, but I kind of like that, so I get reckless. If you snap at me to put me in my place, I'll either argue, accept it or, uh... Enjoy it. I can't say I'd think the same if you were to start removing fingernails or body parts... I can call you 'Your Highness' if it pleases you, though?"

She chuckles impishly, before drawing back in surprise when the darker woman barks at her fiercely, grabbing hold of her jaw none too gently and studying her intently.

"No. Don't you ever call me that!"

"Okay, okay!"

Emma agrees hastily, and she secretly surmises that the other version of the brunette- the darker version of the brunette- has come out to play and treads a little more carefully.

"Madame Mayor it is."

She smiles salaciously, but her eyes shimmer with an appeal to rectify any wrongs, and Regina glowers at her for just a moment longer before replacing her iron grip with a gentle caress and laughing quietly.

"I do enjoy the way you say that."

"Good."

The blonde grins, glad that the Mayor seems once more in good spirits, and she swings her leg over the wall so that she perches looking out over the field and places a hand gently on the brunette's shoulder; fiddling absentmindedly with her hair as the latter joins her in drinking in the view.

"Let me ask you-"

Regina speaks eventually, keeping her gaze cast out at sodden grass and slowly approaching thunderheads

"-is there a saying for the opposite of misery loving company? Is there a saying like that for happiness?"

"Smile and the whole world smiles with you."

Emma chuckles, before shaking her head and studying the dark silk wrapped around her finger.

"I don't really think that's quite as true, though. There are two I can think of, and I have no idea who wrote the first. I'm just hoping you'll appreciate the poorly hidden intent behind it."

She grins.

"The first I thought of is that happiness is like a kiss. You have to share it to enjoy it."

"Sly..."
Regina smiles, and she reaches for the girl's hand as the latter plays with her hair and brings it to her mouth; pressing her lips gently against her palm.

"Not quite what I had in mind."

Emma whispers, but her breath catches in her throat at the tenderness of the act.

"Well, I too am sly, dear."

The Mayor smirks, and the blonde rolls her eyes and goes back to her affectionate fiddling.

"I know this, Madame Mayor. I think it's a good enough saying, though. I think it's hard to be truly happy if you can't allow others the same. I think in a lot of books and stuff, especially kid books- fairytale books- that's the common mistake of the evil stepmother, or old witch or whatever, you know? They feed off of people's misery like it's fucking cotton candy."

"Feed off of it?"

Regina croaks, and Emma nods obliviously and shrugs her shoulders.

"Yeah, for sure, but they're not really happy in the end, are they? They're smug. Satisfied. They're in a better position than those they torment. But is that true happiness? Seems more like hard work to me. Sour joy. I think being the villain in one of those books might be an awful lot like eating rock candy. It's nice, and it tastes good, and you want more, but it cuts up your tongue something wicked, and your mouth gets sore, and even though it still tastes good, that takes some of the enjoyment out of it."

"And we're back to food..."

The Mayor jokes weakly, feeling a little faint due to the current subject matter. Pushing such things aside, she strives on for a change of pace and turns to the girl curiously.

"You said you had two sayings on happiness. What was the other?"

"Oh, well the other one isn't really as comforting. It's true enough though, and I guess the depressive in me appreciates it. Hemingway wrote 'Happiness in intelligent people is the rarest thing I know'."

"That's rather morbid."

Regina agrees, but she smiles as she can appreciate what the girl sees in those words. It is undoubtedly true, but nowhere within the saying does the writer state that such a combination is impossible.

"Well, I must be a rare breed in that case."

She muses airily, and Emma snorts as she jumps down from the wall.

"Oh, Regina, the sun's rays doth shine out of thine backside, don't they?"

"Quiet, you."

The Mayor smiles, before suggesting that they make their way back into town as the sky grows ever blacker; feeling a great deal lighter than when she'd set out into the rain.

A feeling that dissipates swiftly when they slip from the woods back into town and come to a halt; each staring at the new item on display in the window of Gold's shop.
"Well, that's new."

The blonde grins, before jogging across the street to better study Gold's latest addition to his collection while Regina opens her mouth helplessly as she silently screams at the girl to keep away from the hateful object displayed purely to mock her.

To shock her.

To send her surely insane.

"Emma..."

Is all she manages, and she sighs defeatedly as she stalks over to stand beside the younger woman with an uneasy pull to her lips.

An unease that is by no means matched by the girl, as the latter turns to her with a salacious grin and eyes that glitter fiendishly.

"Bit odd, hey?"

Emma smirks gleefully, as her attention reverts back to fraying material and cruel leather.

"Yes."

Regina agrees, and she studies the worn grip that has become almost velveteen with use, and knows that the faint fingerprints visible at the hilt would fit her own hand perfectly.

"Is it bad that I find that totally kinky?"

Emma chuckles as she shoves her hands into her pockets and looks from the Mayor to the weathered crop hanging suspended in the window with a delicate blush to her cheeks. Still, it's hard to look at the riding crop Gold has mysteriously elected to play pride of place in any other way! Ordinarily, the Shop's windows are heaving with junk and treasure, but a curious white curtain has been strung up to mask off the shadowed interior, and it provides a stark relief for the sole implement now on display. The leather at the top of the crop is worn and cracked, while the colourful cotton running up its length seems queer and hand-spun rather than the fluorescent nylon more often glimpsed when used for riding. There is a customary pad of leather that plays the crops cruel tongue, and Emma supposes that it is this that speaks to her more devious side, as its shape is that of a heart and this too appears to be rather well used.

"Regina?"

She prompts, blushing a little more vibrantly as her lecherous quip is met by silence, and she glances over at the brunette in hopes that she won't be left hanging.

"I can see what you mean."

Regina breathes eventually; dark coals fixated on that wicked heart with the cruel shard of glass- a remnant of the crown designed for her wedding; a symbol of her anger- she knows to be hidden expertly inside, as her ears ring with the harsh, yet somehow flat sound of leather wielding down upon flesh.
The way it had sounded when she'd flogged the pretty little cook.

Again and again and again.

Hard, flat, accompanied by screams, before finally being joined by a wet, visceral harmony upon entering the coda.

A minuet in red.

She'd wiped the heart free of blood following her minor, well, mood-swing, but the cotton wound around the shaft had remained permanently stained, and as she studies the hateful relic of her past strung up in the window- arranged to point out slightly as though it were a hideous, accusatory finger- she spies several maroon imperfections to rich magenta.

Come to think of it... She should have remembered.

After all, isn't this the very same crop her mind had conjured up when playing out the dream-scape in the stables.

Isn't this the crop she'd used on Em-

No! No! No!

"Thwack!"

The blonde spits with a grin; her impression of a whipping noise eerily uncanny, and the Mayor whirls round to face her with her eyes wide and her teeth bared.

"Don't do that!"

She snaps angrily, and the younger woman feigns regret and bashfulness with a shit-eating grin; missing the way the brunette looks decidedly pale beneath the shop's awning.

"Aw, why not? You don't want me to? Gonna teach me a lesson?"

"Emma. Stop it."

The Mayor growls, and she closes in on the girl threaterningly until the latter holds up her palms placatingly and wipes the smirk from her face.

"Ok, ok! Sorry. No one's here, though, and I was just joking. Sort of."

She shrugs with a slight hint of embarrassment, and the darker woman looks from wide eyes to the cruel tongue of the crop and sighs.

"It's not that I think anyone might overhear us, dear, it's just... Well, I really don't think much of Gold's attempt at window dressing."

She sniffs as though suddenly bored of the entire situation, and she surprises the blonde as she places a hand gently against her back to steer her away from the window.

Emma's thoughts balance upon a queer tightrope brought on by the brunette's touch in public.

Regina's are at the mercy of a mere knife's edge.

*It is the crop I used on her. Of course, it is. I brought it down between her legs and she yelped, but*
there wasn't any blood. It wasn't turned the right way. I didn't hit her hard enough. She liked it. She damned well liked it. She liked it and I woke up wet, and oh, god, I'd love to do it, but I would never do it, never, no matter how prettily the leather glistened, no matter what sweet noises she might make, no matter how special she is to me-

"I know what happens to people that are special to you.

They get hurt."

"Never."

"Huh?"

Emma asks her curiously as the Mayor snarls beneath her breath, and the older woman glances over at her dazedly before shaking her head.

"I never understand what that little imp is thinking."

She elaborates swiftly, and the blonde shrugs with a small smirk as she confides pleasantly

"Seems like a bit of a whack-job if you ask me."

"Quite."

Regina agrees; knowing that such an observation may well be true, but that insanity and knowledge are two separate things, and while her old mentor might be fantastically unhinged, his understanding of the intricacies of The Curse surpasses her own.

Displaying the crop had been cruel.

But the message behind it?

"You may regret it, Regina, maybe even instantly, but that's not to say that in a brief moment of darkness you won't do something you can't take back."

The crop is a warning.

Cruel, crass, tasteless...

But a warning.

"I really was joking about you punishing me with the crop, you know..."

Emma interrupts her inner turmoil now with an uncomfortable look of her own, before she catches herself in a lie and tosses back damp curls with a shy smile.

"Well, no, I guess that's not true... But don't get weird on me or anything, okay? I was just... I wasn't joking, I guess, but I was messing with you."

"I know."

Regina nods as she forces a smile, but she is unable to meet the younger woman's immediate banter with her usual blend of disdain and silkiness.

"Though, as the idea's being thrown around, and it's miserable weather, we could always have a more in-depth discussion someplace warmer about how you might punish me if the necessity ever
"did arise... Someplace that's-

"-I believe I should be heading home, actually, dear."

"That's kind of what I was hinting at, in case that wasn't cle-

"-I appreciate the offer, Miss Swan- I appreciate it immensely- but I really do need to get a few things done around the house."

"That's cool. I could always help, if you-

"-No."

"Oh... Well, I didn't mean to sound like I was pester ing or anything, I more just meant if you wanted a hand, I could... You know... give you one. With the house. Housework. That kind of hand."

Emma mumbles uncomfortably, and the brunette laughs quietly- it is a strained laugh, but it's still better than she believes she might have achieved were it not for having the girl around- and shakes her head.

"Such a poet. And I don't really mind your particular brand of pester ing, dear, let that be well understood! I simply need to take care of a few things that- unfortunately- you won't be able to help me with."

"Okay... Are you sure you're alright?"

"Right as always."

Regina nods as her teeth clench into a painful smile, and she brushes a wet tangle of cornsilk from the girl's cheek with a gentle sweep of her finger.

"Now, go get changed and dried off for heaven's sake. You'll catch your death."

She snaps in a suddenly business-like tone, and Emma starts off towards the Diner obediently with a wave of her hand and the impish quip over her shoulder of

"Awww, worried about me?"

"... Yes."

The brunette whispers as she turns for home.

Sitting rigidly still in the middle of her bed, the brunette looks down at her hands without really seeing them. Her lashes are wet, and her jaw aches from being constantly clenched, and she wishes sullenly she could take back the last hour and play it a little differently.

She'd snapped.

Snarled.

Behaved horribly.

She knows this, just as she knows that Johanna will forgive her.

Just as she knows that it isn't the first time she's treated the old maid unfairly.
Just as she knows it is things like this that have led to tongues wagging behind her back for years now.

Things like this that people have come to expect of her.

Until Emma had come to town, anyway.

It hadn't been anything more than a cruel lashing of her tongue and momentary loss of control down in the kitchen, but it had still taken her by surprise as it has been a little over a month now since she's unleashed the hot, black anger from her lungs and bitten an unsuspecting victim.

Well... Not counting the night she'd yelled at Emma.

Not counting that disaster.

And this had been nothing as terrible as that horrific evening.

This had simply come about because Johanna had insisted on asking her inane and pointless questions while washing up her dinner things in the kitchen.

Asking her about her day.

Telling her about her flowers.

Enquiring what she might make of the weather they've been having.

And all the while she had been scrubbing away at the plates in the sink, and the water had sloshed around inside the basin maddeningly, and the click, clack, clink of the cutlery littering the bottom had gone on and on maddeningly like some idiot orchestra beneath the waves and it had been as though the moronic, no good, snivelling bitch had been completely oblivious to that hateful racket!

And she'd just carried on talking!

Talking and talking as though her words might bare the slightest hint of meaning!

Like they would be of any interest to her superior!

The no good, cracked drone of that traitorous old bottom feeder- Snow's obsequious old witch- had filled the kitchen like factory smoke, and who in the hell changed the clock above the doorway for one that tick, tock, ticked so loudly?!

So, yes, eventually she'd snapped.

But hadn't she told the bitch twice already that she wasn't hungry for dessert?

Hadn't she goddamned told her?!

Well, clearly, the ginger waste of space hadn't been paying attention, because there she'd gone, walking over from the fridge with a great, wide grin plastered across her face, before placing a big, old slice of apple pie in front of her.

"I told her I didn't want anything more..."

She whispers now, and she worries the silk of her sheets miserably.

Yes, she had told her.
Of course, in hindsight, she supposes she should really just have told her *again*, or taken the pie back to the fridge.

In hindsight, she imagines there could have been *better* ways to go about the situation that to hurl the plate across the room to shatter against the silver door of the fridge-freezer.

She supposes she could have found *another* way to deal with things than to tell the open-mouthed redhead to choose between cleaning out her ears or losing them altogether, and she imagines now that she must have appeared quite *mad* with the colour high in her cheeks and her eyes slitted with rage.

Johanna had grovelled a confused apology before making herself scarce, and by the time the front door had been pulled shut with respectful care, she'd been unable to believe what in the hell had just happened.

Had watched the slow decent of a slice of apple ooze down the door of the fridge in a trail of its own juice; bejewelled with crumbs of pastry.

"It's a good thing I wasn't closer to her."

She muses quietly now, and she knows this to be true. It sounds ludicrous when thinking of herself as the Mayor- a figurehead known in town for her poise and manners- but her memory suffers a plague of recollection of times long gone, and those times are salted with rage and stained with blood.

She'd killed guards for much less than negating to take heed of her second or third warning on any matter.

She'd rid herself of *some* of them before warning them even *once*.

Because everything had been falling apart.

Everything had *hurt*.

And when you didn't take *control* of the situation, people would take control of you.

The young cook who had bled so freely and profusely had been a gift to her along with three handmaids from Leopold the day after their wedding. To keep her company. To see to her. To keep her occupied and tended to and out of his way when not being of use to him. She had been hand selected from the palace kitchens to serve Her Majesty in her own quarters, and she had been selected for her fine skill and excellent repute within the family.

*Family...*

A Family that resided somewhere else in the palace.

No family of *hers*.

The cook had once waited upon Ava.

And she had made it quite clear where her loyalties lay.

And, when Leopold had been demoted from husband to a hushed name whispered and grieved in the hallways, the little cook had slipped through the cracks for a little while as the Queen- widowed so young, so sad- had found other things to occupy herself with.
But she hadn't forgotten.

Hadn't forgotten the way the cook had looked at her when serving her delicacies tainted by her surroundings.

That look.

That look of judgement- of disdain- that look of believing Snow's mother to be the true Queen.

As though that pale bitch had done anything to deserve it!

As though she'd suffered even a fraction of what the weight of the crown was truly worth.

That look had enraged her.

And she had taken matters into her own hands in the end.

The cook had never looked her in the eye again.

Because the lesson had been hard, and the lesson had been cruel, but she'd learnt it eventually after the Queen had taken matters into her own hands.

"I'm not the Queen. Not the Evil Queen."

She consoles herself, but such denial is giving her a headache, as the more she thinks on it, the more she finds she remembers not just the happenings of the past, but the reasoning behind them.

The more she finds herself becoming confused as to how she has been able to tolerate leaving the cretins of her town be for the last eighteen years.

Don't you dare think like that. It's what he wants. It's what Gold wants. Don't you dare. Don't you-

-She frowns. Pulled from her fretting by a weak whimpering from the other room, and she looks up irritably. She recognises Henry's low cry- of course she does, she's his mother- and knows the little boy is simply grizzling to himself.

Fine.

But distracting.

"Henry, shhh."

She calls out unhappily, her head swimming with the past and the present and her chest tight.

She's changed. She knows this. Changed so much for the better since meeting the blonde. Changed in such a positive way, and she just needs to keep a hold on this as tightly as she can, as she's only thinking about the rest of it because of Gold's words and the crop, and-

"-Henry!"

She snaps as the boy fusses a little louder. Closing her eyes and pressing her palms hard into the hollows so that her lashes brush the intricate lines of her fate, she takes in slow, deep breaths and tells herself to get a grip. To get a hold of herself. Tells herself that she can look into Gold's- Rumple's- warning as much as she wants, but that the act is pointless, as there is simply no way she would ever allow herself to do something to mess up what she has created here, nor will she ever lay a finger on the blonde, because the blonde is something good, something light that she will simply cling on to,
and she'll be damned if she's going to allow The Curse to feed off of her! She'll just damn well feed right off of Emma- off of the light- and she won't allow the past to-

"If you don't shut off that noise, I will do so for you! Be quiet or I'll make you myself!"

She screams, and suddenly she is aware that she's no longer sat in her bed, but standing in the nursery- standing over the crib- with her nose an inch from the boy's as he regards her with wide eyes flecked with green.

Naked gums bare unhappily as those curious eyes clamp shut, and now it's Henry who's screaming, and the brunette regards him with her fiery coals opened wide and her complexion pale.

"Henry! Oh, Henry, shhh, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to yell! I didn't mean it!"

She frets as she lifts the boy from the crib and holds him to her chest- her heart beating a frantic rhythm against the salted heat of his cheek- and she falls into the chair by the window weakly; clutching the child and whispering over and over against the pink star of his hand

"I'm sorry!"
Chapter 86

By the time she gets sent off to buy herself and the Mayor lunch on Monday, what had been an inkling to the blonde when bidding the darker woman farewell in the rain has become a certainty.

There is something wrong with Regina.

And she hadn't needed an assessing sweep of cornflower blue eyes and a whispered warning to 'mind herself' to come to this conclusion.

That said, save for the odd nod of acknowledgement here and there, the fact that Johanna had addressed her upon entering had been peculiar in itself, even more so as she'd seemed in a rather sour mood; something which really hadn't suited her. She'd reminded Emma to take off her shoes- a practise the blonde has never once been demanded of before- and to allow the Mayor some peace as the latter seemed a little under the weather.

Brow furrowing as she'd entered the home office, Emma had come to the fairly quick conclusion that while Regina certainly had seemed a little cold and closed off, she hadn't really appeared to be feeling unwell.

She'd asked- of course- and had received a glance that suggested Regina might not usually take kindly to anyone meddling in her private affairs, but then, none of their interactions to date have been all that 'usual' and Emma is hardly just 'anyone'.

"I feel fine. I just have a lot on my mind, dear."

Had come the clipped response to if she might be feeling okay, and the blonde had nodded acceptingly and simply taken a seat.

Knowing that if Regina suffers something eating away at her, she'll let her in eventually if she wishes to do so.

If not... Well. The younger woman has a great number of faults- she will be the first to admit to this- but nosiness isn't one of them. She understands better than most that there are things that take time to come to terms with and find the courage- or simple will- to discuss, and she trusts that the brunette knows she's happy to listen once that time comes.

After Regina's letter- smudged so painfully with salt- the blonde imagines they've crossed any bridges as far as allowing each other in, and so she is content to simply smile, get on with her work and offer a pleasant response to the few words the darker woman does spare her.

It had been fine.

Until about a quarter to eleven when the brunette had let out a shuddering breath and covered her eyes with her hand.

"Regina? Hey... You want some water or something?"

Emma had asked her nervously; really meaning 'are you alright?' but knowing how fantastically irritating that question can be when the contrary is plain for all to see.

"No, dear."
Had come the gritted response, and the girl had worried her lip uncomfortably before scraping back her chair and making her way gingerly around the table to stand beside the Mayor and place a hand tentatively on her shoulder.

"Can I do anything?"

She'd leaned in to whisper; fiddling with dark hair while pulling at the brunette's shoulder gently to draw her in against the sharp peak of her hip.

"Emma, get off me."

Had come a quiet warning, and the younger woman had sighed awkwardly and released her grip, though she had kept her hand lightly resting on the Mayor's shoulder despite being told otherwise.

"I don't want you to be unhappy."

She had reasoned childishly, before taking a hasty couple of steps back when dark eyes had glowered up at her and Regina had snapped

"Then do as you've been told!"

"But, I just-"

"-I told you! Nothing at the workplace! Don't you ever touch me while we're on the clock, do you hear me!?"

"...I hear."

The blonde had nodded uncomfortably, before- unable to put a leash on her more unruly nature- she'd spoken up sullenly.

"I was touching you as a friend, Regina. I was trying to-"

"I believe, Miss Swan, that I am your employer first. Please remember that. Now sit down and bite your tongue. I believe you've given me a headache after all."

And those words hadn't been wholly unlike Regina- after all, the blonde has heard her snap at others enough to know that sometimes it's best just to steer clear for a while- but it had been wholly unlike Regina to speak to her in such a way.

"... You are my friend first, Regina. You've been my friend ever since we were stood out on that old shit-heap of a lot. Maybe we didn't know it yet, but it's true. And... A-and I don't care what you say about it, because I know I'm right."

She'd finished with an air of finality, and her eyes had glittered with nervousness, but she'd kept her jaw raised defiantly, and when the brunette had looked back up with a glower of irritation, she'd found her expression softening slowly.

"We didn't know anything about each other, Emma."

She'd sighed, and the blonde had shrugged- taking the return to use of her first name as a positive sign- and smiled winningly.

"No, I guess not. But I stood up for you."

She'd pointed out, and the Mayor had frowned; ruminating on this fact.
"You did... Why?"

"What do you mean, 'why'? What would you have had me do?!"

"You didn't know me. You had no investment in me. You were watching?"

"I was looking out the window. You just happened to be playing my scenery."

Emma had responded, and the tiniest hint of a smile had found the Mayor's full lips as she'd recognised a tightness to the younger woman's response- a queer dignity to the younger woman's response- and she'd finally leant back in her chair and studied the girl rather than the useless scrawl in front of her.

"I see. But that doesn't explain why you did what you did. It doesn't explain why 'watching' became 'involving' yourself."

"They were ganging up on you! And, I knew those guys. I knew they probably wouldn't do much more than goose you up a bit, but probably wasn't good enough. And, besides, that still wouldn't have been all that damn polite... Also, you were scared. If you hadn't been scared, I... Well, I dunno what I'd have done. I don't like to get into other people's business, but then this wasn't really any business you'd sought out... You were scared, and that pissed me off."

She'd explained thoughtfully, before adding with an entirely teenage toss of her curls

"You can say you weren't all you like, but I won't believe you."

"... I was."

Regina had admitted eventually, swallowing as she'd regarded the blonde; thinking of the electric fear that had coursed through her veins and imagining she has been the cause of that white heat in countless others.

"Were you?"

She'd countered, and Emma had rolled her eyes before shrugging and addressing the question amiably enough.

"A little for you. Not for me."

"They wouldn't have hurt you?"

"They might have, I guess, but that's different."

The blonde had mused with another small shrug, and Regina had leant across the table and called her out seriously.

"Why? How? Different how?"

"I don't know. I guess if they'd jumped me, that didn't much matter. If they went after you, it'd have been a mess."

"Didn't matter?"

"Regina...You're asking me what I was thinking. Back then. Why I came and helped you back then. You want me to lie and tell you I'd have given much of a shit what happened back in that place? To me? I won't. I'm not going to do it. Cos you know full well that if I start spinning you some shit
about pride and self-worth I'd be feeding you total bull. I won't do that to you, and you've so far not done it to me. So quit telling me you're fine. You don't have to tell me what's wrong any more than I have to elaborate on why I did what I did for you. If you ask me, I'll tell you, but only because you've earned it. Because all that stuff you don't want to hear and you're grilling me about right now, that's also got a hell of a lot to do with why I feel about you the way I do. And that has nothing to do with the way you look, the way you feel, the way you taste, that has to do with the fact that I give a crap about all of those things. I can appreciate all those things about you. And I can appreciate that you let me enjoy them. Sure, I still don't totally know how in the hell what we have is in any way a fair trade, but I'm getting closer to accepting that for you it somehow is. I've accepted that I matter to you, and I can't explain to you how that feels, because I would make it sound so much smaller and so much, I dunno, less than what it is with any of the words I could think of. And I know a lot of them, okay? So... You don't have to tell me what's wrong. But don't feed me shit and say it's nothing. You matter to me. You matter a hell of a lot. Sometimes so much it hurts... So don't tell me that what's bothering you is 'nothing' when you won't allow that kind of answer from me."

And then there had been silence. The brunette studying the blonde while the latter had met her gaze stubbornly, before- finally- the former had let out a deep sigh and crossed her arms primly over the soft swell of her chest.

"I threw a plate. I was angry and I threw a plate at Johanna. Well, no, not at her... But that in no way makes my behaviour any more acceptable."

Her cheeks had burned a furious red at this admission, before becoming pinpricked with fever spots of rage when green eyes had watered and pale lips had trembled, before the girl had thrown her head back to emit a gale of laughter that had seemed implausible being born from the room's thick tension.

"Miss Swan!"

Outrage and incredulity, and it had only served to make Emma laugh harder, before the Mayor's hand had found her wrist, and for a moment- just a moment- painted nails had dug in with a cruelty that had caused the younger woman's laughter to die down, before slim fingers had slipped between her own and Regina had shaken her head with a wry smirk.

"I'm not sure that's really the appropriate reaction, dear. It was a serious matter!"

She'd argued, but she'd found- bizarrely- that her own full lips had been twitching at the corners.

"Sure it was. But your reaction is almost as funny as the visual itself!... The thing is, stuff like that happens. Sometimes, we- any of us- can just be goddamn toddlers throwing our toys out the pram. I know it's not your style, but it's not the end of the world either. Sometimes things just reach a breaking point. So, you throw a plate or two, or punch your fist into the wall, and then you move on."

Emma had grinned, and Regina had swallowed; digging into her pocket for a couple of crisp, green bills in a bid to send the girl away.

As, by Monday lunchtime, she'd come to the conclusion that things weren't quite right at all.

"It's the way he works. He plays, he messes..."

Regina reminds her reflection as she brushes out glossy locks; her mind fixated on the knowledge gained from Gold- from Rumple- and visions of the dratted crop strung up in his window.

When Emma had returned from buying them lunch she'd strived to behave in a more natural fashion.
The girl's previous words in regards to why she had taken it upon herself to step into her life in the first place have resonated with her for the best part of the afternoon, as they leave her feeling both touched and full of a deep—ever more familiar—affection for the young idiot.

And struck by just how prophetic Emma's actions had been.

How characteristic they had been of the fabled Saviour.

Along with this, her mind has returned again and again to Emma's reaction to her very painful admission about the plate.

About her rage.

About her mistake.

The blonde had laughed. More than this, though, the girl had chosen her words 'we- any of us' as though reassuring her that there had been nothing out of the ordinary at play.

As if she had not once been a cruel ruler prone to bouts of destruction and punishment.

As though things might all be perfectly okay.

"Well, they might well be!"

She snaps as she removes delicate earrings and lays them on her dresser; studying herself earnestly and alighting upon all aspects of her appearance that differ from the past.

"Before talking to Gold things all seemed just fine... Don't let him ruin what you have."

She scolds the glass, but she knows well enough that her old mentor has no reason to play games with her at present. Games are Rumple's fortune if he wants something... This... This she believes had been a genuine warning. She has caught more than one hint from the despicable little imp that his interests lie in Emma seeing it to her twenty-eighth year and setting prophecy into motion, and she has no reason to believe that he might wish to taint the Saviour- nor her unwilling creator- with faux fancies and trickery now.

"Well, what might he know of love and affection?"

She scoffs, but it's a strained attempt at finality and she knows this. Still, she can't be seen to begin talking to herself in such a casual manner as though she were the Swan girl chatting away to her cat, and so she slips beneath plush sheets with pursed lips and plunges herself into darkness; letting out a low breath as she tells herself to desist with her lunatic worrying.

It doesn't work, but then, deep down she knows she's no fool, and had never expected it too, but she closes her eyes and turns her back to the window and the town beyond, and before all too long, she sleeps.

Dreams.

Uneasily she dreams.
Hurrying down the great, stone halls, she takes care not to be seen.

Not to be heard.

Not to be caught.

She has passed several gilded objects—statues of knights baring arms and ornate mirrors lining the mottled walls—and knows that she wears a glamour. The reasoning behind her false face remains a mystery, but now is not the time to think about such things.

Now is the time to run.

Run, run, run—as fast as she can.

She isn't quite sure what she flees, only that it is something dark and seductive. Powerful. Those she passes in the Palace do not join her in her attempt to escape—it's too late for them—but they fear it, oh yes, they fear it.

That ominous shadow that looms over the castle like a shroud.

They don't speak of such things, but they fear it.

They fear Her.

For the threat that enslaves this place is most surely female. Sensual. Deadly.

One could fall in love with that breed of terror if they glimpsed its face.

So she mustn't glimpse it.

She will not glimpse it.

She will only run.

Run where?

Run why?

Oh, she doesn't know, and she's getting tired—so tired—and she's sinking lower and lower into the very bowels of the stone, with no sense of purpose, no sense of sanity, only instinct.

And her instinct tells her to run.

Because the one thing she does know—that she is sure of—is that she doesn't want to wait around for an answer to her questions.

Doesn't want to know.

Doesn't want to turn back and look into the face of the monster that rules this place.

Because that monster will... What?

Turn her to stone?
No. That was the fate lined up so neatly for Snow before her prince stepped in.

Before they bested her.

Yet again, yet again! They'd bested her, and they would continue to do so right up until...

"The wardrobe..."

She chokes as her lungs burn and she descends down, down, down, in an endless escape of an unknown pursuit.

It's wet down here.

Dark down here.

The air is rank, both with moisture and with cold, and she remembers how wrong the books lining the walls of her current world had been. How lacking in detail.

Fairytales, fairytales, fairytales, but no illustration or poetic extracts of text could tell the true horror of the story.

The cold had kept the rats at bay. She remembers that. But in their place had come starvation. Nothing to grope for, nothing to kill, nothing to prey on when one had become the lowest of prey themselves. The smell of decay down here is nothing more than an olfactory promise of oncoming fate, and she knows that when the flickering flames of the guards' torches lick the walls, one can sometimes catch a small glint from the stones as if they might be pregnant with hidden jewels.

There are no jewels down here, though.

She knows this.

That glittering comes from no stone or rock or treasure.

It comes- occasionally- from the bloodied tear of an embedded fingernail; ripped away in a futile attempt to escape.

Ripped away, the same way the sanity of those forced to dwell this deep had been torn from them mercilessly before their hopes- with the lights- had been snuffed out.

Breath quickening, she breaks into a run as her feet find the slippery stone of the castle's deepest trench, and she keeps her eyes carefully trained on the darkness ahead, because to her sides- oh, to her sides- the others down here are weeping.

Begging.

Pleading.

Curl up, beaten, bare, dirty, bloodied and afraid.

Reborn as trembling fetuses with eyes blown and hollow in the darkness; all skin and bones and angles, with bared teeth and gravel where their voices once were.

She doesn't want to know.

Doesn't want to see.
Won't see.

"I won't, I won't, I won't..."

She repeats to herself over and over, but the darkness is never ending and her breath racks through her lungs like a knife and she knows she can't keep going forever because this terrible place goes on for miles.

For years.

For Evil's reign.


There are hundreds.

Each one a visceral, visible milestone of the descent into chaos.

Deeper and darker.

Each cell; deeper and darker.

So much harder to come back from.

"Keep going."

She murmurs to herself, and yes, she thinks she might just be able to do it. The air here is thick with a sewery burn, and the world seems to be made up merely of shadows as the light at the end of this godforsaken tunnel is no longer anything more than a pinprick.

There isn't much further to go.

Not much further at all.

In fact...

Yes.

Yes, she can see the end.

The total blackness.

She can see the-

"-Emma?"

Her voice sounds obscenely loud down here and she shivers as it echoes off the stone, causing several gaunt faces to creak around to peer blindly at her.

The girl, though.

The girl in the cell at the very end... She barely moves.

"Emma!"

Low, desperate, and she hunkers down with her dress pooling around her ankles and dragging in the muck as she reaches her arm through iron bars and shakes frantically at the blonde's shoulder.
And, now the girl does look at her. Slowly, moving with the cautious frailty of one greeting the action with pain.

Her blood looks black in the shadows.

"No, no, no..."

She moans as she shakes her head and reaches in further for the girl; clutching at dirty curls and marble-cold flesh.

"No... Why?! No..."

"Get out of here-"

The blonde croaks, and her eyes dart nervously back the way her visitor had come.

"-you can't be here. She won't let you be here!"

"Who?!"

A wracked sob, as distraught coals drink in what has become of the girl.

"Who did this to you?!"

"Regina..."

"I'm here, I'm here, oh god, I'm here, but who did this?! Who-"

"Regina..."

Quieter now as green eyes roll back to show their whites.

"Emma, no, come on, please!"

She pleads, and she presses her forehead against the cold iron of the bars as she grabs at the blonde and tries to pull her closer.

"Regina..."

"I'm here! I'll get you out, don't worry, okay? I'll find a way to get you out, don't-"

"-Regina."

Sharp emeralds snap back into focus; looking first to their visitor, and then beyond with a terrible glimmer of fear.

"Emma, what is it, who is it, what-"

But suddenly she's blind.

Blind, as the pinprick of light that is all that is left over down here is blotted out, and she grabs a hold of icy fingers and squeezes hard in naked terror

"Emma, who is it?!"

"Regina!"
Coughing fitfully as she fights for breath, the brunette sits up in bed; her nightdress plastered slickly to her flesh as she shivers and retains her clammy grip on the covers.

"No. No, it can't be. I would never... I would never!"

She whispers hoarsely to the moon, shaking her head.

But, deep down, she knows she would have. Not now. Not here. But... Once upon a time, her dream's visions might have rung true. She might well have left the girl to rot down below the castle floors. To bleed. To freeze.

Might once have, and, if Gold's warning carries any depth, might once again.

Oh, not drag the girl into some godforsaken basement. Nothing so ludicrous. But treat her poorly?

Hurt her?

Such a notion seems impossible as soon as she flicks the switch to her right with shaking fingers and eliminates the room's shadows with a comforting yellow glow. As impossible as it has done ever since the idea had been put in her head.

Like a locust laid to hatch.

But, she would have said the same about screaming at Henry the way she had done.

About coming unravelled in the presence of Johanna; one of the few members of her sorry, unwilling cast she can spare any time for.

And, this afternoon, hadn't her eyes flickered again and again to the small litter of crescent markings lining the blonde's inner wrist? Hadn't she felt a small pang of guilt- and worse; shame- for knowing she'd been the one to leave them there?

She thinks of the black anger that had coursed momentarily through her veins when she'd allowed the younger woman to play roughly when asked how she might like to be treated herself. She'd ended up hitting her and Emma had been visibly surprised, but she had remained undeterred, and rather than finding her own breed of anger, she had merely been apologetic. It is a different side to the girl then she had first portrayed when strutting around her apartment in Boston, and the Mayor knows with a sense of unease that it is a side few people have been let in on.

Emma has loosened up and mellowed out, of that there is no doubt...

Of course, Regina has seen enough to know that the girl retains her bite and her recklessly impulsive flair when dealing with life, even here in town. She may not be as angry or as bitter as she had been, but she maintains that ironclad belief that things can always change, and she hasn't lost the cold spike of survivalism that the brunette imagines has often been mistaken for arrogance.

But, when it's the two of them?

Well, in the same way as she allows herself to laugh and to ease up on the rigid self-control that has kept her well regarded- feared... but well regarded- in town, Emma has slowly but surely taken to rolling onto her back for her and exposing her belly.

Her throat.

She loves her.
And it isn't simply a physical thing, nor a lingering sense of gratitude.

Every ounce of the girl's being when they are together speaks of a queer sense of love for her, and though neither of them has said a word about it since Emma's abrupt admission of her feelings in the height of passion, she imagines the blonde understands that it is reciprocated. The fact that she might not know what to do with that fact is another matter, but she understands it, of that the brunette is sure.

Shivering as the voice of her long-ago mentor creeps into her head, she swallows uneasily.

"Ah, but you wanted her dead, dearie! Wanted the little Swan girl dead! Created the curse to rid yourself of her parents, Regina. Boil, boil, boil and trouble! Mixed up a wee little curse to soothe your mind! Mixed up a recipe for disaster to destroy a little girl from long ago. Created something magnificent out of a wondrous concoction of ingredients and, what? You've become attached to a simple item needed to bake the cake? You won't dice the butter? You won't crack the egg? You're losing sleep over a mere side product of-"

In the corner, her phone lights up, and she stares at the ugly brick of technology with her lips thinned into a bloodless line as she is suddenly sure that Rumple has wrestled free of his leash in her mind and has come to torment her in reality.

Pulling herself together, she slips from silken sheets and pads over to the Nokia on the dresser cautiously.

It's not Gold.

Not Rumple.

Letting out a low breath she hadn't realised she'd been holding in, she runs her finger over her bottom lip thoughtfully as she opens up the small text icon flashing across the screen bearing the title 'EMMA. S'.

I've got tomorrow morning off. Meet back at the farmhouse in the field? 8? I'll bring breakfast. E.

Pondering the space before the final period, Regina is unequivocally certain that the blonde had finished her text with a kiss before going back to edit herself.

Old habits die hard...

Looking from her phone to the clock on her bedside table, the Mayor makes it 2.17am.

A rather obscure time to be enquiring after breakfast plans, in other words.

Licking her lips thoughtfully, she debates her actions for a couple of seconds, before tapping back with swift efficiency.

MOST people would find this to be a rather rude time to message someone...

Her reply is short and irritable but she knows Emma better than to think the girl will take it to heart. In all honesty, she's curious as to if the blonde will reply at all, or if technology has somehow failed her and she's received Emma's invitation at this ludicrous hour simply to further play with her mind.

MOST people would find this a weird time to be ANSWERING messages. Your phone is set on silent. It always has been. You were up. Nothing rude about it.
Comes the swift response, and despite the inner turmoil that plays havoc with her thoughts, Regina smirks down at the screen as she rolls her eyes.

*Okay. Let's say I was. Why are you awake?*

*Quid pro quo, Clarice.***

Comes the immediate response, and Regina sighs as she has little clue why the blonde addresses her in such a way, but the context has her presuming Emma refers to a character widely known in this world's pop culture, and she replies wearily.

*Bad dream.***

She indulges truthfully, feeling an obscure wave of nostalgia ripple through her as she is fairly sure the last time she'd shared this burden with anyone it had been with her father when she'd reached no higher than his shoulder.

*Can't sleep.***

Emma replies after a moment or two, and the brunette smiles to herself as she responds smartly

*Try harder.***

A longer period of silence, before a couple of dashes flash up on the Mayor's screen to symbolise the face of one very much unamused.

This, in turn, amuses Regina *greatly,* and she notes that it feels strange to allow herself a wider smile, as her jaw has been clenched for the best part of the last couple of days.

Breezing over Emma's display of irritation- *mock* irritation, she is sure- she taps back hesitantly

*Tomorrow morning sounds fine. Bring coffee-*

And, she *almost* goes on to ask for the *reasoning* behind the blonde's obscure invitation, before dismissing the idea. If Emma tells her that they have things they need to discuss, she's apt *never* to get back to sleep. If the girl simply tells her she imagines this form of, well- let's face it- a 'date' seems fun... She doesn't think she could bear it.

Because the girl's blood had been black.

Black in the shadows.

And *that* pain had been fictitious, but the wardrobe? The wardrobe had been real.

Necessary.

And the girl had been underfed, unkempt, unhealthy when they'd met. Jumping onto roofs. Springing into the path of cars.

"Well, *what would you have had me do?!!"*

Because, long ago, in a land far, far away, once upon a time, an Evil Queen had placed a curse to reap revenge on a child incapable of keeping their word.

And now she is faced with the *price* of that magic.
Now she wants to take it all back. Make it all go away. Because a date- a date!- just seems insane after everything she's seen and done.

And she's never wanted anything quite so painfully.

Looking down at her curt response as her fingers hover over the keys of her cell, she eventually finishes her message without another mention of the blonde's proposal.

-And try to get some sleep, dear.

You too. Sleep well. Or at least better! Night.

Comes a speedy reply, and the brunette yawns as she responds finally

Goodnight, Emma. X

Before padding to the door and slipping into the bathroom now that she's up anyway. Coming back into the room a moment later and regarding her bed with a firm sense of resolve, she glances over at the dresser as her cell winks impatiently. Frowning- having thought she'd provided an end to the conversation- she opens up Emma's last text and sighs.

X.

That's it. That's all. But she understands its weight. Taking in a deep breath, she places the phone back on the dresser and turns off the lights; finding her way back to her bed by memory.

Turning to face the window, she swallows as she prepares for another barrage of hateful scenes that serve to remind her of what she'd once been.

What she might unleash.

But, in the end, she sleeps dreamlessly until morning.

And by the time she's seen to Henry and greeted Johanna- the latter once more seeming in pleasant spirits- she's almost forgotten the dream that had roused her so fretfully in the early hours completely.

Almost.

She remembers one thing, though.

Doesn't quite remember the context or the importance of it, but it sticks in her mind and throbs there like a rotting tooth.

The girl's blood had been black in the shadows.
Morning brings with it a fine mist of rain, and the blonde wonders as she trudges through the lush green of the forest whether Regina will show at all. She doesn't think the brunette to be one quite so flakey with her promises as she herself had once been- after all, she can't count the times she has agreed to show up here, there or anywhere before thinking better of the act- but she knows the Mayor well, and knows that shivering uncomfortably in the morning dew and attempting to save her hair from the grey drizzle pattering lazily down won't rank highly on the darker woman's wish list.

She finds herself pleasantly surprised, however, as when she crests the gentle slope that leads to the open field below the farmhouse, she spots an unmistakable silhouette stood up on the ridge. The Mayor stands with her back to her under a large umbrella as black as the rest of her outfit. She is clad in the sleek lines of one of her delectable business suits, and the blonde is fairly certain that when she gets a little closer, she'll spy heels on the darker woman's feet despite the densely packed mud she must have walked through. She casts a seductive shape, and Emma hurries her pace a little, causing the bag she carries at her side to beat against her calf as she trots up the hill.

"Hey!"

She greets breathlessly, and the brunette turns to face her with a roll of brilliantly dark eyes which she then casts to the heavens.

"Well, this was a fabulous idea, Miss Swan. Truly."

She scoffs, and Emma shrugs a little awkwardly and appeals fairly enough

"How was I supposed to know it would rain?"

Sighing for lack of an answer, Regina simply looks the girl up and down and shakes her head.

"Why did you want to meet up here anyway, when there's a perfectly good Diner with indoor seating?"

"I just... Look, if you want to go back, we can..."

Emma mutters, and the darker woman concludes what she had already thought to be the case- that the blonde had wanted some privacy away from town- and she interrupts her with a long-suffering huff, before gesturing towards the bag with an air of finality.

"We're here now. Might as well deal with your poor choices."

She muses, but her lips pull up a little at the sides, and Emma raises a brow before following the brunette as the latter beckons her and stalks towards the farmhouse.

"Are we allowed in here?"
She asks curiously as Regina ducks beneath an arch of crumbling stone and leads them into a sheltered corner of the rock-studded yard.

"No one's lived here since... Well, for a very long time."

The Mayor shrugs, before turning to Emma with her hands on her hips and eyeing the younger woman's bag dubiously.

"Did you at least bring something to sit on?"

"Uh..."

The blonde wrinkles her nose, before smiling winningly and pulling a small bundle of tartan fabric from the bag. She unwraps a glass bottle of fresh juice carefully from the heavy folds before shaking it out and handing it over.

"Here. You can sit on that."

She offers, before crouching over the bag and pulling out the rest of their hastily packed breakfast stolen from Granny's.

Looking down at the small swatch of material in her hand, Regina rolls her eyes with an ill-hidden smirk and lays it out primly over uneven stone. It's a decorative square and spans a little less than three feet in total, and she takes a seat neatly with care to save her expensive pants from the white grit of the stone and accepts the steaming plastic cup handed to her as Emma pours her own cup of coffee from the thermos.

"Well, this is all rather primitive."

Regina observes, but she sips at her drink with a smile, and the blonde slowly eases up the furrowing of her brow as she comes to the peculiar realisation that the Mayor means this in a strangely positive-fascinated-way. Planting her own ass down on the stoney dirt indifferently, Emma blows on her coffee and offers a smile as she looks out over the dreary, unkempt yard.

"We used to do this most mornings. Not with coffee or pastries always, but with whatever we did have. Sometimes we'd sit against the car. other times we'd go find someplace out in the dunes or in the woods or behind some building or other. For a while we had one of those portable little camping stove things, you know? That was good."

She grins, and the brunette nods as she studies the girl thoughtfully.

"That almost sounds fun."

"Oh, it was!"

Emma agrees with a look of surprise at the confusion in the Mayor's voice.

"Yeah, we had a lot of fun. Not all of the time. Not even most of the time, I guess; we chose terrible times to make some of the moves we made, and in hindsight, there were a lot of times it'd have been better to stay put or to move on when we did the opposite. Times when it got super cold, or super hot, and even once when we just had to buckle up, cross our fingers and wait for a sandstorm to pass on. When I opened the door of the bug, it cut a sharp slice through the stuff and we had to dig our way out before we could try and move the car... But a lot of the time, I guess we had it ok. I've never much been one for wanting a whole lot- not physical stuff, anyway- so the fact we never bought anything was no sweat. We didn't really eat right or drink right, I guess, and I'll bet you'd have a
tonne to say about our take on hygiene, but... We saw a lot. Most of the world, well, the small part I've seen, is pretty beautiful. And the bits that aren't, they have their own secret appeal. Even Boston. Travelling around in an old tin box sounds claustrophobic, but to be honest with you, it was all just a case of deciding whether to choose to see the good or the bad.

Don’t get me wrong, sometimes I got so sick of it all I just wanted to hit something, and there were times I thought about leaving... But, then, I guess that's normal. Sometimes it got hard, and I think we both reached our limit now and then. In the end, though, I guess I just figured I could see the good or the bad, and why dwell on the negative, you know? Sometimes you just gotta get over stuff."

She smiles, and Regina purses her lips as she looks down at her coffee.

"Yes, that seems wise."

She agrees softly, before looking up to watch Emma carefully go about sharing out some chunks of melon between two bowls rested between her legs; her sneakers dusty from the stone.

"You're getting all dirty, come here."

She fusses, and she moves as far to one side of the tartan square as she will allow in order to remain sure that she won't suffer a similar fate.

"It's fine, I don't mind."

The blonde shrugs, before looking up curiously at the empty space beside the brunette and shrugging her shoulders as she pushes herself up with a grin.

"You'll probably get me all sandy now."

The Mayor grumbles as the girl takes a seat snuggly beside her and hands her one of the bowls, but she makes no move to pull away as her shoulder and knee press against Emma's own lightly in this new position. In fact, she finds herself leaning against the brash leather of the blonde's jacket ever so slightly, and she savours the sweet melon between her lips as Emma chews on her own.

"So, how come you wanted me to come and meet you out here. Really?"

Regina prompts gently, and the younger woman sighs as she sips at her coffee before turning to the brunette and regarding her shrewdly; close enough to see the fine irregularities of the latter's mascara and the soft blend of her lipstick.

"I liked it out here the other day. It's quiet and kind of, I dunno, secret..."

"... Do you like having me as a secret, dear?"

The Mayor asks, and the blonde blushes, but answers without hesitation

"Yes. I do."

She allows a sly flicker of her tongue through sharp teeth which the brunette catches with a small intake of breath.

"Good."

Regina replies, and she reciprocates Emma's smirk, with a dark smile of her own.

"I guess I just wanted to talk to you about yesterday. You were sad, and then when I asked you
about it, you snapped at me, and I-

"I'm sorry."

Regina sighs as her eyes wander to the girl's wrists, but the blonde wears her jacket and she is unable to see if her cruel grip has left its mark.

Left its mark in the same way as the troubling slash of silvery white still circles her thigh, and she swallows uncomfortably.

"It's fine."

Emma waves away- shaking her head in a display of disinterest at bearing any ill feelings- and she tosses her curls away from her face- sending several of them brushing down the Mayor's back- and cracks the seal on the bottle of juice with a thoughtful expression.

"I just... I just wanted to ask if you were okay. Only, I know how annoying that question can be, and I didn't see the point of asking you yesterday because I could see the answer for myself and didn't want to fuck you off. I just figured... I'd give you a while and then ask you. Breakfast seemed like a good enough time for that."

"You were deciding all this at 2 a.m. last night?"

"I was worried."

Emma shrugs, before continuing quietly

"I've told you a bunch of times that I just want to make you happy. That I want you to be happy. That's still true, you know... You told me about the plate and about Johanna, and- weirdly- I believe you that that was what got you all upset... What bothered me when I got home though, is that I don't think you feel much better about things. I was lying in bed just kind of thinking 'I bet she's not asleep', cos I just had this feeling like you weren't happy or something, and I was right!... I just... I wanted to give you a chance to talk if you wanted it. Before work. Before you're sat on one side of the desk and I'm sat on the other, because I don't want to cross any lines and-

"-You didn't. Emma, you didn't. I shouldn't have snapped at you like that. I know you were only trying to help. It's just... There are things I'm not used to, in the same way as this whole situation has been a learning curve for yourself. Someone trying to comfort me is one of those things. I'm a private woman, and my emotions got the better of me when I didn't wish for them to. Your response to noticing my change of mood is nothing you should be apologising for, it was just something I hadn't known what to do with."

"... I can understand that."

The blonde nods and she hastily takes a sip of her coffee as the Mayor leans into her with a little more weight and pulls them back to rest against the wall as the rain begins coming down a little harder; a small outcrop of stone jutting out at the top offering them a meagre rim of shelter.

"Your jacket's going to get dusty against those stones, Regina..."

"I'll get it cleaned. What's done is done... Were you really not able to sleep because you were concerned about me?"

She asks with as much surprise as Emma shows in her face when she answers
"I was worried! Not that I thought you'd do anything stupid like I might do-"

_Her blood. It was black. It was everywhere!_

"-But just... I was just thinking about you is all."

She explains, and her cheeks pinken happily when Regina places a soft kiss on her lips.

"You _are_ good. Just like they said you would be. But they never said you would be good to _me_. That's not how the story ever goes."

The brunette murmurs, and the younger woman frowns as she places down her cup.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Nothing."

Regina assures her, louder now, and she simply smiles when Emma looks at her quizzically.

"... What did you dream about?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Your dream. You said you had a bad dream. What was it about?"

The blonde asks gently, and the Mayor lowers her eyes to tight denim and scarlet leather and the scuffed catastrophe of the girl's shoes, before plucking the last sliver of melon from her bowl and holding it up for the younger woman to take.

"It's not important."

She lies, and when Emma seems undeterred and tries to ask once again what her dream had been about, she feeds sweet honeydew between pale lips, and the blonde's eyes widen in surprise at this intimate act which serves to cast a hazy shroud over her thoughts as she is unable to focus on much else other than the way the Mayor caresses her lip coquettishly with her finger; the soft whorls pressed against pink petals sweet with the melon's nectar.

"Regina..."

She breathes a little dazedly, before giving up any attempt to further the conversation when the brunette leans over her and replaces the soft brush of her fingers with her tongue.

The Mayor leaves first; making her way briskly across the field and disappearing into the woods.

Emma watches her go with her eyes narrowed; deep in thought.

Her jeans are slightly damp from the rain, and her underwear fares no better for entirely different reasons, and while she's not about to _complain_ about the darker woman's surprising move to heat things up a little, she isn't so foolish as to believe Regina hadn't turned on the charm simply to call an end to their conversation.

More than that, though; to _distract_ her from the topic of conversation.

She knows Regina well, and knows that if the Mayor had simply wanted her to shut up, she'd have had no issue with telling her so. This, though, this had been a tactical ploy for silence on the matter.
This had been velvet tongue, and wandering hands, and fingers working slyly at the fastening of her jeans.

It had been delicious.

But unconvincing.

"You're not okay."

Emma murmurs as she looks out over the empty field uneasily, and the thought lends her a low ache of distress as she goes about packing up their things.

Heading into the woods to follow the brunette back into town and switch her clothes for something a little dryer before work, Emma muses upon their situation thoughtfully.

She recalls Regina's unhappiness the previous day when explaining what had happened with the plate, and thinks on the way she has noticed that a darker side to the brunette exists just below the surface; seemingly desperate to come out and play. She imagines it is this that the brunette had been referring to when she had warned that she possessed an aptitude for cruelty before any of this really began.

She can see that it bothers the Mayor deeply.

That mean streak. That cruel streak.

That terror that she might lose control.

And, for one like Regina, she can understand that acting on impulse and throwing the plate at the old maid had been upsetting.

And, worse- for Regina, at least- embarrassing.

She can appreciate all these things.

But she doesn't necessarily agree with them.

In her eyes, the brunette's carefully hidden dark side excites her rather than disturbs her.

And that loss of control she has sensed now and again when they've played intrigues her rather than eliciting the fear Regina seems to think it should.

The darker woman seems to be on tenterhooks right now, and it's clearly causing her a great deal of distress.

Of unhappiness.

Of unease.

And that bothers the blonde a great deal more than any brand of darkness she can fathom the older woman possessing.

Maybe she just needs to let loose. Let go. Breathe out some of that poison...

The idea causes Emma to blush in a way that- if she'd been there to play witness to the sight and the girl's thoughts- might well have ended the brunette's exhausting grip on her manners. For that rosy hue is nothing but salacious mischief, and green eyes glitter with a promise that everything that
should be forbidden- that *must* be forbidden- will be taken in her stride with great pleasure.

If she'd been privy to the sight, Regina might have punished the girl for challenging her.

As it is, Emma makes her way across the field slowly and alone, with a sly grin creeping across her face as she is struck first with a faint shadow of an idea, before watching it bloom and blossom into nothing short of a plan.

It's *simple*, after all.

Regina aches and frets as though full of venom.

Of poison.

And what do you do if you suffer a wicked bite of the stuff?

Well...

You suck it out, of course.

You release it.

You unleash it.

You suck the venom out.
Chapter 89

Chapter Notes

A/N: Enjoy :) More to come tonight I hope. Please review.

By the time Emma slips from the damp evergreen of the forest, she has all but made up her mind about what she plans to do. What's missing is simple, and causes her no real distress, as all that she has left to do is plan the particulars, and particulars- she has learned- are relatively easy, once the resolve to take action has come into play.

She knows what she has to do.

What she wants to do.

What she will do.

She'll kneel before the Mayor- figuratively... literally- and ask for the rest of what Regina has been struggling to hold back. Ask for the version of the brunette that the latter greets with discomfort and a curious cloak of fear.

To many people, that almost schizophrenic divide between want and will might raise several red flags, and the blonde isn't so blinded by her affection and her youth not to see its effect on the Mayor. The thing is though, that she understands how it can feel. She knows what it's like to listen to the hellish racket of voices bickering and snarling away upstairs; each fighting to have their way in expressing themselves. Sure, when it's worded that way she supposes it sounds more than a little crazy, but it's not. It's really not. What it is, is having experienced and endured a grand spectrum of unfortunate events and- she finds it easier to allow Regina this excuse than herself- hurt. What it is, is knowing that there is a right way to behave, and a way that feels right. It's pain and anger and, most importantly, something having happened once, twice, a dozen times to call into question why one should bother playing nicely when the courtesy isn't reciprocated.

She doesn't know what that event had been for Regina, and she is fairly certain she's unlikely to ever know. Not because Regina doesn't trust her, or feels she can't speak to her about what's on her mind, but because there are certain things it does no good to discuss. There are things that happen to create a hole in a person, and that hole isn't going to go away by talking about the terrible things that punched it there in the first place. In a strange way, what happened isn't really all that important- at least in her eyes it never has been- because it's done. It's over. What matters is treating the area around the hole, as the resultant ache is like a quick-spreading infection, and what matters is sealing it, cleaning it as best as possible, and then taking care never to touch the raw, abused edges to make it any worse.

No, what happened is something she won't attempt to pry from the darker woman. But the resultant darkness is something she has difficulty fearing in the way Regina seems adamant she should, because, so far as she can understand it, that darkness is the brunette's version of her recklessness. That lingering blackness beneath a perfectly maintained surface mirrors the manic self-destruction that lurks behind her own sunny grin.

That carnival of insanity that craves the numbing disconnection of the bottle, and the pleasurable
ache of slamming off of the walls, and the nauseating flash of adrenaline—so similar to climaxing—of looking mortality dead in the eye and giving her a teasing yank of her nightmare curls before turning heel and running away, shrieking with laughter and something else.

Something sickening.

Regina doesn't strike her as self-destructive.

But destructive? Just plain old angry at the world and wanting to pull the wings off of its idiotic little flies just because it hurts, and it aches, and it just isn't fair?

Sure.

Something like that.

Maybe.

"Or she's just plain, straight out got a sadistic streak that's getting her antsy."

Emma murmurs to herself with a smirk, but she knows better than that.

Knows there's more to it than that.

But, hell, she's done all she can with words, and she knows the Mayor has indulged her to the extent she is capable of in return. She's written her the letter and left her in the room with the child. She'd gone after her when everything had been black and she'd held her. She's warned her about the darkness and admitted what happened with the plate.

They've talked.

They've cried.

They've covered pretty much all bases so far as the blonde can see.

But sometimes talking isn't enough. Crying is nothing but wasted salt. And sharing is nothing more than the mutual suffering of an invisible disease.

Sometimes the solution really is quite simple.

If you're hungry, you eat.

If you're thirsty, you drink.

If you're aching and fretting because you just have to find some form of release?

Well.

Then you find that release.

Or, in this case, accept it when it's offered to you.

"Oh, shit."

Emma scolds herself and she is fairly sure that her cheeks burn positively crimson at the giddy thought of offering herself up to the brunette. The notion excites her, and serves to make all memory of the countless warnings and snapped rebuttals a little hazy and seem suddenly very long ago. Of
course, she understands that Regina has tried to do right by her and treat her well, but, she's not asking the darker woman to quit doing those things.

Not in the long run.

She's not going to stroll into the office and tell Regina to just go nuts, because she knows that the Mayor most likely will, but not in the way she'd like.

The brunette has made her stance on her callous recklessness perfectly clear.

But... What if she were to stroll in and offer to play a game?

To play out a scene?

To offer up a means of release without the Mayor having to worry about what it might mean for the two of them in any other capacity but right there, right then?

She is suddenly reminded of an explicit little clip watched with eyes so wide in the moonlight that they’d looked- to Neal at least- like silver nickels when the two of them had found refuge in a poky little motel room just outside of San Angelo. The idea had been simply to sneak in after watching 274's paying customer stalk out into the night in the direction of the rather meagre strip, to use the shower and have a little root around in the mini bar. That plan had changed somewhat when she'd sprinted for the bathroom- whooping victoriously at getting to rinse herself free of sticky road-dirt first- only to be echoed by a louder crow of exuberance and Neal grinning triumphantly when she'd stalked back into the room, combing her fingers through wet curls.

"Check out where Mr Fedora Leather Cuffs left off!"

Neal had smirked, pointing to a frozen scene on the crappy TV plonked unceremoniously on the dresser, before ignoring her protesting giggle not to touch anything or they'd get in trouble- again- and pressing play; putting the scantily clad redhead, and entirely unclad little Latina girl into motion. This rather explicit viewing session had taken place several weeks before The Grossly Uncomfortable Sexual Fantasies talk, and so had been met with raucous laughter and a great deal of lecherous teasing on each other's behalf rather than anything more meaningful, but, when the slightly-too-old-for-her-school-girl-uniform redhead had pulled a paddle from a suspiciously empty prop-style nightstand and proceeded to bring it down once, twice, three times across the squealing young this-is-probably-my-first-time-and-I-hope-it-pays-for-college Latina's pleasantly perky breasts, the blonde had found herself swallowing and clenching her thighs together surreptitiously as a peculiar wave of jealousy had announced itself out of nowhere.

The girl had squealed- rather unconvincingly- and moaned a whole lot of 'no' which had been even less believable.

It had been trashy, tacky, and badly lit... But it had been a scene that had played out a hell of a lot more erotically in the blonde's dreams for the next week or so.

It had seemed exciting.

Hot.

Fun.

It had also seemed- now that she thinks about it- like the sort of thing that might be over once ecstasy had been met. Like- and, sure, it had been a skin flick- it had been a game to be played- and in her head, it had been a delectable one- but didn't set in stone how life must be lived outside the bedroom.
Regina respects her. That is something the Mayor has gone to great pains to try and make clear, despite her sometimes cutting way with words.

But a little bit of energy releasing, anger unleashing, dark side appeasing roleplay wouldn't hurt what they have. Surely?

"Nope."

She grins to herself, and, if fate wasn't the cruel, wily bitch she is, she would most likely have wandered home with a deep blush and butterflies doing all number of fantastic things low in her belly while trying to figure out exactly how to explain to Regina that she might like to try something a little more intense if the darker woman would be so kind as to bend her once more over the desk.

She would have gotten changed for work while debating the use of kitchen implements, or purchasing one of the little red and green paddles from the sports store collecting cobwebs next to the cannery.

Would probably have laughed herself into a fit of hiccups while imagining just how presenting said paddle to the Mayor might play out when explaining that she wasn't exactly looking for a game of ping pong.

"I'd probably just crumple right down dead in the middle of the room."

She chuckles, but, before the ludicrous thought can take further shape, she stops in her tracks and looks across the street with a frown.

And, just like that... All shadows and silhouettes of plans and ideas fly the nest, as one, clear, solid solution manifests itself resolutely in her mind, and she crosses the morning-quiet pavement with a slowly growing smirk.

A smirk that Gold greets with one of his own as he catches the thin tinkle of the bell above the door heralding the entrance of a curious customer.

"Miss Swan."

He smiles- turning his cold grin into a welcoming flash of teeth- and, if he were to call himself surprised upon spying who his first visitor of the day might be, he'd be lying.

"Hi. Good morning. I didn't really think any place in town would be open this early..."

The blonde rambles as she lets herself in, feeling both flushed with excitement and a little unsure of herself as something about this whole situation seems entirely, well... Out of her hands.

That's crazy, Swan. What? You think some greater force woke up horny this morning and felt like spurring this little... Whatever it's gonna be into action?!

"I open the door whenever I get an inkling I might meet a curious soul looking to buy."

Gold smiles, in no way setting the girl's mind at ease. But, then he beckons her closer and she takes a step into a hazy shaft of light that bleeds through the shadows, and the old proprietor's steely eyes and crooked sneer seem suddenly more a sign of age than of malice, and the underlying stench of mildew becomes overpowered by the sweet and welcoming scent of cedar.

"Oh. Well. I guess that's a good way to do business."
Emma shrugs awkwardly, and Gold's leathery lips stretch wide to allow her to count each and every one of his irregular teeth as he nods and laces his fingers delicately together on top of the counter; a pale glimmer of sunlight hitting the glass sparkling above him as an old mobile spins in an unseen breeze.

"Now, Emma. What can I help you with today?"
Chapter 90

Chapter Notes

A/N: please enjoy and review :)

The girl is late.

Dark eyes flashing up to the clock above her head, Regina scowls. She has warned Emma that she would do well to show up on time on numerous occasions, and the fact that the blonde fails her now in no way helps her mood.

She'd come home from their little breakfast excursion feeling exhausted. Confused. At war with herself. She'd set out wondering if perhaps the younger woman was hoping for a little bit of sugar to make up for being snapped at yesterday and turned down the day before, and- though she knows it shouldn't by now- it had surprised her when Emma had explained her reason for inviting her out had been simple concern. After all, she'd told the truth when admitting that such an intimate breed of care is a variety she has little experience with, and while she knows the girl's heart to be impossibly good given everything she's seen and what she knows, it had still hit her like a fist to hear the blonde explain she'd been unable to sleep because her thoughts had been wrapped up in her wellbeing.

It is unbearably fantastic to be told out loud that she is cared for- that she is worried about- but it hurts terribly none the less.

It hurts laughing with the blonde and indulging in her comforting warmth and intoxicating scent of honey and rain, when her tongue feels as though it has been carved from steel, and it is all she can do to keep it bitten down lest she snap and snarl and react in a way she truly doesn't want to.

In a way the younger woman really doesn't deserve.

Your tongue is the least of your worries...

Yes, ok, yes! Fine! Yes!

She's worried about a whole lot more. A whole lot worse.

She's worried about hurting the girl.

About really hurting her.

It had started as a hateful, niggling concern she'd blamed on the despicable imp and his detestable tales, but it has grown into a fully fledged fear as, little by little, she can feel herself beginning to brew and to seethe the way she once had. That terrible rage has lain dormant for the last eighteen years- channelled thankfully into superior disdain and a mocking sense of knowing- but that steely, quiet loathing is slowly blossoming black.

I should never have grabbed her wrist that way...

No, never. And the painful irony of the matter is that she doubts Emma even remembers the act! Doubts that the blonde has given the way she'd clawed at her pale skin for a moment- just a moment-
any real thought at all.

"If I asked her about it, she'd react with surprise. That wide-eyed, pensive, look of surprise."

She murmurs, and until recently, she'd come to like that peculiar blend of innocence and hardiness; that look that suggests 'well, ok, if you say so, I'll eat whatever you're serving, and I'll swallow it all down happily enough because it's you, but if it's poison you're feeding me, you best not be expecting me to go down without a fight', but more recently, it's an expression from which she has found herself looking away.

Emma probably doesn't even remember that brief second of cruelty.

And that's what concerns her.

Because it had come out of nowhere.

There had been no reason for it.

The girl had laughed at her actions and it had irritated her, but heaven knows there are countless things others do every day that irk her just a little bit, and for that, she doesn't blame her past, but simply the fact that she's human!

It had simply been a spiteful moment of power.

A brief moment that had wiped the smile off the blonde's face for just a second, before- in Emma's eyes- all normality had been restored and she'd let the situation go without ever properly acknowledging its existence.

It had been nothing more to her than a couple of bruises to be discovered and shrugged away the next day.

But to Regina, it's something much more than that.

"Just calm down."

She wills herself now, as she has done repeatedly the last couple of days, but it is getting harder and harder to slow the frantic beating of her heart. The blonde had asked her what she'd dreamt about- what had kept her awake in the early hours of the morning- and she'd wished more than anything that she could answer her. That she could share what's on her mind. Because she has spoken to Emma about a great number of topics, and the younger woman might be lacking in years, but she makes up for it with her way with words, and it would mean more than anything to her to listen to the blonde approach her fears with that calm way of speaking and that impervious little half-smile juxtaposing the seriousness of the matter, because if anyone could make her feel better, it's Emma, but it's also Emma that's driving her slowly mad!

"What was I supposed to do? Tell her I fear for her? Tell her to keep away? Tell her that her blood glistened black in the shadows and I could smell it- smell it- before I woke up?!!"

She asks of the room, and the slight note of hysteria coating her tongue frightens her badly.

No.

Of course, she couldn't have done that.

So instead, she'd done the only thing she could think of and had stopped the conversation in its
tracks. It had been a stealthy move, no doubt about it, but she knows deep down that she'd pressed into the girl with a silent desperation to remain close- to banish her dreams with reality- and had all but smothered her while straddling slim hips and exploring soft flesh and sweet heat with light-headed familiarity.

Not that Emma had seemed to mind.

They'd remained that way for quite some time- with her pinning the girl against the wall with the weight of her affection- while her mind had gone racing and tumbling down a crazed number of chaotic routes, and she'd almost become lost in herself- in her thoughts, in her fears- before the blonde's choked breath in her ear had pulled her from the mess of her emotions.

Mischievous teeth had flashed her a grin as green eyes had glittered both with heat and with amused surprise, before the girl had leant up and tasted her once more with the kind of relaxed ease that seems only to follow total bliss. "We should do this again sometime."

The blonde had teased, before rolling out from under her and fastening her jeans back up with a sigh. "Perhaps sometime when it isn't raining? And you can exchange the favour..."

She'd scoffed back; unable to believe the jocular lightness of her own voice as her throat had seemed to close up and constrict as Emma had rolled her eyes; laughing easily while scuttling wicked fingers up her thigh.

"Well, you're already wet..."

The blonde had reasoned with a pink flash of her tongue, and Regina had shaken her head firmly and reminded her of the time. "That may be, Miss Swan, but I'm afraid it's going to have to wait. I have work to be getting on with, and so do you. Go home and change and be at my office for nine. And, for heaven's sake, try to show up on time for once!"

Nine-fifteen.

Nine-fifteen and girl has yet to stroll in.

"Not good enough."

Regina hisses peevishly, before closing her eyes with a shake of her head as several visions of how she might have dealt with such insubordination back in the Enchanted Forest flash through her mind without invitation.

She-

"-Hey! Sorry, sorry, I know, I'm late, but I promise I have a good reason."

Emma interrupts her inner turmoil as she barges into the room, and Regina opens one eye- perturbed- and huffs irritably through her nose.

"Oh yes? And what might that be? I'm intrigued!"

She mocks silkily, but her look of disdain is replaced by one of suspicion when the blonde meets her waspish demand for an explanation with a sly grin and the splaying of her palms as she falls into the
"Then you'll have to be intrigued a little while longer."

Emma breezes, before she catches a glint of something a little less playful than she'd like in dark coals and loses some of the smugness from her tone.

"It will all become clear later. Like, after work. If you're around that is?"

"Why does that promise fill me with disquiet rather than anticipation?"

"Because you're being a total buzz-kill! Come on! Don't you trust me even a little bit?"

The girl grins.

You're good to me.

You're the light.

You're changing things.

You're changing me.

Oh, god, please! Please, you're changing me, and I want it to be okay, I do! But magic doesn't work that way!

You're the light.

I am the darkness.

The sickness.

The plague that haunts this town.

I-

"Regina? Cat got your tongue?"

"What?"

The Mayor croaks as she blinks to find Emma leant forward in her chair with her nose an inch away from her own and waiting expectantly for an answer.

"Of course I trust you."

She whispers, and the blonde beams back at her as up above Henry begins to bawl.
A/N:

About this chapter- kind of wasn't at all planned, but I liked the banter after all the tension, so have kept it in. Please enjoy and review :)

About this fic- so, a lot of reviews say this is getting really long (it is, I also have eyes!) and others express concern about what's going to happen as this is (hopefully) heading towards some sort of climax. So, here's the deal. About 30 chapters or so ago, I kind of had a plan of where to take this, but figured I'd keep that quiet and see how it all panned out, and now it's getting towards the end. That is, the end of this particular fic/ arc of the story. Hopefully, the tension is high and it's clear 'something' is about to go down. That will conclude Keep Your Enemies Closer. That said, those of you that have expressed concern etc about what might happen, please do try to trust me. I have spent WAY too much time on this fic to do something that I think would ruin it/ the relationship built up here irrepairably. This is a really hard message to write as I don't want to put anyone off, and I also don't want to give anything away, I've just had several messages asking where the fuck this is all going. So, the plan is this- Enemies will be concluded within the next few chapters, so if you're reading thinking 'this all seems a bit ominous', I guess I should thank you! It's a story- a long one- and it's supposed to! :) It will end on an epilogue that will lead into the next story arc- ALL THINGS COME TO THOSE WHO WAIT- which will hopefully put minds at ease. As for why I'm splitting it, well...
a) it will be a very sensical place to do so, I promise. b) On a slightly more self-serving note, I do seem to still get people starting this fic/ following when I update, and, as we're heading into the 90s with chapters now, I feel a 100 chapter story looks less intimidating then, who knows, however many it takes! (also just to keep my own sanity/ remember stuff, I need to split the story lines!) So, yeah. You're stuck with me for a hell of a lot longer, I'm afraid, if you want to join the ride.

I'm not sure if this was the right place for this message or if I should have posted it in the last chapter of this story, but I figured I'd just explain before anyone panicked. Badly- but then what's new!? So! Yes! Please, please enjoy this! If it all seems a bit worrisome and dark, it will be fixed, you have my word! And I hope you enjoy my little experiment and will let me have a little play :) If it's too long/ much etc, then thanks for reading and I hope you'll at least see it through to the end of this first part :)

Phew! Thanks for reading.

Henry's out of character fussing results in the Mayor spending a good deal of her time upstairs sat with the boy while Johanna potters around nervously, and she can't help but feel a cruel twinge of gratefulfulness as it provides her with an excuse to give the blonde a wide berth. Henry is neither hot nor showing any signs of anything actually ailing him, and this puts her mind at ease a little as she rocks him gently against her breast.

The lunatic idea that the boy might be fretting due to the turbulence wrecking havoc in his mother's
head doesn't even cross her mind.

Of course it doesn't.

That would be insanity.

No.

He must simply be feeling a little sorry for himself, and as he is usually an easy baby- at least, he has been after the drama of his first couple of days here- Regina will allow him this without any grievance.

The fact that it gives her an excuse to remain upstairs for the best part of the morning is simply a coincidence.

A happy coincidence.

Or, so she tells herself until she makes a brief journey downstairs to poke her head around the door to her office to ask Emma if she'll make them some coffee as she doubts she's doing much else of any importance. The blonde's uncharacteristically morose expression pulls her from any further thought, and she sighs as she leans against the door frame and regards the girl solemnly.

She has been so caught up in her fears when it comes to The Curse and what might become of them, that she realises it has been a while since she sat back and thought about the paths they've taken to get here. She recalls the way the younger woman had flinched at the neighbour baby's cries in Boston and the disastrous blow out she'd heard about from both Ruby and Emma herself as a result of the blonde's discomfort with what she'd done. Remembers talking to Emma about her decision to give Henry up a lot more candidly, and how she'd told the girl again and again that she'd not done the terrible thing she believed she had.

She has spent a great deal of time worrying about the future and about the ramifications of The Curse, but it strikes her now that even in the short time they've spent in one another's lives, they share a past that is in some ways quite beautiful.

It seems almost a lifetime ago that her own emotions had seemed fairly in check and she'd merely spent her time keeping a watchful eye on the girl's, as she'd believed- back then- Emma to be the one out of the two of them that might somehow crack.

In the end, she supposes they've each taken their turn to offer the comfort the other has desperately needed.

"He's okay. He just woke up in a less than amiable mood this morning, it seems."

She assures quietly now, and the blonde nods without looking up from the empty page in front of her; allowing the Mayor just the drawn lines of her profile.

"...One day it will all be okay, Emma. Not today, not tomorrow. I can't tell you when... I can't tell you when I'll be ready for that, or when you yourself will be. But it will be okay. One day."

The younger woman nods woodenly and acts out a little pantomime of itching her face as though bothered by an unseen breeze, but it doesn't escape the Mayor's keen gaze that she wipes at her nose with her sleeve before keeping her finger pressed- trembling- below her eye.

"Emma, you-"
"I'm fine. I just need to sneeze."

"I see... Well, there are tissues in the top drawer of the cabinet. In case that sneeze is the beginning of a cold."

She offers, and although her heart feels heavy when she hurries back up the stairs with a warm bottle, it is somewhat of a relief feeling like herself- like Regina- for the first time in the last couple of hours. Clinging onto that silver lining, she sits with Henry until the boy's eyes become heavy with sleep, and waits for him to fall victim to whatever version of the Sandman watches over the very young.

Placing him gently back in his crib, she smiles as Johanna discusses her latest batch of dried flowers with the quiet patience the maid has come to discover- much to her surprise- lies beneath the Mayor's often curt and demanding ways, and the ageing redhead thinks to herself as the brunette disappears from the room how entirely unlike Regina the other day's queer outburst had been.

"Do you want to get us some lunch?"

The Mayor asks as she slips back into the drawing room, and Emma nods- thankfully dry-eyed once more- as she still seems a little shy in the face of Regina's words of comfort.

Returning the blonde's small smile- the riding crop waiting in her car currently the last thing on the girl's mind- the Mayor stops her as she starts to get up with a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Really, dear. Did you even try when you brushed out your hair after sitting in the rain this morning?"

She scolds, and Emma chuckles quietly as she looks up into dark eyes with a smile that speaks much more of mischief.

"Who says I brushed my hair at all after?"

She replies smartly, and the Mayor sighs loudly- giving a soft yank to a handful of curls- before parting long hair gently and weaving it neatly into a long braid with the occasional fussy sniff when met with a particularly determined knot.

"You're hard work, did you know that?"

She frowns, but her teeth show in a perfectly painted smile, and Emma offers her a shit-eating grin as she leans back in her chair and looks up at the darker woman impishly.

"But my wit and charm more than make up for it?"

She teases, and dark eyes roll as the brunette mutters

"Something like that."

"Aw, I love that you don't even pretend to hate me anymore."

Emma smirks, and the Mayor frowns, looking down into sparse freckles and snapping sharply

"I never once hated you."

Overwhelmed with memories of the past; of her anger, of the soldiers sent to slay the babe, of yellow eyes watching her- full of knowing- as she'd clutched the pillow- not in possession of a knife- while watching the idiot, oblivious Saviour sleep all but bare in the lunatic light of the summer moon.
"True, but you used to at least attempt an air of disdain."

Emma points out cheerfully, before getting up and regarding the brunette with her hands slipped casually into her pockets.

"I think, Madame Mayor, you might just have to bow down and admit tolerance."

"Bow down?"

Silky, dangerous, but with a fire in dark coals that causes the blonde to swallow with nervous lust.

"Proverbially."

"... So long as that's understood. And I'll go so far as to deny hatred. Tolerance might be pushing it."

Regina smirks- desperate to return to the easy affection felt less than an hour ago, but struggling as all thoughts of bowing and of hate play with her mind- and she gives the girl a gentle push to accent her words.

"Now go on. Evidently, I'm not employing you for your hard work, as I'd be sorely disappointed. As a secretary, you are mediocre at best, but as my little errand girl, you at least have your uses."

This latter quip finally achieves her the scowl she'd been fishing for and she smiles victoriously as she reclaims her seat and shoos the blonde on her way.

"Well? Go on then."

"You are so full of it, Regina."

"I presume you're referring to something delightful in that case?"

"My god-"

"-Now that's more like it-"

"-You are something else, you know that?!"

"Oh, I'm many things, dear. Right now though, one of those things is famished. Be a sweetheart and see to that, will you?"

She teases with a coy silkiness to her tone, and she holds out a fold of bills dismissively. Frowning when Emma declines to snap at her and snatch them away with an air of predictable irritation, she looks up quizzically and shakes the money pinched between her fingers.

"Well?"

She challenges, and the blonde shrugs, before taking a step closer and bending across the table with a cool, expressionless stare.

"Is that any way to get what you want?"

"Miss Swan, don't you go forgetting who's boss in this office."

"Fine."

Emma smiles, though she makes no move to take the money held out to her, but rather appropriates a
more salacious grin and darts her gaze briefly but pointedly down the low V of her sweater. Raising a brow in dubious understanding, Regina licks her lips and leans against the high back of her chair with her arms crossed over the soft swell of her chest.

"My dear, please do not tell me you want me to slip you this money anywhere other than your hand."

"Let's call it a tip. For me being such a good little errand girl."

The younger woman challenges, and the brunette's eyes widen before she clears her throat and lowers her attention primly down to the diary in front of her.

"Let's call it 'lunch is on you', Miss Swan."
When Regina pulls out one of the heavy directories kept on her shelves, Emma groans audibly but doesn't find herself wholly surprised. Their conversation over lunch had been curt at best, despite the small window of familiar bickering and affection shared earlier. She'd come back from the Diner to find Regina staring out of the window at the barren branches of her apple tree— the last of its summer fruit now little more than a litter of rotting cores studding the lawn— with a pensive expression.

"Just look at the state of the garden."

The darker woman had sighed, and Emma had raised a brow as she'd looked out onto perfectly manicured shrubbery and tasteful autumn blossoms with a small smile.

"Such a state, Regina!"

She'd teased, placing down the containers bearing their lunch while offering lightly "If you want me to go throw away the rotten apples, that's something I believe I might be able to manage?"

"No! Don't you go touching those."

The brunette had warned abruptly, and the girl's brow had furrowed for a moment before she'd shrugged the matter away.

She now wishes she'd been a little more persistent, as she glares down at a seemingly endless list of names beginning with W.

"Are you sure there's nothing else you'd like me to do?"

She asks hopefully, and the Mayor sighs as she keeps her eyes trained on her work and replies wearily

"I'd like you to do as you've been told. And, take your feet off the chair, please."

"Can I at least go sit on the floor or something, then?"

"If it will keep you quiet, then, by all means, dear."

Regina nods distractedly, and Emma makes one last attempt to persuade a better alternative— sighing loudly and pointedly as she drags her feet towards the centre of the room and settles down in front of the empty hearth— but gives up when the brunette ignores her in favour of checking over the correspondence neatly stacked and ready to be sent in her 'out' tray.

Oh well.

Emma pulls a face and goes back to scouring the page. It's monotonous work, and mind-numbingly boring work, but she can read the darker woman well enough to know that she shouldn't take it personally. Or, at least, that she shouldn't take it to heart. She understands that this is simply another part of Regina's attempt to keep herself in check, and, while she's not exactly overjoyed by the work she's been set or the silence that prevails between them, she comforts herself with the knowledge that she means to attempt to help the brunette alleviate her curious problem once they finish their day.

This notion lends her a rather favourable showreel of explicit imagery, and she smiles to herself as
she flicks the page; thinking about the dark lust sure to add a sinister allure to the Mayor's elegant beauty when she presents her with the crop.

Fuck, yeah.

Glancing up from her work- Emma's entirely compliant silence undoubtedly suspicious- Regina frowns as she catches a small smirk playing across pale lips, before mentally scolding herself when she licks her own in response. The girl seems lost in her thoughts- which suits her just fine- but there is a rosy glow to pale cheeks that she doesn't quite trust herself to ponder too deeply.

After all.

The blonde sits so nicely, so submissively curled up on the floor; long braid trailing over one shoulder, and the low cut of her sweater drawing attention to the fragile bow of her clavicles. It strikes her that apart from the evening when Emma had come over for dinner- and quite a lot more as it had turned out- the younger woman has been carefully considerate when selecting the clothes she wears to the office; usually pairing teasing cuts with modesty beneath. The fact that she now wears deep green wool that gapes low in her position to tease at the plain cups of her bra is unlike the girl, but the Mayor reminds herself distractedly that if it were anybody else, she'd not suffer a second thought on the outfit.

After all, it's not all that alluring- not really- not vindictively so, I'm sure.

The blonde just sparks emotions- and reactions- from her that she is helpless to control.

"I'll bet you got pretty much whatever you desired once you were old enough to know how..."

She muses huskily, and her own surprise at having spoken aloud mirrors Emma's as the girl looks up at her quizzically.

"Uh. I guess. Sometimes? Like what?"

The blonde asks with a small frown, and the brunette forces a smile through gritted teeth as she suffers an obscure wave of disconnection; both intrigued and darkly amused by the girl's sly little game of innocent incomprehension, and furious at herself for speaking to the blonde in such a way when the connotations threaten to be completely out of line and rather unkind.

"Nothing, dear. I meant nothing by that. Just that you're very pretty."

"Thanks..."

The blonde blushes, before cocking her head and asking curiously

"Regina, is something wrong?"

"No, dear."

Yes.

I'm sorry.

That was an incredibly rude thing to insinuate!

...But I'll bet it's true.

Oh, I'll bet it is.
I'll bet the sweet, precious little princess has a few tales she could tell that would make her mother's blood run cold.

After all, look how easily you went falling for me. What you allowed from me. Sitting curled up so innocently, so sweetly, where you so obediently knelt and gave away just how bad a little lost lamb could be. I-

-Stop!

Please! Stop!

"I'm sorry if that sounded cruel..."

She forces throatily, and the blonde smiles and teases easily

"It's okay. I'm sure your own appeal doesn't hurt when getting things done sometimes."

She winks, and the brunette's knuckles blanch as she grips the armrests of her chair angrily, and she offers a wry smirk and silken retort

"Then that is the other party's concern. Very few would be worth my time."

"Oh, I hear you!"

Emma chuckles as she looks back down at the page, and Regina opens her mouth to remind the little idiot just how low her standards had been when they'd met- to snap at her that all it seems to take is the promise of a drink and she'll happily turn on the charm- before she scrapes her chair back so hastily it almost topples over and stalks swiftly for the door.

"I need coffee."

"Well, I can... Make it..."

The blonde frowns as the Mayor disappears from sight, and she sighs as she stretches out her legs and unravels her hair from its braid absentmindedly. She struggles to decide how many of Regina's peculiar remarks and actions are worth noting and how many exist purely in her head. After all, she knows she has a rather overactive imagination, and while she has come to the firm conclusion that things are not all as they should be with the Mayor, she reminds herself sternly that Regina is still one of the most impeccably put together people she has ever met.

Don't go imagining her a good dose of crazy, Swan. Dark, seductive and dominant are more than enough to contend with before you go making her out to be some impossible character straight out of the pages of a goddamn book.

Smirking, she watches as Regina stalks back into the room- perfect curves embraced in exquisite fabric the same shade of merlot as her lips- and accepts the mug brought over to her with a wisely polite murmur of thanks.

"You're welcome."

The brunette offers disinterestedly, before leaning down without warning and pulling the girl up so that she kneels; placing a hard kiss on her lips.

"Now, that's service!"

Emma chokes breathlessly as she stares up at the Mayor making her way back to the desk.
"Get back to work, Emma."

Regina scolds gently, and she offers a small smile before lowering her gaze back down to the letter in front of her.

She tells herself to remember the girl as she had been, sat on her front steps clutching the letter so painstakingly written. Tells herself to remember the way the blonde had grinned at her sheepishly and told her how much she'd wanted everything that was unfolding between them. How it had been gentle. Careful. How she'd paused to think of the way she'd taken, demanded and threatened back in that other world, and had so easily pushed that version of herself away.

How it had been safe.

Licking the sweet taste of the Mayor's lipstick surreptitiously from her smile, Emma feels her heart flutter faster as she begins counting down the hours until their workday comes to an end.

Until she can let the brunette in on her little plan.

Until she can give her her present.

"Okay. I can't take it anymore. What is up with you?"

Regina sighs as she watches Emma fidget restlessly and look swiftly away when caught in the act of staring.

"Nothing. Well, okay, something. I just... We still have five minutes until it's my usual home time, so can I be 'unprofessional' for a second?"

"...I'm sure you could manage that, yes."

The Mayor sighs as she looks down pointedly on the way the girl lies sprawled across the floor on her stomach, with a small stain of ink colouring her bottom lip from where she's nipped at her pen, and one sneaker dangling perilously to show the beginnings of a hole at the heel of her sock.

"Cool."

"If you say so, dear."

A roll of pretty, dark eyes. A childish display of pink velvet to reciprocate as the blonde sticks out her tongue.

"I just... So... Hmm... I don't really know how to do this."

"Well-

"-Do you remember when I came over for dinner the first time, and we spoke about stuff before you agreed it would be okay to... You know?"

"... I remember. Yes."

"Well... You warned me, remember? Warned me about how you could sometimes be, and about how you occasionally felt the need to be a bit cruel and a bit mean and stuff... You told me I had no idea what you could really be like. That there was this kind of darkness to you."

"I recall."
Regina breathes; sat stiffly in her chair and looking down at the girl as the latter studies the floor shyly and plays with her hair.

"... Sometimes, I think I see her."

Emma elaborates quietly, and she looks up into dark coals with that cool, green gaze the brunette both loves and loathes.

It's easy, after all. Easy to look down at the blonde and see her as nothing more than a delectable little game. A gift to be unwrapped. But that knowing, easy stare speaks of an intelligence the Queen has seldom faced.

"See whom?"

She asks, taking great care to keep her voice light.

"That side of you. Dark Regina, I guess... Evil Regina."

The girl muses, and she chuckles deviously at the title while prefect teeth flash dangerously in response.

"Oh yes?"

"Yeah. More and more I see her when we're together. It's like... Like you're all there and I'm talking to you, but sometimes there's this reflection or glimmer or something that tries to butt in. Sometimes, when you're looking at me, I feel like you'd like nothing more than to hurt me."

"Emma, that's not--"

Regina starts; her mind racing as the girl's words speak to so many facets of her being, and she both relishes the thought and baulks away from it in terror.

"-It's okay."

Emma interrupts her, and she slowly looks over to meet that same, sane, cool green as the blonde regards her with a secret little smile.

"It... It's what?"

She frowns, and the younger woman laughs gently before pushing herself up and flashing her a grin full of promise.

"Wait here a second. I have something for you."

A second becomes a minute and a minute becomes two, and the girl begins to shift her weight nervously from foot to foot as the Mayor keeps her head bowed and her eyes trained on the object lying across her lap.

Finally, Regina speaks; her voice rasping in her throat as if cultivated from glass.

"... Where did you get this?"

But she knows.

Of course, she does.
There is only one place Emma could have bought the crop.

Only one place that would sell something so repulsive.

"Gold's store."

The blonde informs her, merrily enough, and she feels the beginnings of a headache pulsing sickeningly at the base of her skull.

"I thought I told you to keep away from there! Away from that man."

"Well... I mean, you kind of hinted you weren't all that keen on his window dressing technique, and-
"

"-What did I tell you about that man?! I told you to keep away! You didn't listen!"

Regina snarls, and Emma clears her throat uneasily but refuses to allow herself to be made to feel like a child.

"You told me to watch myself around him. I did. We barely even spoke. I just asked him for what I wanted and paid."

"Why?... Why would you want this!?!"

The brunette whispers, and Emma nibbles her lip uncomfortably; not sure if she's being tested right now, as she would have thought- hoped- her intentions might be obvious.

"You're struggling with your feelings, and I think it's my fault."

She admits; speaking quietly with her own eyes locked on the worn cotton lining the crop.

"I don't mean to do anything to frustrate you- not really- and I think you know that. But I also think this isn't the way you normally play things, and I think- for whatever reason- you're finding it hard being so nice to me all the time."

"For 'whatever reason'?"

Regina asks, and she looks up with a frown; a dull twinge of anger thrumming through her veins at this perfectly, unquestionably accepted predicament.

"You believe I have darker urges, and the reasoning behind that doesn't bother you? You're just going to go with it?!"

She growls, and Emma shrugs a little nervously but refuses to back down. After all, it has taken a lot of guts- as well as her own inner urges- to bring her to this point, and she's not about to apologise for not approaching an awkward situation in exactly the way Regina might like.

"Yes, I believe you have darker urges. I also believe I have darker fantasies. I won't question yours if you'll permit me the same courtesy."

She bargains, braving a smile while striving to keep her jaw held high and the discomfort from waverin in her voice.

This isn't how I thought this was going to go...

She swallows audibly, but she refuses to lower her gaze when dark eyes glitter up at her
calculatingly and the brunette runs her tongue slowly- thoughtfully- over her bottom lip.

"I told you to stay away from him."

The Mayor repeats, and her fingers close on the hilt of the crop as her brow furrows angrily. Her irritation is matched by Emma’s, as the blonde struggles to find her feet as things all seem to be unravelling before they've even begun.

"I'm not a child, Regina! All I did was go into a store and purchase something. I bought it because I thought it'd make you happy. I bought it because I wanted to help you. I-"

"-You can't! You can't help me!"

The brunette snaps furiously, and she lets out a shuddering breath as she watches the younger woman's uneasy attempt at keeping her cool turn into an unhappy scowl.

"...You say you're not a child, and yet you sulk before me like one."

She chides, and she hears the notes of malicious mockery and arrogant contempt in her tone just as clearly as she is sure Emma does, and when the latter's lip trembles slightly, she wants both to kiss her and to hit her.

"I'm not 'sulking'. But, if you don't want to play with me, then you could just say so, you know? You think this was easy for me? You think I wasn't practically crapping myself buying that thing? You think it wasn't hard enough to meet Gold's eyes when passing over the money- knowing what he must be thinking- without you turning this into something it isn't? All I wanted was to try and offer you something I thought you'd appreciate. If I thought wrong, then I never meant any disrespect and I'm sorry. Truly. The real bitch of the matter is I don't think I am wrong. I've seen the look you get when you allow yourself just a little taste of what you might like but believe you shouldn't have. I can tell the difference! And that's fine! You know how I feel about you, and that isn't going to stop just because you're not playing with my hair or checking I'm okay every five minutes. It's not! If you don't want to do this, then that's fine. Of course it is. No harm done. I won't mind at all if you just say so.

But, I'm offering you this because I want to.

And because I want you to... T-to be the one that... I trust you."

She finishes; hating the tension in the air but not backing down from it. That tension between them makes her feel goddamn sick at times, but it is also something she has come to suspect derives from the terrifying depth of their emotions towards one another.

"...You trust me."

Regina repeats the girl's words quietly, fingering the crop.

Tracing worn cotton.

Stroking ancient blood.

"Do you trust me?"

“Yes."

Back in her bedroom. Back when she'd stripped the girl of her uniform and treated her so carefully.
So gently.

It had been beautiful.

But it had been insane, too.

She realises this now.

Insane for the Queen to allow the Saviour to coax her into acting so selflessly.

To have allowed the little wretch to have driven her to anger, to madness, to tears!

To have worried her, tricked her, snapped at her without any care for whom she might be speaking to.

To have let it come to this.

To stand over her while she sits- sits at her goddamn desk in this hateful land- and speak down to her as she watches her sweat.

*You don't truly think that...*

She does though.

Because the way the little bitch has worded it rings in her ears now and drowns out those impossible voices from her bedroom.

From out by the docks.

From the myriad of moments spent smiling at the girl.

"*If you don't want to play with me...*"

Green eyes glitter down at her with that same breed of hateful mischief as her mother's.

Pale lips remain gently parted, as though ready to taunt and tease her the way others have done before.

Emerald wool falls dangerously low to showcase ivory flesh, and she caresses soft leather as she thinks of Boston- of cheap whisky and reckless behaviour- and the way the pretty, little blonde had knelt at her feet to do her bidding.

Thinks of the cell- the last cell in the maze of her dreams- but this time it's not the blood glistening in the darkness that she recalls, but pale flesh stripped bare.

Delectable.

Vulnerable.

Forbidden.

"-Play with me-"

"I would love to..."

She purrs, and the younger woman raises a brow quizzically as she tucks her hair behind her ear; recognising a distinct change in the brunette's voice and striving to gauge whether or not this might
be favourable or if she would do well to back off lest Regina genuinely get pissed off with her.

"Huh?"

"I said I would love to. Play with you, dear. I would love to."

The Mayor elaborates, and when sharp teeth flash in a winning smile, she bares her own sharkishly back, reaching out and caressing the girl's hip before slipping her hand beneath soft wool in a way that causes Emma's breath to hitch; the darker woman's touch a little more demanding than usual.

"Okay. Good!"

The blonde grins, before shrugging with a shy giggle and gesturing towards the desk.

"Well, I mean... Do we just kind of... Go for it? I... Well, I've never done this before."

"It's okay. I have."

Regina assures, but her words lack their former comfort of when she has spoken them softly before, and Emma swallows with nervous anticipation as the Mayor's threat- wait, what? Threat? No...- sounds more like a dark promise.

"Cool. Um. Well. Where do you want to-"

"-Shh. Take off your sweater.

The brunette silences her, and the younger woman quells an instant spike of irritation- so deeply ingrained in response to being told what to do- in favour of grateful compliance.

Regina knows what to do.

Regina always knows what to do.

And right now, she understands that she's playing with the version of the brunette she's been trying to beckon out like a kid hoping to snatch a peek of some legendary evil.

It's exciting.

A million cautionary thoughts fly through her mind as she obeys the darker woman's command, but it's exciting.

If you play with fire; you'll get burned.

Mess with the bull; get the horns.

Don't throw stones in glass houses.

Don't kick the hornet's nest.

But, most apt in her mind is an image, not a saying; an idiot teen stood before a mirror before calling some unholy name thrice.

Candyman.

Bloody Mary.

Mother fucking Prince Charming or whatever.
The idea of summoning some terrible monster in the shape of the Mayor amuses her, and she grins as she lets her sweater fall to the floor and shakes out her hair.

"Something funny, dear?"

"Nope. Just nerves."

She smiles, before adopting what she hopes is a more appropriate expression when perfectly plucked brows raise haughtily and the brunette places the crop on the desk while tapping her nails impatiently on its lacquered surface.

"Nervous? I thought you trusted me?"

Regina goads, and the blonde rolls her eyes and blows an errant curl from her face as she murmurs irritably

"I do. I just don't want to be embarrassed. Don't worry, it's nothing to do with you, just... This toes the line between insanely hot, and cringe-worthy cliche. I guess just don't tell me I've been a 'naughty girl' and we should be alright. I could just do without living down some tentative mosquito swats and you laughing at me for the next week or so."

She jokes, although she's not sure she entirely sees the funny side.

"Oh, Emma... After that grand little speech just now about so, so wanting to play, there will be nothing tentative about this."

The Mayor soothes, and the girl mimics her indulgent smile with an uncertain version of her own; not quite sure how to read between the lines of Regina's last statement.

Not even sure there'd been anything between the lines to decrypt.

"Tie back your hair."

The brunette orders, and she nods appreciatively as the younger woman snaps an elastic band from her wrist and pulls back long curls into a messy ponytail.

In doing so, thick gold gets pulled away from skinny ribs, and Regina hesitates for a moment as her gaze falls upon the dark thunder of damning crescents just below the cup of the blonde's bra.

"I love you."

Swallowing, her eyes dart up to Emma's own- momentarily uncertain- before the girl crosses her arms and cocks her hip sassily, flashing wicked teeth and enquiring with admirable confidence.

"Better? What now, Your Majesty?"

Biting down on her tongue as her eyes blacken from tawny brown to lustful embers, the brunette drives in her teeth until she tastes blood.

"Now, you're going to wait here while I tell Johanna to hurry on home."

She hisses, and it's Emma's turn to swallow- a little nervously- as she watches the darker woman stalk for the door in a breeze of crimson.

Standing in the doorway of the drawing room and watching the blonde, the darker woman takes in a
deep breath and heads for her desk. For the crop. Emma stands with her back to her- looking out over the garden- with the waterfall of her ponytail tumbling down between bare shoulder blades. One of the small hooks of her bra juts out awkwardly- having come undone- and Regina supposes it might have been that way all along, but imagines she knows better.

She imagines that the girl had briefly considered taking matters into her own hands and playing by her own rules to surprise her, before considering the possible dangers of such bold behaviour.

*Well, we wouldn't be here if you weren't so smart, dear.*

*Then again, I do believe you might soon find this little game to be remarkably poor judgement on your part.*

Yes.

She is fairly certain Emma might finally get it through her pretty little head that she would do well to respect her Queen.

*She* loves you! *Just, please! Remember that! Remember that she-*

-Loves her. Yes. The girl *had* said that, hadn't she, but what does *she* know?

What does the *Saviour* know about love?

After all, she's only here, only *exists* as she does, because of the great things done by the Queen.

She is undoubtedly sweet, that much isn't worth debating. Amusing, cheerful, bright.

And, most interestingly; loving.

But, the thing about love is... *Love is weakness.*

It is a fickle thing.

She'd loved her father, after all, but in the end... Well, in the end, they'd simply suffered a conflict of interests.

He'd seen himself as alive.

And she'd seen in him a more *useful* state of being.

Cruel, perhaps?

But then, isn't that what they've all *said* about her for so long now?

Isn't that what they *whispered*?

*They* were the ones that made her this way...

And she's never *once* denied what she is.

She'd told the girl. *Told* her! Told her what she is, and the little bitch refused to listen.

The teasing little imp paid her warning no mind and took it upon herself to taunt the beast and present her with a means by which to teach her a lesson.

And, that's *really* all she means to do, after all...
Teach the Saviour a lesson.

"I brought that tree over with me when I came here. Did I ever tell you that?"

She muses quietly, and the blonde jumps in surprise- the Mayor's entrance silent on stockinged feet- and turns around with a smile.

"No, you never told me that. Where did you come here from?"

"Somewhere very far from here. I'm sure I will tell you about it sometime. But, for now... Let's not spend our time chatting idly."

She smirks sweetly, and the younger woman laughs huskily as she is more than in agreement with this last statement; Regina's kind of kooky behaviour intriguing her no end, but the crop in the darker woman's hand whispering a sweet promise she's becoming impatient to feel.

"Agreed."

She nods breathlessly, and her gaze darts once more to the desk, while her hands rest hesitantly over the clasp of her jeans; waiting for permission.

The brunette's eyes follow the blonde's and flicker over to the desk, sending an electric wave of anticipation coursing through her blood, before dark coals alight on several other aspects of the room.

Pictures.

Papers.

The town's crest; false and meaningless and seeming more like a mockery unto her every day.

Scraps of paper and doodles and a paper coffee cup stained with a band of lipstick next to a half-eaten pastry and a receipt.

...These aren't her things.

They are the Mayor's things.

This is the Mayor's room.

And it is the Mayor's desk that sits beneath needless documents pertaining to a grand illusion, and a small pot of flowers gifted to that pathetic version of herself by the red-headed traitor she'd once sworn to destroy.

"Upstairs."

She breathes, beckoning the blonde, and the latter raises a brow but does as she's told; following the darker woman slowly up the stairs with steadily mounting excitement.
A/N: Slight warning on this chapter- some violence. I feel that's probably kind of obvious, and not sure this scene really deserves a warning, but, better safe than sorry :) 

"Take off the rest."

Regina orders as she closes the door to the bedroom, and Emma works at the button to her jeans before walking forward while pushing them down.

"What are you-"

The brunette freezes as the girl brushes pale lips softly against her own, and she closes her eyes as though suffering a splitting headache.

"-Take off the rest."

She repeats in a choked voice, shoving the blonde away from her so that the latter stumbles with her jeans get caught around her ankles, and Regina catches a brief flash of something other than lustful adoration cross the girl's face.

"Hey..."

Emma grumbles, but she decides not to push her grievance any further. She's brought this on herself- this queer little stint of role play- and she supposes she can't very well start complaining because Regina's taken to it all with almost terrifying flair.

"Is there a problem?"

The darker woman hisses, and the girl pulls her jeans off along with her socks and shoes and shakes her head.

"Nope."

She offers amiably, and the brunette nods as if in agreement before brushing the leather pad of the crop up the younger woman's bare thigh and using it to snap at the scant swatch of her underwear.

"All off."

She demands, and Emma giggles as she hastily strips off simple cotton and tosses the last of her garments onto the small pile of its predecessors.

"Ok, ok!"

She grins, showing her palms and offering a bizarre little curtsey as she regards the brunette warmly; eyes flickering now and then down to the crop.

"Get on the bed."
Regina continues; her tone unaffected by the blonde's playful demeanour. Watching as Emma does as she's told- the girl centring herself gingerly before looking up at her expectantly- she finally smiles and perches on the edge of the bed; drinking in peaks and plains of pale flesh.

"Good girl."

"What did I tell you about saying crap like that?"

Emma scolds breathlessly, but her eyes glitter with anticipation and she wets her lips involuntarily.

The Queen pays her words no mind.

"Always playing the good little girl, aren't you, Emma?"

"Well... I guess that's slightly less awful than calling me 'bad' or 'naughty', but it's still a bit-"

But the girl's irksome grumbling dies down when the brunette presses the leather pad of the crop against her lips.

"Shut up."

Cold. Demanding. Lacking in any sign of affection.

Emma does as she's told with a small frown- not used to Regina speaking to her the way she does now- but she tells herself once again to just take this element of the Mayor's perceived role in her stride. And really, what harm does it do to allow the darker woman to speak in such a way? From anyone else she'd find that schizophrenic dance between scolding and praise laughable at best, but when Regina does it... Well, it's almost convincing.

"Good."

The brunette muses in response to the girl's silence, and she leans forward to study the blonde pensively; the latter's breathing an audible whisper as the tension builds between them.

Running the dangerous length of the crop slowly up the younger woman's leg, the Queen laughs quietly when Emma moves to allow her easier access to trail the inside of her thigh.

"Oh my, aren't we keen...?"

She teases, and the girl swallows as there is something predatory in the darker woman's tone that thrills her.

"...Such a pretty princess..."

Regina purrs, and the blonde opens her mouth to argue against such a grossly unwarranted title, but something in the Mayor's eyes has the words dying in her throat, and instead, she takes in a low, anticipatory breath and flutters sooty lashes shut.

"Ah!"

She hisses, before giggling pleasantly; the soft sting of the crop spreading divine heat flooding through her veins, and she touches the bare flesh below her navel experimentally with a small smile.

The Queen watches; eyes black.

"Is that what you'd been hoping for, dear?"
She whispers, and Emma nods without opening her eyes and grins.

"Good."


Running the crop over quivering flesh thoughtfully in a seemingly random pattern, Regina keeps the pad turned inwards; the bright glow of the bedroom light catching the glass shard just peeking out of carefully sewn leather.

"That's very good."

She continues, giving three short twitches of her wrist to rain down a series of stinging taps over the girl's abdomen.

"Does that hurt?"

She asks, tracing one of the slowly reddening marks colouring taut alabaster.

"No, it's okay."

Emma replies through lust-gritted teeth as she clenches the expensive silk of the bedsheets in her fists and lets out a low laugh.

"Does this?"

Regina asks; snapping the crop down so that it whistles, and the blonde jumps with a small yelp and shoots her hand over breast involuntarily.

"Ah, that was a bit harder..."

She grins; massaging the soft flesh above her heart, but a slight furrow of disconcertion shadows her brow.

"It was."

The brunette agrees silkily.

"Too hard?"

"N-no, it's okay. It's fine."

Emma assures her, and perfect teeth flash behind sinful scarlet as the Queen wields the crop with malicious cruelty.

"What about that? Is that what you wanted?"

Green eyes blink open glittering with surprised tears as the blonde brings her knee up; looking down at her thigh and checking for any signs of injury as her flesh smarts painfully.

"That's a bit too har- ow!-"

She growls as Regina brings the crop whistling down to land sharply between her breasts.

"-Why did you do that?!"

"I thought this is what you wanted from me?"
The Queen frowns in a mocking charade of confusion that juxtaposes the wide stretch of her smile.

"Regina, don't be a b-stop it!"

Emma cries as the brunette smacks her on the hip, and she pushes herself up with a snarl; the tears caught in her lower lashes predominantly born from confusion.

"I want to play, not have you beat the shit out me with a fucking-fuck!"

The girl barks, holding her hand to her face- completely stunned- and she slips her tongue to the side of her mouth to check for blood.

"What have I told you about that kind of language?"

The darker woman snarls, and the blonde glowers back with an angry exhalation of air and reaches forward in an attempt to swat her back; the smarting pain burning her upper lip throwing her completely.

"You can't fucking hit me in the face! What the hell?!!"

She yells, and Regina lets out a feline hiss as pale fingers enclose around her wrist, and she warns the girl off of her with several sharp slaps of the crop; no longer caring which way the pad faces.

The little bitch had tried to fight back.

Had shown her the disgusting insolence that festers in her very genetics.

Emma emits a hoarse cry as she scrambles on the bed; attempting to avoid the cruel sting of the crop while simultaneously trying to grab a hold of Regina's hand.

"Stop! Stop it!"

Wary now, as she's fairly certain that at least one of the Mayor's lashings has broken flesh, and she gives up trying to deal with the brunette and instead simply strives to roll off the bed and out of the darker woman's reach.

"What are you doing?! Where do you think you're going?! What? You don't like me all of a sudden?! You don't like this version of me?! Why so surprised?! I warned you! Why so- ahi!"

The Mayor snarls as the blonde kicks out at her as she leans over the bed and yells at the girl.

"Regina, stop it! I don't want to play anymore, okay? Yeah, okay, yeah! You warned me! Please!"

"Please?"

"Yes! Please!"

Emma repeats with a sob as the brunette looks down at her curiously; moving over the bed to straddle her dominantly.

"Say that again..."

She smirks; her nose an inch from Emma's and her eyes glittering with pure, euphoric ecstasy as the blonde's shimmer with confusion.

With pain.
"Say it. Go on..."

She taunts, and the younger woman shows her teeth in an animalistic snarl as she shakes her head and snaps up at her.

"Fuck that! I'm not gonna do that! Let's just quit this, okay? This is way past my comfort zone, and I'd think that was pretty fucking obvious! So quit with the whole evil, wicked, bitch persona! I don't want to do this anymore. It's not doing it for me!"

"Oh, it's not? Well, that's a shame..."

Regina purrs, but she suffers a moment's uncertainty as Emma's queerly logical appeal dances around the nightmare of her mind. The girl still seems adamant that this is a game. One that's gotten sorely out of hand... But a game. That she isn't truly this person. That bringing down the crop again is a choice...

"Emma... You should never have tru-No!"

And new rage bleeds into her eyes, her breath, the flash of her teeth, as the little bitch grabs a hold of her when she fails to move and attempts to flip them.

"Don't you dare! How dare you touch me like-"

"-Drop the fucking crop!"

Emma snarls into her ear as she closes her legs around slender thighs and wrestles with the brunette in an attempt to pin her down.

She is almost successful, too; all of Regina's fears and warnings about posing as a threat not accounting for the simple fact that the girl holds the cards when it comes to physical strength. It had never even crossed her mind. Never crossed her mind that in a land without magic, the Saviour might try to fight back. That she might put her hands on the Queen! It never-

"Ah!"

She shrieks as the girl claws at her wrist in an attempt to get her to let go of the crop, and she looks up into wide eyes filled with their own growing rage, and wild hair hanging in crazed clouds having escaped cheap elastic.

"Just chill the fuck out! Shit!"

The girl yells, and down the hall, Henry starts bawling to accompany a heavy clap of thunder from outside; the sky bruised a deep, ominous purple.

Regina shakes her head, looking up at the girl as though finally really seeing her, as rain lashes against the window, and she lets out a low noise of uncertainty and loosens her grip on the crop.

The Queen shakes her head, looking up at the girl, and her heart hammers with hate.

"Please stop?"

Emma asks wearily, and she sits splayed bare over the darker woman's hips with her knuckles blanched white round the latter's wrists.

"You asked for this..."
The brunette hisses, and suddenly she's fighting against the younger woman's grip like a wildcat, and the blonde yelps as she looks into brilliant dark coals and sees only darkness; so pure it seems tinged with an impossible magenta rage, and fear bolts through her heart and-

"-Ah!"

A chorus; both women crying out as the lightbulb above the bed shatters.

Emma will later refer to it has having blown.

Regina will agree, but secretly think that a better description would be that the bulb *exploded*.

Which is, of course, impossible.

Slim limbs and manic hands grope and snatch at each other in the darkness, before a high scream and a hoarse bark slice through the blind silence, followed by a loud thump.

"...Ouch."

The blonde pants finally, rolling gingerly onto her side on the plush carpet of the Mayor's bedroom.

"Ah!"

Comes a pained hiss in response as Regina pushes herself up with a wince as a sharp pain shoots through her wrist, and she untangles herself from the girl slowly.

"What happened to the light?"

Emma asks as her eyes struggle to become accustomed to the unsettling darkness.

"I... I'm not sure..."

The brunette breathes, feeling sick to her stomach as a dull rage thrums in her throat at the fact that she lies on the floor after having been dragged—dragged!—from the bed. It juxtaposes with the deep wave of horror and confusion that swallow her heart and constrict her lungs, and she fears that if neither symptom lessens and lowers its voice she will surely go mad.

"Emma..."

She chokes. Her lashes wet, and she reaches out to pull at the blonde's shoulder so that the latter faces her. Demanding. Afraid.

"Em-..."

Wide eyes adjusting to the darkness, Regina gasps and pulls her hand back as though scalded.

"No..."

"Ow."

The blonde repeats moodily as she looks up at the Mayor warily.

"No..."

"What?"

The girl frowns in hazy confusion, a little winded after their graceless tumble off the bed, but this is
currently second in line on her list of grievances as her head thrums something rotten.

Regina simply shakes her head; not able to speak as her throat feels as though it might be no wider than a pinprick.

Blood.

It splatters the side of the girl's face and stains her hair.

Blood.

Blood that glistens black in the darkness.

"No! no, no, no!"

The brunette croaks, and the blonde blinks up at her with growing alarm as the Mayor sobs and bright tears fall down her cheeks to land in the carpet and on the bare flesh of her arm as the latter leans over her.

"Stop that. You're getting me wet."

Emma grumbles; momentarily debating cracking into a grin at this delightfully unplanned innuendo, before deciding she still suffers enough irritation towards the Mayor to kill the fun of it.

"No..."

Regina whispers as she looms over the younger woman in stunned disbelief.

"Regina...?"

Emma probes, not exactly thrilled at the complete insanity unleashed mostly to her misfortune just now, but concerned as the darker woman is not often one of so few-ineloquent-words.

"You're bleeding..."

The Mayor breathes, and fresh tears spill down her cheeks in quick succession as she bites her lip. Her teeth illicit a dull ache as she worries them nervously with her tongue; soft velvet uncomfortably tender, and she vaguely recalls biting down until she could taste copper and barely suppresses the urge to vomit.

"Oh."

Emma frowns, and she rubs experimentally at her temple and retracts her fingers with a hiss.

"Yeah, I think I kind of knocked the crap out of your nightstand."

She sighs, and she finds herself struck by how- with the rapidly clearing thunderheads throwing the room back into view- she must have been crazy to think Regina's eyes had looked black. Of course, she supposes all things considered, her observational skills might have been somewhat compromised by trying to contend with Regina's fucked up version of roleplay, but the brunette's eyes as they shimmer unhappily down at her now are the same beautiful, tawny brown as she remembers first coveting back in the bar in Boston.

"You have a tiny ring of honey gold around your irises."

She informs the Mayor as she remains sprawled out on her back; her limbs aching in protest of her
rather unplanned impromptu workout.

"Wh-what?"

The darker woman sniffs, and she reaches out a trembling hand to the blonde's face.

Emma flinches.

"Don't... Please... Please don't do that..."

Regina begs, and she shakes her head childishly as she retracts her hand with a sob.

"Do what?"

Emma frowns.

"You flinched. I'm not... I'm not going to hurt you. Please. I'm not going to hurt you..."

The Mayor whispers, and the blonde swallows and reasons fairly enough

"I flinched because I have a great big gash in my face and I don't want you touching it."

And she rolls her eyes in a pantomime of exasperation at the brunette's stupidity, but she inwardly wonders just how true her excuse might be. She supposes she knows that Regina would never hurt her, but... Their little game just now had scared her badly. It hadn't seemed like a game at all to the brunette, and, while the crop had sparked its own breed of discomfort- and, fear, okay, yes, fear- it had been the look in the Mayor's eyes that had frightened her more than anything.

For a brief moment just now, Regina had looked at her like she'd hated her.

"I'm sorry..."

The brunette murmurs, though whether she means for trying to touch the girl's wound or for everything else is something Emma can't quite gage.

She wants it to be just about her head.

She doesn't want to hear Regina apologise about the rest.

Doesn't want to talk about it.

Doesn't know what to do with the rest.

And, she's doing her best to remain calm right now- and she'd say she's doing a pretty damn good job- but, if Regina starts telling her she's sorry, or that she didn't mean it, she's not sure she could handle it.

Because, roleplay or not, the version of the Mayor that had come out to play had been hateful.

Alluring, arousing, exciting? Yes.

At first.

But she had been hateful.

And the blonde doesn't want an apology she's not sure she can believe.
Because, she only needs to look at Regina now- her Regina, the one that told her that the flowers littered the fields like blankets in the spring- to know that the darker woman's sorry for what she's done.

But it's not her Regina that ended up wielding the crop, and no amount of sanity nor logic will convince her otherwise.

"It's okay, I just don't know if you should be prodding around up there is all. I'm pretty sure it's not as bad as it looks. I can still see and remember my birthday and stuff. And yours."

"M-mine? Why would you know my birthday?"

Regina frowns- distracted- and her throat feels slick with salt, and oh hell, she's glad Emma seems so certain as to her mental health, because her own head spins, and she doesn't know why on earth the girl speaks about the things she does, but oh, god, she doesn't want her to stop because at least she's talking, at least she's responding, at least she hasn't shut her out.

...Yet.

"Graham told me. When I went and asked him about you."

Emma explains and the brunette closes her eyes as she sighs.

"You've always been good to me, and now... Now, look at what I've done..."

She speaks quietly, more to herself than to the blonde, who swallows uncomfortably and breaks the resultant silence in a low voice

"Well, I wanted to bed you... So..."

Watery laughter at this, before the brunette wipes at her eyes and studies the girl worriedly and gently coaxes her up so that she sits against the bed.

"I'm going to call Whale. We need to get you to the hospital."

"What? No way! I feel fine. I'm not gonna go to the fucking hospital. I'll just clean it up and stick a band-aid on or something."

Emma grumbles, and the Mayor sighs and rolls her eyes, but doesn't argue. It had been her fear that had painted the injury so morbidly at first glance, but now that the sky has cleared and she's not peering through shadows, she can see that- while bloody- the actual wound itself is really more of a scrape, and half hidden within the girl's hairline.

"Always so contrary."

She scolds gently, and she gets up with the intention to fill a bowl with some warm water and soap to clean the girl up; the similarity between doing so and Emma doing the same for her back in Boston like a knife to her heart.

"I'll clean you up."

"It's okay. Granny probably has stuff."

"Probably. But...I'll do it. I... I can do it."

"Fine."
Emma shrugs noncommittally, and the brunette sniffs as though disinterested before turning away so that the blonde can't watch the way her face falls. She squeezes her eyes shut to try and rid them of salt, while her lips form a pained maw of anguish and her teeth chatter.

"I told you I was evil."

She whispers - so quietly the younger woman hears nothing more than a sigh - and the girl hangs her head and studies the carpet morosely.

"This might sting..."

Regina warns as she pads back from the bathroom and kneels down beside the blonde; her breath tickling lightly against pale skin as she leans in to tease back bloodied hair gently and presses warm cotton against battered flesh.

"...It's not your fault, you know."

Emma murmurs eventually, and the Mayor stills in her tentative dabbing uncertainly.

"Sorry?"

"This. Me getting a cut face. You're sad about it, but you didn't do it. I hit myself on the nightstand. Could have happened to either of us."

"... It could."

Regina agrees, before lowering down the bowl and stained cotton and placing her fingers at the girl's jaw to coax her into meeting her gaze.

"But it is my fault. Emma. This. Everything. It's my fault."

"Don't say that."

The blonde growls uncomfortably; wishing she were home and chatting with Ruby, Granny, anybody, even fucking Leroy would do, as her head spins and her body aches and her feelings remain a little raw from going up against a side to Regina she never wants to see again. She just wants to put some clothes on and not be here right now. Not deal with this right now. Not until she can get her head around it. She wants space. But, all that aside, she still thinks it's a little much for Regina to go claiming the blame for 'everything'.

"But it is, dear. I-"

"-Don't. Please. I can't. Not right now."

"Emma..."

"Not now."

"Okay... When, though?... You're not going to come in tomorrow, are you? To work. To serve me at the Diner. To-"

"I'll come in. It's my job. I have to."

"No... No, you don't. You don't have to do anything, Emma."

"... I wish I'd never done this."
The blonde sighs miserably, and the Mayor nods; taking hold of cold hands and pulling the girl to her feet.

"Regret is a terrible thing, but this isn't your disaster to regret. You've done nothing wrong. It's me. *I'm* the one that ruined everything."

Regina assures, and her voice breaks as she claims this last, before her breath catches in her throat when Emma leans forward and kisses her gently on the cheek.

"You haven't ruined everything. You haven't ruined anything. I told, you, didn't I? I told you that what I felt wouldn't change just because you weren't playing with my hair or asking me if I was okay every five minutes."

"Yes, but-"

"-But nothing. Regina, I may be a thief, okay? But I'm not a liar. Right now I'm cold, I need a shower, I need to sleep, I need to not be stood here with my blood on your nightstand and that thing lying on your bed. But how I feel hasn't changed."

"... Maybe that's the problem."

The Mayor whispers, and when the girl opens her mouth to argue back, she kisses her gently; not wanting to stand here going back and forth over tentative feelings as she believes Emma when she says she's no liar. She believes that the girl still likes her.

*Loves you. She told you she loves you. And look what you did to her!*

And therein lies the deepest of her fears. The blowing of the light- which in itself strikes her as strange- had been unforeseen, but she also believes it had been her saving grace. The confusion and graceless brawling that had ensued had served to break some of the spell, which had ended abruptly once quite literally getting the sense knocked into her.

She'd been *forced* to pause.

To look.

To think.

But if she *hadn't* been...

The little cook's blood had painted the walls, and that poor waif had submitted as soon as her punishment had begun.

The blonde had fought. Had snarled. Had spoken to her in ways one must *never* speak to their superior.

And, if the light hadn't have blown-*exploded, it exploded*- where would she have stopped?

...*Would* she have stopped?

How *close* has she just come to *killing* the girl, just as she had planned to do from the very beginning?

*It would never have come to that!*

No?
Looking down at the smattering of purplish marks that dapple the blonde's flesh, she shivers. After all, she'd also never have believed before today that it'd ever come to the point it has done. That she'd have relished watching the girl go from delectably excited to fearfully disturbed by her own hand.

"Go home."

She chokes, stumbling back and picking the younger woman's clothes off the floor with trembling fingers. She holds them out anxiously; reaching forward in order to keep her distance as though suddenly afraid.

"Go home and find Ruby and tell her you hit your head and that you need her to sit with you for a while. Go watch a movie or eat some ice-cream or do whatever it is you two like to do. If necessary, just go help out in the Diner. Go have a nice evening and get some rest. And then tomorrow... I suppose tomorrow's up to you. But I won't mind if you take a couple of days off to... T-to just relax, or whatever you want to do. You've worked hard since coming here- not always well, but hard, and long hours- and maybe it'd be good for you to have some space. Maybe it'd be good for us to... T-to just have a couple of days apart."

"Are you breaking up with me?"

Emma jokes, but her voice wavers slightly and she struggles while doing up her jeans as her fingers shake.

"I'm doing right by you."

Regina replies, and she walks stiffly to the door and holds it open.

"And if, when you're lying in bed you end up replaying this all later... Please... Remember that I was once good, too."

"If I'm lying in bed replaying this later, I only need to look around at the room I'm sleeping in and everything in it to know that you've always been good. It's just who you are... But it's up to you to see that, too."

Emma sighs, and she slips from the room and follows the Mayor slowly down the stairs; the hallway bright in comparison with soft tungsten light, and the heavy pounding of the rain melodic against the panes.

"Are you going to be okay driving in this weather, dear?"

"I've driven in much worse. Used to live in my car, remember?"

The blonde jokes gently, and the Mayor nods, before blurring out

"I just want you to be okay."

"... You know I will be, Regina. Everything will be. Not today. Not tomorrow. But it will. You said so yourself.

And I trust you."
Chapter 94

When the blonde gets home, it only takes her five minutes to have Granny convinced into giving her the night off in spite of her adamant declarations that she feels fine. In truth, it's not the raw cut to the girl's temple- an injury the old woman had insisted on cleaning herself without any interest in Emma's protests that Regina had done so just fine- but rather her mood. The blonde seems shaken and withdrawn, and when she greets Granny's original grumbling as to the fact she's home late for her shift with a quiet apology and the offer of working the Diner for the entirety of the next day, the older woman knows something's wrong.

"What about the Mayor?"

"She won't mind. I... She's given me a couple of days off."

"Oh, has she now?"

"I guess there's not much work to be doing."

Emma shrugs, and cornflower blues study her shrewdly over the top of thick-lensed glasses.

"You would tell me if there was something wrong, wouldn't you, Emma?"

"Of course."

"Hmm."

Granny sighs, before surprising both Emma- and an eavesdropping Ruby- when she turns to her granddaughter and holds out her hand; beckoning that the brunette should hand over her apron.

"You two go on upstairs. Go on, now. And you both better make sure you're on best form tomorrow morning. Bright and early."

"Really?"

The blonde asks, looking at the young waitress, surprised, but the brunette is already stripping off her apron at lightning speed and pushing the younger woman towards the stairs as she beams

"Thanks, Granny!"

Before the old widow can change her mind.

Several hours later, when the grey-haired woman makes her way stiffly up the stairs, it doesn't really surprise her when she peeks into Ruby's room and finds it to be empty. Padding further down the hall, she listens for any sounds of life, before pushing open Emma's door gently to spy both girls curled up in the blonde's bed; Ruby snoring softly while Emma appears to be nothing more than a couple of tufts of honey gold beneath crisp cotton.

Switching off the bedroom light with a sigh, Granny closes the door and heads up the hall to her own room.

Her nerves tingle and her arm aches, and she supposes it's most likely something to do with the horrendous turn of the weather.
The weather has always seemed to play tricks on her.

"Such an old woman."

She scolds herself, but she has read tales of a great amount of other old women who claim similar symptoms in the light of a storm.

And, after all.

It makes a great deal more sense than her own, private belief that she is in some impossible way attuned to a coming change in circumstances. That she can sense the arrival of something new.

She had once read a book claiming that a dog might howl for several hours before the first tremors of an earthquake could be felt. Something about animals possessing a queer sort of premonition about that kind of thing.

"Preposterous."

She yawns, but, as she slips into the old peach folds of her nightdress, she happens to chance a glance out of the window. Down below, Caskett sits high upon her self-proclaimed throne of the birdbath. Watching the window of her Girl's bedroom alertly, with the soft brush of her tail flicking back and forth.

She mewls quietly.

Before settling down with her nose between her paws and continuing her night watch as though waiting for something to happen.

Regina sits on her bed with her head in her hands. Down the hall, Henry bleats quietly, but she doesn't dare go to him. Doesn't dare do anything. She'd finally forced herself to kneel down on the carpet and scrub at the side of her nightstand- the whitewashed wood providing too stark a relief for her to ignore the red smear down its side any longer- before getting stiffly to her feet and locking herself in the bathroom with the cold tap running on full stream over her trembling fingers. Finally, she'd splashed some water into her face and retreated back to the bed, and here she has sat for the best part of three hours, at a loss of what to do.

It has been five minutes since the boy started his soft crying once again; his distressed whimpering as a result of the commotion taking place in the bedroom silenced as soon as she and Emma had desisted with their crazed shrieks. But now... Well, she supposes it's about time for him to be fed.

"You've done it a hundred times before..."

She tells herself, but still, she refuses to move.

She's scared.

Scared of what she might do.

That's ridiculous! It's Henry, you'd never-

-But the thoughts blacken and curdle in her skull. Yes, it's Henry. It had also been Emma. Not Snow's child. Not the Saviour. But Emma.

Her Emma.
And she'd turned on the girl until the blonde had screamed.

"She coaxed me into it..."

She reminds herself, but despite knowing it to be true, the fact doesn't make her feel any better. Emma had quite brazenly stuck her head into the lion's mouth- with the crazy declaration that she'd known she was doing it!- but there have been enough times before her gift of the crop that the girl has felt a mild sting of The Curse festering away beneath the brunette's carefully honed exterior without deserving to.

And then, of course, there's the fact she'd screamed at Henry.

_The Curse. It feeds. It's feeding because you're letting the light in._

Gold's words swim around her head as they have done ever since she'd said her tentative goodbye to the girl. They torture her. Scare her. Ruin her.

Because no matter how terrible what happened this afternoon had been... It's not the end.

It's just the beginning.

As long as she continues to try and help the blonde, it's the _beginning._

And, she'd been able to break out of it this time, but next time... Next time what's to say she'll be able to stop before she does something worse? Before she hurts somebody irreparably, and that cool, calm reasoning she's come to depend on from the blonde can no longer explain away what she's done.

As if mocking her concerns, Henry's crying increases to unhappy bellowing; the little boy not used to being ignored when he wants for anything.

"This is ridiculous!"

The Mayor moans in a voice high with exasperation, but she is not a woman to whom fear has ever come easily- not since she was a girl and she'd had every reason to greet her mother's dark shadow over her life with terror as well as love- and right now she's petrified.

"Calm your shit, Regina..."

A low voice murmurs in her head, and she blinks; not quite accepting that she's condoning the madness of allowing the Swan girl free speech in her mind, and yet greeting that curiously amused tone gratefully.

"Would you ever have hurt a child? I mean ever? Even when you were at your bat-shittiest?"

"No..."

She whispers- making a distracted mental note that she really _does_ need to do something about the way the girl speaks if it's rubbing off on her own subconscious- and shakes her head slowly.

She had _threatened_ to do it- alluding to malicious and terrible fates in store for the children of those victims she'd wished to see quake before her- and _promised_ to do so, but... Well, even when she'd tricked those poor, hapless twins into obtaining the _apple_ for her- an object she would have happily killed for- she'd watched their progress from afar; not quite acknowledging the fact, and yet always on hand to jump in if the need should have arisen.

Because deep down... She'd never have been able to allow harm to come to a child.
"Well, there you go then. Quit this. Go feed the damn kid. You'll be fine. I trust you."

"No. I'd never have hurt a child..."

She repeats with a sob of disbelief that she'd ever thought so, and pushing herself from the bed.

Sat with Henry—once more content—in her arms five minutes later, she looks out over the dark shadows of her garden solemnly.

"What do I do, Henry?"

She asks the boy, and she is met by a curious stare but no answer.

Of course, she already knows the answer, but it kills her, and she knows she's only stalling.

Surely there has to be another way. Surely?!

"Please?"

She murmurs, and she waits hopefully for some voice—whether Emma's or anyone else's, she doesn't much care right now!—to speak up and tell her once again that it will be fine, but she is met only by silence.

Because the same rules that applied to Henry don't work here. There's no guarantee it will all be fine; none at all. And deep in her heart, she knows it most likely won't be.

Knows that if things carry on, Gold's warning will come to full fruition; she'll do something she can't come back from.

Something that even Emma won't allow her redemption from.

"But I need her here. Henry, I need her here!"

She cries quietly, before her eyes widen when she realises just how much truth lies behind those words.

Squeezing her lashes shut and lowering her forehead to Henry's she says a silent prayer to any interested deity before kissing the boy gently on the cheek as Emma had done to her earlier.

"... Come on. We're going on a little walk..."
Placing the baby carrier down gently at the mouth of the crypt, Regina steps slowly towards the large, marble coffin that centres the silent room. She runs her fingers over the cold stone pensively, before laying down the item she'd had to make a small detour to acquire over the name plaque centring the ancient grave.

A rose.

Cut away from the bottom of her garden after a moment's careful selection. She'd been keen to get moving as soon as possible- fearful that any further hesitation might kill her nerve and keep her from doing what must be done- but she has never come to her father's grave without bringing a flower before, and- no matter what crazed nightmare her world is turning into- she doesn't plan to start doing so now.

"Thank you, daddy."

She whispers, before bracing her palms against the sides of the stone coffin and applying gentle pressure. A low squeal of protest greets this act as grey marble moves on a series of hidden tracks to slowly reveal the dark mouth of a staircase leading down into Storybrooke's depths. Turning back for Henry, she holds the carrier in front of her carefully, descending a couple of steps into the black void, before reaching out confidently to find the telling button of a switch.

Warm, yellow light bathes crumbling stone walls, and she walks slowly down the stairs while murmuring quietly to the boy who peers out from the carrier curiously.

"It's ok, sweetheart. There's nothing here that will hurt you."

This is entirely true, for although the crypt holds ancient relics of her past- many of which no longer hold any power, but several of which are still dangerous- they all belong to her, and, unless she wills it, they can do no harm to her child.

"You're fine with me, Henry. I can keep you safe, I can do that."

She whispers, and the words leave her lips in a sigh of relief.

"I can keep you safe, dearest, but right now I need you to help me do the same for Emma. There are very few things for me in this life, Henry, but so long as you and that total idiot are okay, it will be
fine. It will all be fine. You'll help me, won't you? Please?"

She asks quietly, but she needn't worry as the boy already fulfils what she'd wanted him here for.

Comfort.

Simple but sublime comfort.

It has been a long time since she spent time in her vault. The only heart she has put to more regular use is Graham's, and for the last trip to keep the blonde and Ruby from leaving town, she'd barely spent five minutes down here. Other than that, she has seen no reason to dwell down here.

Not anymore.

When she'd first awoken to the new reality of this world, she'd visited often. Once the pleasant throws of victory had begun to wear thin and life had seemed as though it might just be cursed for herself as well as the bovine cretins brought with her to suffer. The suffering had been minimal she'd thought back then, and even watching Mary Margaret strive to make her way clumsily through life had lost its appeal before too long. She'd missed magic. Power. That divine and terrible energy.

She'd come down here to mourn.

But, ever since Henry has come into her life, she's found other things to look forward to and wish for.

"Very little here retains any of its former magic."

She explains to the boy whose eyes become heavier by the second as the brunette's voice soothes away any fear of this strange new place.

"Very little."

She repeats quietly, stalking the length of the far wall, where pitted caverns in the porous stone hold a curious array of treasures and trinkets. The steady thrum of a thousand hearts creates an eerie melody echoing from the damp walls, but she hasn't come here for any of them, and their metronomic rhythm continues undisturbed.

"It's here somewhere..."

She assures the sleeping child, before adopting a relieved smile when she locates an old, wooden chest. Pulling it down, she places it upon a small, stone pedestal and slips her fingers into twin notches on either side to manipulate hidden catches.

"Only one thing really seems to work in this world- and I believe that before too much longer even bottled magic will be of no real use or potency- but the power inside these vials comes from natural ingredients and harvested emotions that were free gain in the Forest for any that knew where to look. Potions, Henry, retain the power invested into them by mixing together ingredients that may not possess magic themselves. They survived The Curse- some of them- but only by the slightest hairsbreadth."

She sighs, aware that she is really just talking to herself, but feeling a sense of comfort in explaining her process. Whether or not she is right to do so, she doesn't really know, but to go about the work she has planned in silence seems an unbearable fate.

"I just hope I'm not making a mistake..."
She whispers, but she knows it's not an error in judgement of the situation that she really fears. She *knows* what she's doing is right. Deep down, and despite all of the pain it causes her, she *knows*. Her hesitancy stems from purely selfish reasons, but down here in the comfort of what she once cherished, she will allow herself this small flaw.

"This all happened *because* you were selfish..."

She reminds herself, and that quiet, amiable voice speaks up in her head once more with a note of bemusement.

"*It happened because you were angry, Regina. You were angry for a very long time, and whether that was right or wrong isn't worth beating yourself up over now. It happened because you were hurting.*"

"Well, what about *now*?"

She challenges out loud.

"What happens now, when this hurts so deeply? Is this *punishment*? Where was the *reward*? Where was *my* happiness?"

Tears salt her words, and she waits- breathing audibly- but the voice doesn't seem to have an answer and it remains hatefully silent. Glancing over at Henry, she bites her lip. If her wants are selfish, then this is her sacrifice, just as the girl had spoken of giving up her child.

*She did it... Now it's your turn.*

"But she's the Saviour. She's *good*. What if I *can't*? What if-"

"-Are you really going to spend all night here talking to yourself?"

Comes an amused sigh as the blonde makes herself at home once more up in her thoughts. She is reminded of the hateful slew of dreams suffered wherein Emma had spoken to her in a similar dance of reason and psychic bickering, but that version had been born of something cruel. Something teasing and ill-mannered. The voice that speaks to her now is gentle and kind, laced with amusement and the weary huskiness of one wishing to put everything to rest.

"You can do it, Regina. You're good. *I* told you."

"But-"

"-Shh. Come now. *Let's not argue about it. You've come this far, haven't you? I know it's hard, but I also know you can do it. I trust you.*"

Wiping her eyes briskly with the back of her hand, the brunette nods; pulling out an ancient cork from a long-necked vessel and pouring a thin stream of molten silver into a volcano glass bowl. Plucking two, dried petals from a small, silken pouch, she crushes them into fine, purple dust and adds it to the bowl. Pulling the book of matches she'd taken from her kitchen cabinet from her pocket, she strikes up a flame and touches it to the mixture; turning flickering yellow instantly blue.

Blowing on the liquid left in the bottom of the bowl, she studies the small, clear pool settled at its base; looking just as innocuous as water.

Harmless.
And, for just a moment, she suffers the strong urge to lift the vessel to her lips- going so far as to raise her hands- before she stops; Emma speaking up gently

"Quit that, Regina. Don't be an idiot. That's my job."

"Well, it's a good thing you're so god damn good at it!"

She replies sassily, before bursting into tears.
Sitting across from Emma as the blonde studies the straw spinning lazily in her rootbeer, Ruby sighs and casts her gaze around the afternoon-empty Diner.

"You want to play me at darts?"

She asks without any real hope, and the girl shakes her head just as she has done in response to each of the Waitress's previous suggestions.

"Aw, come on, Emma! I'm bored! We don't even have any tables to set up because Granny's hosting one of her stupid quilting evenings tonight! At least take a look at this magazine with me. Look. I can test you to see what kind of girl you are; I mean, yeah, I'm not sure you're any of these, but it's still fun and... Emma! Would you stop looking at your phone for five minutes?"

"Huh? Sorry."

The blonde murmurs, and Ruby leans across the table with her jaw cupped in her palms and studies her friend shrewdly.

"What the hell happened yesterday?"

"Nothing. Nothing happened yesterday."

The younger woman shrugs, and the brunette groans in a theatrical display of disbelief much as she had done when Emma had claimed simply to be 'tired' when they'd been sat in her bed.

"How'd you cut your head?"

"I told you already last night; I whacked it on a cupboard."

"Okay... But how come you're not working for Regina today? And don't say you told me last night, because if you're gonna try selling me the tale again of how Madame Mayor simply 'hasn't got anything for you to do', I'm not buying it. She's always found you stuff before, and-"

"-Ruby... Stop."

"No. Not until you snap out of your funk. I'm your friend, aren't I? You're supposed to be able to tell me stuff..."

The waitress pesters, but her brow furrows anxiously and the blonde understands in a distracted way that Ruby's whining comes from a good place, and that her continual standoffish rebuttals to the brunette's concern are doing nothing more than hurting her feelings.

"If I could tell you what was wrong, or what happened, I would. But I'm not sure I understand it myself."

She sighs quietly, and Ruby sits back against the worn vinyl of the booth and worries her hair with a frown.

"Did you and Regina have a fight?"

"No... Not exactly."
"Is she mad at you?"

"No."

"Are you mad at her?"

"...No."

The waitress raises a brow at this quiet response- Emma's expression wrought with uncertainty- and opens her mouth to call the blonde on it, but she is bested in her bid for the girl's attention as the cell lying on the table between them lights up with a message icon. Looking from the phone to the younger woman, she shrugs when the latter does the same back to her- seemingly at a loss of what to do- and coaxes gently.

"Well, go on then. Haven't you been fiddling with that thing all goddamn day? Open it."

Biting her lip, Emma reaches out and snatches up the cell; knowing who the message will be from without bothering to glance at the name.

_Emma. I don't wish to leave things between us as they were left last night. If you would allow me to, I'd like to see you._

The absurdity of this last statement hits the blonde like a tonne of bricks, and she swallows as she scrolls down.

_I was hoping you might agree to talking on neutral ground; I said we needed a break and maybe it would be nice to get one from this place. If you accept my invitation, I'm available after seven._

_I understand if you say no._

_I understand if you say no._

Regina runs a finger nervously over the small nick in her upper lip as she keeps her eyes trained on those words. Everything about their tentative uncertainty and submissive doubt is unlike her, but she'd been incapable of sending the blonde the message without adding them- after a long pause for thought- at the end.

Of course, she _needs_ Emma to agree.

It's vital that she does.

But... She stills her attention to the small scar as she recalls the look of utter shock that had graced the blonde's features as her hand had flown up to cover the smarting sting the crop had landed in much the same vicinity on pale skin.

She needs Emma to agree.

But she doesn't necessarily _expect_ her to. That look had been one of fearful disbelief before it had evolved into anger, and she has no way of knowing where the girl's head might be at given that she's been allowed time to think. She-

Snatching up her phone when it beeps quietly, she opens up the younger woman's message with trembling hands.

_I'd like to see you too. x_
Letting out a choked breath, the Mayor glances over at Henry who watches her contently from his baby seat and wipes distractedly at her cheek to chase away escaped salt.

*Good. Seven it is. Do you want to come and pick me up around then?*

She strives to keep the tone of her message casual. Tells herself not to look over at her desk where a small vial sits upon varnished wood.

*Am I driving?*

Closing her eyes and taking in a deep breath, the Mayor allows herself a moment before pulling herself together and tapping back briskly

*Yes. x*

Placing her phone down beside her on the sofa, she clasps her hands together uneasily and speaks to the boy.

"There's a lot of holes in this plan, Henry. *Lots* of them. And that's not the way I like to work... Not the way I do things at all..."

Henry gurgles in response, and she nods as she pushes herself up and stalks over to him.

"I'd rather that I had more time. Rather think of a better way... But that can't happen, sweetheart. It *has* to be now. I can't allow the risk that would come with extra time... And if I spend much longer with her, I'm not sure I *could* let her go."

Bare gums show happily enough in response, and she lifts the child from his seat and holds him close to her; marvelling at the difference in his weight since when he'd first been given to her.

"Come, dear. Let's call Johanna. There's still a lot to prepare."

In the end, it isn't until quarter to seven that the brunette feels she has prepared everything she is able to prepare for the evening, and she sits rigidly on one of the sofas in her office with a bulky travel bag resting at her feet.

"Did you want anything to eat, love?"

Johanna asks as she pokes her head around the door, and Regina declines her offer and dismisses her woodenly; the old maid leaving on a friendly note of

"Just let me know if you need anything. I didn't hear you come back."

Back.

Back and forth, back and forth.

Her day has been a maze of curious errands, the last one being the most involved and almost having been forgotten entirely.

But she *can't* forget anything.

*Mustn't* forget anything.

Because Emma's relying on her. Whether the blonde knows it or not.
The last errand had been a challenge, and not only because of the drive. It had involved a certain degree of stealth and sneaking around, and, while both are things she had once taken to often and with talent, she’d felt highly uncomfortable sat waiting in her car and keeping a watchful eye on the Diner. Fortunately, she hadn’t had to wait around all too long; Granny making her way slowly up the steps around noon, and then it had only been a matter of ten minutes or so before the Ruby and Emma had come trotting down those same steps with a great deal more grace.

The blonde had looked well.

Smiling.

And Regina had allowed herself just enough arrogance to suppose her text might have had something to do with it. Before receiving a reply, she’d known it could have gone a number of ways. That Emma might ignore her completely- a result she’d loathed and feared and not had a clue what she would have done about- or tell her in no uncertain terms to back off. The odds had only been about one in three that she would be hoping to hear from her, yet the brunette is not ultimately surprised that this should have been the conclusion. It fills her with guilt she knows Emma herself would berate her for.

Never mind that now...

She’d whispered out in her Benz, and she’d watched from her well-hidden voyeur’s point until the two young women had disappeared from sight. Allowing herself just a moment's grace to avoid the unlikely event that one of the two might have forgotten something and come running back- unlikely, but then it is Emma, not to mention Ruby!- she’d eventually slipped from the car and stalked around the back of the building before making her way through the side door and up to Emma's room.

After that task had been completed, it had simply been a case of forward planning and an hour's drive.

And she supposes she needn't have travelled so far.

But her heart had told her that to stop anywhere closer to the town line would be foolish.

Painful.

Dangerous.

That done, everything else had been taken care of in town this morning.

So now, she waits.

"So, where are we going?"

Emma asks to break the tension that accompanies the brunette entering the car. The darker woman has stashed her bags in the trunk and now sits fiddling with her chair, so far having said nothing but a curt 'hello' upon slipping into her seat. She’d been worried Emma might greet her with wary caution- which she would more than understand- but in the end, when she looks up at the girl, the latter offers her a small smile and she relaxes slightly; eyes wandering to the small flare of colour at the blonde's upper lip and the clean scrape grazing her temple.

"Just head out towards the interstate, same as when we picked up your car."

She instructs, and Emma nods as she puts the bug into drive and rolls them slowly out onto the street.
"You want some music, or...?"

"Does the radio even work?"

Regina asks with a dubious glance at the worse for wear dials, and the blonde laughs quietly and admits

"Nah. Sometimes if you whack it a bit you get some static and a few notes, but it's mostly for show."

"Then why ask?"

"Because it was too quiet..."

She sighs, and Regina frowns as she tries to think of something to say, before Emma tags on with a grin

"I could always sing to you?"

Surprising herself as she laughs at this, the brunette looks over at the girl and breathes out some of the tension sitting in her lungs like steel.

"Please don't."

She replies snidely, and she returns Emma's smile with one of her own before extending a hand and placing it on the girl's thigh; stroking coarse denim with her thumb.

"Regina, don't."

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean-"

The brunette jerks her fingers away instantly, and the younger woman sighs and glances over at her with a sheepish grin.

"I just meant don't start feeling me up if you don't want to end up sat on the side of the road after I crash this thing. I have a very stringent 'don't sex me up while I'm driving' policy..."

She explains, before catching the slight hint of agitation that accompanies this statement and leaning over after a quick check of the road to place a soft kiss on the brunette's cheek to show her she'd gladly make her an exception to the rule if it wasn't for the fact her words stem from a practical concern.

Touching her fingers to her cheek where Emma's kiss burns her skin, Regina nods as she offers softly

"Understood. Thank you... Thank you for letting me see you-

"-Will you quit that? Regina last night was... Shit, I don't know what it was, and I'd rather if we didn't talk about that right now. Of course I wanted to see you. I always want to see you."

"That makes you the exception then..."

Regina sighs, and the blonde frowns as she turns onto the long stretch of road that will take them through the woods.

"Well... Maybe that'd change if you didn't treat everyone with the facade that you couldn't care less about them..."
"It's not a facade. I've told you. I don't like them."

"Well... *If* that's true, then that's fine. I'm not saying you have to *like* them. I'm saying you *care* about them whether you admit it or not. Storybrooke is weird, but you're good at your job. You're a good Mayor. You'd have to be; else you wouldn't have been doing it for so long. Someone else would have been elected after you served your term."

"... Maybe there were no other candidates?"

Regina suggests quietly; cautious when it comes to talking to Emma about such things when the topic of conversation dances so perilously close to the truth, but she also wants to know- much as she always does- what the blonde might have to say on the matter.

"Hmm... Well, it doesn't change anything. Not really. You care. I've seen so for myself... And I'm not saying that you should suddenly start offering out sugar instead of vinegar or anything like that. You are the way you are, and hell knows it *suits* you! It would be *insane* if everyone had to walk around vomiting sunshine in order to be a good person... But you are one. You do *know* that, don't you? Sure, you disguise it sometimes, but you're nice. You're kind. You're just a boring old, run of the mill good person, really... With a wicked side."

She smirks when the darker woman takes in an audible breath at this last little quip to show she's playing.

"...You seem hellbent to *refuse* to believe otherwise."

Regina agrees eventually, and Emma laughs; shaking her head as she flicks on the headlights as the forest becomes dense and overhangs the road.

"See, *that's* the thing. Actually, I dislike most people. That's not all that nice, but *fuck* it, you know? I have my reasons, and I figure if nothing else, I've earned the right to my emotions. People, on the most part, are grey."

"Grey?"

"Kind of. What I mean is that for the most part, no one I've met has been particularly *great* or particularly *mean*. That's not to say the people I've met *aren't* good or bad, it's just generally when you meet someone, you don't see anything more of them but their covers. *Most* people are like those non-descript books that blend in with the others. They're grey. They *don't* do anything to make you miserable- why would they?—but they don't try to *help* you either. I think that's a fair summary of humans, and for the most part, that's fine. The thing is, I've been in positions where my own cover-dust jacket, whatever- was all torn up and beat to shit. Like, you could *see* that, you know? But, *most* people continue on being grey. Continue on with their own shit and leave you to yours. That's just fine. But, when you're really feeling it, and you've been dropped and tossed on the floor and people keep turning down pages and getting you muddy and leaving you in the rain, you start kind of disliking those grey people that have eyes that work *just* as well as your own do and yet don't react to what they see.

I never *expect* anything from people.

I haven't since I was very young.

I learnt a long time ago that people let you down a lot. A *hell* of a lot. And it's easier just to keep to yourself.

That was my decision, and it was entirely logical, but deep down, I'm *human*, and yeah... I just don't
like most people. Call it spite, call it jealousy, call it whatever you like; I won’t argue. But I will say I have enough experience to stand by that personality flaw.

You say I refuse to believe you aren’t good, like it’s something I think of everyone in my naive little head—"

"-I never said that-"

"-No. But you think it."

"...I think you’re a surprisingly positive person beneath the sarcasm."

"In some ways. Not in others. Where do you think that sarcasm comes from? It’s not all for shits and giggles. A part of it is, and a part of it is just plain old irritation and disinterest in people. Grey people. I refuse to think you’re a bad person because you proved me wrong, not because I’m naive. You’re the deviation from the norm- a lot of this town is- not just me hoping blindly. I like you; that’s your first abnormality right there. I care about you; that’s also not something I’ve ever been good at... And I trust you. For me, that’s enough to know you’re a good person.

I just wish you’d figure out what it would take for you to think it, too."

"Emma... I-"

"-You’re going to argue with me, aren’t you?"

The blonde smiles, and the Mayor sighs and purses her lips; shrugging her shoulders to show she’s not about to give the younger woman the satisfaction of being right.

"...You don’t have to be all sugar and spice. Just let people in on the fact that you can be. The people here look to you for guidance. If you could just allow them to see that maybe they could also look for more... I’m not saying you have to be friends with them all. I’m saying you should pick the ones you can tolerate and let them in a little. You don’t have to watch movies and braid each other’s hair, but there’s a middle ground. The next time you feel shitty about people not wanting to see you or be around you... Just... You know... Remember that."

"Alright, Freud."

"That’s all actually incredibly unlike anything Freud ever-"

"-Shhhh... Know-it-all."

Regina interrupts with smirk; touched by Emma’s admission as to her feelings when it comes to her, but not wanting to hear more on the matter when, deep down, she knows she agrees with the rest of it all, too. After all, she’s no longer just doing this for herself and Emma. It’s bigger than that.

"I like to read."

The blonde argues with a hint of embarrassment, and the Mayor nods with a smile.

"You do. But not grey books..."

"No. Not grey books."

Emma agrees softly. She is relieved that things seem to have settled between them, and finds herself-as she so often does- silently marvelling over how much she enjoys the darker woman’s company.
She is not often someone of a great many words, not because she doesn't have them firing away a mile a minute upstairs, but because she doesn't find them easy to let free from the leash of her tongue where others might hear them. With Regina, its okay though. Regina seems to like the intrinsic tangle of her thoughts, and more importantly, Regina listens.

She offers her that courtesy, and this in itself goes a long way.

"Where are we going?"

Emma asks again curiously, and the darker woman sighs, looking out at the fast approaching town sign with a sense of mourning.

"Away for a little while... Keep going. We'll pass a small town and then it's a fairly boring drive for a little while yet."

Nodding, Emma does as she's told; whizzing past the sign for Storybrooke on their right and thinking nothing much of it.

What she thinks about is how things have changed. How they've let one another in. Last night had been a disaster, but it had all come from simply wanting to give another piece of herself to the brunette while hoping the latter might find some sense of relief in her offering. It hadn't worked- and she cringes at the memory- but nor does she entirely regret doing what she did. Her intentions had been in the right place, and while she has no idea why Regina flipped the way that she did- sure, the brunette had warned her of a darker side, but this had been simple insanity- she also knows that the Mayor has respected and appreciated the opportunity to be let in before.

"I know the town up ahead, you know."

"Kittery... You said you'd been there once."

Regina replies after a moment's pause. Of course, she too knows the blonde has a connection with the tiny little burg, but she is surprised that Emma is bringing it up. Watching the girl out of the corner of her eye, she waits to see if and how she will continue; taking in restless fingers gripping the wheel and the nervous bouncing of one knee.

"Yeah. I was actually born around here. You probably knew that though, right? From my mom?"

"... It's been a long time."

"Well, yeah. I was born around here. Though, there's no hospitals or anything anywhere near here apart from Storybrooke- which actually never even showed up when I searched, weirdly...- so I can't tell you exactly where. Which bush. Which tree. Which hole in the fucking dirt-"

"-Emma..."

"Anyway. That Kittery town? That's where the kid that found me took me to. That's the closest place I have to an answer... Not all that inspiring when they call anything with a flushing toilet a town. I went back there when I was fifteen. I'd wanted to go back for years, but, for a number of reasons, that's how long it took. The same guy that called the cops when they found me was still there frying burgers at this little shitty truck stop. I told him who I was, and why I was there- the information I wanted- and apart from being told I should buy some blackened meat or quit wasting his time, he had nothing much more to say to me. His son was only slightly more helpful. Told me he knew everyone from around there, and there wasn't anybody that had been carrying a kid at the time. He had nothing more to offer me than to make a couple of gross comments behind my back that were pretty easy to overhear... I didn't even care. That was the one place I could think of that might provide some kind
of answer.

And it didn’t.

The blonde sighs moodily as they enter and leave the small town in the space of thirty seconds; the bug not slowing down once.

Steeping her fingers in her lap, Regina studies them pensively, before speaking softly

"I believe one day you'll have an answer."

"Yeah? How?"

The younger woman scoffs, and the brunette furrows her brow and turns to the girl.

"Because. You deserve one."

"Yeah. Well..."

"And I'll help you... I know more than you do about your mother... I'll help you. I can't promise you that you'll find her- that much is... Well, that's up to you- but I'll help you know where to look."

"Really? You know... Kn-know where she is?"

"... Let's not discuss that right now. There are a couple of things I wish to talk about this evening, but that isn't one of them. If I knew anything that would help you immediately, I would say so. You know I would. But I don't know anything right now that would do you any good... I will, though. Take that promise for now. I'll have answers. And one day I'll show them to you."

"... A-are you gonna say sleazy things behind my back, too?"

Emma jokes, a little breathlessly as she processes the magnitude of the brunette's promise.

"Never."

"Oh."

"I'll say them to your face."

Regina smirks, and the blonde grins sheepishly as she blushes.

"That'll work."

"Mhmm."

"Now pay attention to the road; I wish to get where we're going alive."
Chapter 97

Chapter Notes

A/N: So! The end! Sorry this was so belated. This isn't my only long fic, but it's definitely the one I had the hardest time parting with and feeling content with the ending (Not hurried along by a little trip to the emergency room today, either). NOT that this IS the end... I have finished this story on an epilogue which acts as the lead in to the next fic- ALL THINGS COME TO THOSE WHO WAIT- which follows on from this one. Hopefully how/ why will become clear when you get that far. On that note, there are DEFINITELY some unanswered questions at the end of this. Don't worry. I know some things need explaining and that will all come about as part of the next story's plot-line :) But, for the time being, goodbye and thanks for reading :) I hope you enjoy, and please review :)

"Really? This place?"

Emma asks as she steps from the bug and shoulders the small bag of overnight clothes brought with her at the brunette's request. Realising she perhaps sounds a little ungrateful, she hastily flashes the darker woman a grin; not in the least bit fussed at the fact that they stand bathed in the neon glow of a Super 8 sign, but a little surprised that Regina has had them drive so far from town simply to stay in a low budget motel room.

Dark eyes flashing briefly to the small building just visible down the street, the Mayor shrugs, and beckons the girl towards the lobby.

"I wanted to take a break from Storybrooke. This town seemed as good a place as any to do so."

"Sure."

Emma agrees, watching with interest as the brunette stalks into the dingy reception through sliding doors with an air of tangible distaste and murmurs to a young woman behind the desk. Still, the bespectacled redhead greets them amiably and hands over the key to their room with a smile; informing them that they would be making a poor choice if they were to give the clam shack a block down a miss.

"Thanks."

The blonde grins at the woman, before walking off in Regina's wake as the latter breezes gracefully over to the elevator in the corner.

"What's in the bag?"

Emma asks as she nods towards the large duffle bag slung at the brunette's hip; the material bulging out in places and serving to make her wonder if she should have perhaps packed more than underwear, a shirt, a toothbrush and a fresh pair of socks.

"Don't be nosy."

Regina scolds, but her eyes glitter with affection as she simply stares at the girl leant against the cool
steel of the elevator wall. A surprisingly base urge comes over her to slam her palm against the emergency stop button to Emma's left and break the unspoken distance between them, but she quells it with a frown and swallows when the blonde glances up to regard her curiously.

"What's up?"

"Nothing."

She snaps, and sharp teeth flash in a wicked grin as pale fingers brush over the damning red button and Emma winks at her.

"Always wanted to do it in an elevator."

"Miss Swan... Please spare me such inappropriate suggestions."

The brunette breathes, and she is fairly sure that colour blossoms across her cheeks, but she takes care to offer the girl her sternest glower.

"Sorry."

The younger woman mutters, and the Mayor nods as though in haughty acceptance, while inwardly wondering if the cold, metal walls against the blonde's bare skin would make her gasp.

"This way, I think."

Is all she offers as the doors slide open, and Emma follows her down a narrow hall and waits patiently as the brunette strives to figure out the trick to the key tab.

Finally successful, Regina leads the way into a decent sized room in which two queen-sized beds play as feature points. Walking over to the one closest to the bathroom, she places down her bag, before turning to the blonde a little uncertainly. She hadn't asked how the room was furnished, but, with several options now available to them, she is curious as to what Emma might decide to do. Perhaps the most obvious course of action would be for the blonde to claim the other bed simply because it's there, but she watches on with a bitter taste in her mouth as she wonders if the girl might not also opt for the other bed due to what had happened between them last night. Seeming to be similarly lost in thought- standing hesitantly between the two- Emma eventually offers the brunette a pointed look and promptly slings her bag next to the Mayor's own.

"You know, this is my first time actually paying for a room in one of these places."

She admits in order to break the silence, and the brunette laughs as the younger woman glances impishly over at the mini fridge.

"You can have whatever you like. My treat. Though, I did come prepared."

She smiles, and green eyes widen comically when the Mayor unzips her duffle bag just enough to pull out a bottle of wine.

"Seriously?"

Emma asks as she perches on the edge of the bed.

"I won't say anything if you won't."

Regina sighs, but she does so with a smirk. Ordinarily, she supposes she would be one of the last people to encourage the blonde to drink, but she has learnt over the last month that age is little more
than a number, and she no longer feels the same element of guilt and disapproval when it comes to
the girl partaking in a glass or two as she once did.

And besides.

Tonight... Tonight she's willing to make allowances.

Not to mention, the younger woman's eagerness to accept the bottle is something she's counting on.

Locating two plastic cups from the dresser with a glance up at the blonde when the latter snorts with
laughter at the exaggerated look of disgust she offers towards the only available substitutes for her
usual fine cut crystal, she pours them each a generous helping of pinot noir and hands one over.

"What are we drinking to?"

Emma asks, and the brunette pauses pensively before replying

"To you."

"To me?"

The younger woman wrinkles her nose and shakes her head.

"Nah, that's weird. At least drink to both of us or something. I don't wanna drink to myself."

She chuckles, and Regina shrugs and allows for a toast to the both of them, although she inwardly
feels it is not herself that needs a superstitious wish of luck or success.

"So, do you want to go try that clam shack after this?"

Emma asks as she leans back against the headboard and brings her feet up onto the sheets after
kicking off her sneakers.

"If that's what you want?"

Regina nods, sipping at her own drink and perching on the other side of the bed with a caution that
has nothing to do with a fear of spilling her wine. She wants to lie beside the girl. Touch her. Be
close to her. But she is painfully aware that they haven't spoken about what happened last night, and
whilst Emma has expressed that she doesn't really want to, the brunette can't help but feel a little
uncomfortable at the thought of doing anything that might not be considered appropriate by her
companion. Eyes trailing once again to the violet blossom tainting pale lips, she swallows and shifts
her weight uncertainly.

"I don't much mind... I can think of things I'd rather do than go out to some local eatery..."

The blonde replies; rolling onto her side to regard the Mayor pointedly with a sly grin. Allowing
herself a slow smile, Regina moves over properly onto the bed and looks down on the girl with a
mocking glower of superiority.

"That's only your first glass, and already you've lost all sense of decorum."

She teases, and Emma scoffs huskily

"You're implying I had any to begin with?"

"True. A foolish mistake to make."
Regina laughs softly, and this time, when she places a hand on the younger woman's leg, the latter looks up at her with a mischievous smile full of promise.

"You wanted to talk..."

Emma prompts quietly, as she shifts a little and parts her legs to allow the brunette's soft touch to slip between her thighs. The darker woman swallows and slides her hand slowly to rest against the zipper of the blonde's jeans before she nods.

"Yes... I do."

"Here? Or...?"

The girl asks, sipping from her glass innocently as she pushes against the Mayor's fingers causing the brunette to lose track of her thoughts momentarily while she cups her palm between skinny thighs and makes a slow circle.

"Anywhere."

Regina murmurs; watching sooty lashes close and sharp collarbones flutter beneath pale skin as Emma's breathing quickens.

"Okay, we can talk anywhere. After."

The blonde smiles serenely, and the darker woman shakes her head and removes her hand, offering a look of amusement when the girl's eyes open to regard her with blown irritation.

"No."

"Well, we're not doing it during..."

Emma grumbles, but she pushes herself back up to sit straight- narrowly missing christening the bedding with her glass- and offers the brunette a warm grin in response to the latter's disdainful eye roll.

In truth, Regina's reaction is entirely for show. She had told herself not to expect anything from Emma- unsure if the younger woman would even agree to accompany her here in the first place- and the fact that the blonde welcomes her touch both astounds her and serves to soothe her. It makes this whole trip all the more painful- reminding her so clearly of what she's destined to lose- but it helps her also. Helps her heart to heal just a little at the visual- and tempting!- realisation that she hasn't broken the bond built up with the girl as she'd feared she might have done.

"Emma..."

She appeals quietly, and the blonde smiles and crosses her legs, glancing out the window and suggesting pleasantly

"It's dark, but it was balmy out earlier... We could go for a walk? Get some air?"

"That sounds nice."

Regina nods, and she smirks as she catches the look of wide-eyed approval that greets her act of slipping their wine bottle into her handbag.

"I have no responsibilities here..."
She shrugs, and Emma laughs as she dons her jacket and teases

"Oh, shit, bad Regina's come out to play!"

She imagines her face falls just as swiftly as the brunette's at this, and she shakes her head with an awkward study of the floor.

"Come on. Let's go misbehave."

She offers quietly as she slips her hand between the Mayor's waist and elbow and steers her gently to the door in a silent bid that they not mention the connotations of her foolish words.

"Do you ever do anything else besides?"

Regina murmurs into her hair, and the younger woman smiles and teases

"You know, for someone that doesn't want to give me the satisfaction of experiencing elevator sex, you have a funny way of showing it..."

In the end, they find themselves venturing into a deserted thicket of trees that spills out onto the tall grass of a vacant park. The leaves glisten indigo in the moonlight and whisper amongst themselves, while the reedy whine of a chain link swing-set picks up now and then with the wind. They've walked for the best part of an hour, chatting quietly and amiably, but forever keeping their topics light and innocuous.

Now, as she catches a low sigh leave the brunette's lips as the darker woman strives to bring up whatever it is she means to discuss, Emma comes to a stop and rakes at the compact dirt surrounding ancient roots with her sneaker.

"It's dry here. We could sit and talk if you like. Have some more wine?"

She finishes hopefully, and Regina looks from the moon-dappled mud to the younger woman and back again.

"... I suppose."

She agrees dubiously. Rolling her eyes with a low chuckle, Emma strips off her jacket and lays it out on the ground, pointing to it and sighing theatrically

"Go on. Sit."

"Don't be foolish. You'll get cold."

Regina snaps, and the girl shrugs and takes a seat with her back against the trunk of an old oak tree and smiles.

"I don't really mind. We can move on if I do."

Lowering herself down so that she hovers just above strewn out red leather, the brunette eventually shakes her head and settles in the dirt instead; picking up the blonde's jacket and holding it out to her.

"I'd rather I get a little dusty than have you sat there shivering."

She points out sensibly and, while Emma simply shows her palms in a display of 'suit yourself', the Mayor notes privately that it isn't often she's willing to make such simple sacrifices as she does now.
It isn't often that the thought even occurs to her.

"Things do tend to get dirty all too swiftly when in your presence."

She smiles at the blonde, who shows a flicker of her tongue in response.

"Promises, promises."

Emma smirks cheekily, before looking expectantly to the Mayor as the latter pulls the wine from her bag.

"Oh. Damn it... Glasses."

Regina curses, and the blonde shrugs and moves to sit a little closer; leaning against the darker woman's tailored autumn coat and plucking the bottle from her hand.

"It's fine."

She smiles, unscrewing the top and taking a sip from the bottle; the thick rim of heavy glass leaving a bead of bloody midnight on her lips. Wiping it gently away with her thumb, Regina swallows as her eyes find Emma's in the darkness, and she takes the bottle and follows suit.

"Since knowing you, my life has become a rollercoaster of new experiences."

She muses as she licks the tangy residue of the bottle from her lips, and Emma simply nods; aware that this is the Mayor's way of bringing them around to the conversation she's brought them here to have, and not simply another affectionate dig at her standards.

"You're the best thing that's ever happened to me."

Regina continues quietly with her eyes cast down at wine in her hands and her weight pressed gently against the girl.

"You and Henry."

Nodding once more, Emma takes the bottle- feeling slightly shy in the face of this candid admission- but she answers back truthfully

"Well, you already know you're the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"I know you think so."

"I know so!"

"Well... I intend for that to remain true."

The brunette muses, and the younger woman frowns as she nips from the bottle; not entirely sure what's meant by that.

"Regina?"

"I wish to continue being a good thing for you. I only want good things for you... And sometimes I worry. What happened last night... It can never happen again."

"No. Well. That's ok... We just won't do that kind of thing again."
Emma promises quietly, worrying the pinot's label with her thumb.

"Look, I didn't know it would upset you to do that kind of thing. Maybe I should have asked, but I kind of felt like you'd say no unless I offered it up in a more real sense... And I wouldn't have minded if you'd said no, of course I wouldn't have... I just also kind of knew you wanted to do it... You did... Didn't you?"

"... I wanted to."

"Thought so."

The blonde nods, and she offers over the bottle as she rests her cheek on the darker woman's jacket.

"I know you didn't want to do what you ended up doing, though."

"I'm so sorry..."

"It's okay. I know you are. I know that, too."

"You seem to know a lot."

Regina sniffs, and Emma laughs quietly as she sits up to allow the brunette to sip from the wine.

"I do."

She shrugs simply, and she accepts the bottle before leaning in and brushing her lips gently against the brunette's.

"I know you don't want to hurt me, and I'm sorry that I put you in the position I did when you'd made that quite clear. The thing is, I did it because of my own interests too, not just because I was trying to figure you out. I wouldn't have asked you to do it if I'd not wanted you to. Not something like that... I didn't like it- lesson learned- not when you did it so hard... But, I didn't go up into your room yesterday and expect you not to hurt me, and maybe that was a mistake."

"Don't make this into a mutual thing-"

Regina whispers against pale lips; clutching at the soft skin of the younger woman's ribs beneath cheap leather and stroking her thumb against one of the delicately defined hollows between bone.

"-You're eighteen years old. I should never have allowed it to-"

"-Don't tell me what to do and then insult me-"

Emma scolds breathlessly, moving so that she kneels over the brunette with the latter's stretched out legs between her own.

"-I told you before; I'm not a little girl. You say I know a lot, and that's true. I do. I'll bet I know more than half of the people in your town, Madame Mayor. We wouldn't be sat here if I didn't. So don't tell me you should have taken charge of the situation because I'm some clueless, naive child. What I did was arguably stupid because it was stupid. Not because I'm eighteen."

A gentle nip at painted lips to mark her heated words, and the darker woman lets out a choked breath and glides her other hand up beneath thin cotton to mirror its sister's movements over hot flesh.

"It wasn't stupid. It was something you wanted-"
"-Then let's leave it at that-"

"-Something I took too far. I could have really hurt you, Emma-"

"-But you didn't-"

"-Not this time-"

"-Not ever!"

"No... Not ever."

Regina agrees with salt blurring her vision before she pushes the blonde roughly back so that the latter lands hard in the dirt with a yelp. Green eyes sparkle up at her—tinted silver in the moonlight—as Emma grins broadly; her jacket rucked up beneath her shoulder blades to allow the grit and twigs to rub against her spine. Pulling the brunette down on top of her, she kisses her violently as the latter straddles her firmly and takes charge.

Slipping her hand into tight denim with some difficulty, Regina breathes in the younger woman's ear as the girl moves beneath her with her long curls catching on the forest debris.

"I want to give you what you want."

"Then do it."

Emma snarls back, her own hands lost in the silk folds of the brunette's shirt.

"I want to give you what you want, but know that I won't end up hurting you any more than I should. I want things to be good between us. I want to give you everything. Not just sweetness and not just hate. I want things to be real between us."

"They can be."

The blonde chokes as the brunette deepens her assault.

"They will be."

Regina growls as she bites down with carefully measured force on a skinny clavicle and feels the girl shake tellingly pinned beneath her.

"Fuck..."

Sitting up and regarding Emma nakedly in the dark, the Mayor admits quietly

"Well, that certainly wasn't what I'd imagined would happen."

Grinning, the blonde pants softly beneath her and reassures

"I have no complaints."

"No. I can tell."

Regina teases as she watches the girl try to catch her breath.

"I meant it, though. Things will work out... I promise."

"Regina, what do you-"
"-Just tell me you believe me. Please. That you believe me that I'll do the right thing this time. That you'll accept my promise."

The brunette urges gently, and the blonde frowns in confusion, before adopting a wide smile.

"Okay. I believe you. Things will work out just fine."

And, she supposes it must be Henry the darker woman speaks of. Henry, and her left over guilt, and whatever else she has decided to hold herself accountable for as she seems to be doing an alarming amount of recently. Supposes the brunette may even be talking about her earlier promise made today to help her- help her! Finally someone who will help her!- answer the one question that has always oozed poison in her heart.

In the end, it doesn't matter.

She simply pushes herself up as best she can with the darker woman sat splayed across her thighs and hugs her fiercely.

There's no point telling Regina that she's promising the impossible.

No point telling her that she has no way of knowing how things will work out.

After all, there's no magic in this world.

There's no point at all, because she knows that whatever happens, the brunette means what she says.

She is a sceptic herself, and whether things all work out or not is something a lifetime of facing sudden obstacles and hidden dangers has taught her not to bet on.

But she believes Regina in her intent.

Of course she does.

"You're covered in dirt."

The brunette murmurs eventually into golden curls as she brushes grit and leaves gently from the blonde's back as the latter keeps her arms encircled tightly around her neck.

"Yeah, and whose fault is that?"

"Yours. If you'd have lain still it wouldn't have been half so bad."

The Mayor scolds instantly, and Emma chuckles into her hair before lowering her arms and crawling out from under her.

"Oh yeah? Well, lying still is kind of hard with you fooling away down there."

"Fooling? My dear, I offered you a great deal more than foolery."

Regina sniffs as they make their way slowly out into the open and start the short journey back to the motel.

"Fine. It's hard to control myself when you're fucking me, Madame Mayor."

Emma replies smartly, and dark eyes flash in reprimand of the girl's language, as perfect teeth close over a plump bottom lip.
"Miss Swan..."

Regina scolds, and the blonde chuckles darkly as she links her arm momentarily through the crook of the Mayor's and grins at her sharkishly.

Rolling her eyes in return, the brunette's expression is strained as she drinks in familiar good humour and fire.

"What's wrong?"

Emma asks- grin falling into an open flower of concern- and the darker woman shakes her head and squeezes her elbows in close to her body to keep the blonde's hand trapped in the warm folds of her coat.

"Nothing, dear. I just... I'm just glad you're the person you are... I never thought I would be, but..."

"How do you mean?"

The younger woman asks lightly, before adopting a shyer tone and probing softly

"You mean because of Henry?"

"I mean because... I'm just glad."

Regina finishes with a helpless shrug of her shoulders as she is unable to explain any more than that to the girl, and Emma laughs and squeezes the soft wool covering the Mayor's arm and nods

"Good. That makes me glad... And so do you."

Closing her eyes for a second and swallowing salt, the brunette forces a smile. Pulling herself together, she leads them onwards, dark coals reflecting the neon haze of the motel sign as they make their way into the parking lot.

"Come on. Let's go back inside."

She suggests softly, and Emma nods and follows her into the lobby and through the doors to the elevator. Once inside, the blonde chuckles quietly as her cheeks rouge scarlet, and the Mayor smirks with her gaze cast carefully away from the girl's, lest she catch her eye and initiate what she knows they're both thinking about.

"Behave."

She scolds gently, and the younger woman's giggling only intensifies as she bites her lip in an attempt to muffle the sound and shakes her head.

"Sorry."

She smiles, and they both hurry through as the doors spring open; Regina fishing the room key from her coat pocket and declaring haughtily

"I'm not about to get asked to leave an establishment as dire as this one on account of your debauched mind."

Running her hand firmly over the soft swell of the girl's backside as the words leave her mouth, she lets the door swing closed behind them to shut herself and Emma- laughing- within the cosy room.
"You're amazing."

The blonde smiles as she falls back onto the bed and regards the brunette stood with her hands on her hips gazing down at her, and Regina sniffs as her heart skips a beat, before informing the girl primly

"I know."

Smirking as the younger woman shakes her head in exasperation, she catches the hopeful way Emma glances over at her duffle bag and offers an eye roll wrought with much the same.

Because it's expected of her.

And it's imperative in her mind that the blonde doesn't start questioning her willingness to supply her with liquor tonight.

I'm here. For every two sips she takes, I'm allowing myself one. I'm here to make sure that she's okay.

I only want her to be okay.

"You're very transparent, dear. Honestly, have I not spoilt you enough?"

She sighs, but she gets up as she does so and slips a second bottle from the bag and cracks the seal.

"I'm having fun."

Emma confides with a small frown, and Regina pours out a cup of deep, red wine and passes it to her as she perches on the bed.

"Good... So am I."

"Well, don't look so distraught about it!"

The girl chuckles, her tongue poking playfully between her teeth; painted crimson. Adopting a kinder expression, she takes a generous sip of her wine before placing the paper cup carefully on the nightstand and leaning over so that she sits nose to nose with the brunette. Smiling sweetly, she makes no move to take the darker woman's drink from her, but rather simply works around it; kissing the Mayor's cheek softly before trailing a slow line down her jaw while her hand creeps up a slender thigh. And still... Still, the blonde's actions speak ever so faintly of timidity. Not so much pregnant with the shyness and newness they had been when the two had first started exploring one another, but yet delicately hinting at the fact that she still can't quite believe her luck.

Swallowing her wine and closing her eyes, Regina tilts her head back slightly to allow the girl further access. She is still a little thrown by the way things have worked out tonight. She'd not come here thinking they would be enjoying themselves the way they are. Sure, she had brought the wine with her, and had hoped they would at least be able to endure each other's company on somewhat pleasant terms despite what had happened only a day ago, but as for their trip becoming a simple, amiable- and not to mention seemingly rather heated- 'getaway', she'd not even dared to hope.

"It's just new to me to be doing this kind of thing."

She explains truthfully, and Emma smiles against the vulnerable column of her throat as she teases

"Well, then you're pretty fucking talented for an amateur."

"You know what I'm talking about... The fact that I'm good at pleasing you-"
"-And so modest!-

"-Goes without saying-"

"-And humble-"

"-But this whole... Spending time together in the way that we do... I never believed I could have that."

She murmurs, surprising herself with her honesty, before hissing as the younger woman sucks gently at her pulse point.

"Sorry, I know, I know, no marks. I-"

The blonde breathes huskily as she misinterprets Regina's harsh gasp as one of irritation, but she breaks off when the darker woman plunges her hand into thick waves and presses her back to the sensitive spot where her shoulder meets her neck.

"It's okay... Just don't bite me."

The Mayor coaxes, thinking of the way the girl wears numerous badges of their amorous activities and the fact that suddenly... Well, suddenly she wishes she had a few more herself. Hidden. But that might take forever to fade.

"Harder."

She whispers, teasing golden curls gently as her lashes flutter shut when Emma does as she's told.

She loses track of how long they sit there, her fingers playing through soft silk while her blood thums wildly against parted lips and the hard edge of sharp teeth that touch but never close. Eventually, she pulls lightly on the blonde's hair and the latter sits up slowly with blown emeralds fixed to the deep mark left at the Mayor's request.

"Okay?"

Emma asks a little uncertainly, though her voice is raspy with arousal, and the brunette nods as she looks up into wide eyes heatedly.

"Yes, dear. Perfect."

She soothes, and the blonde smiles before leaning over her pointedly in an attempt to get her to shuffle down to lie prone on the bed.

"Good."

Emma mutters, fiddling open the small buttons of the darker woman's shirt in slow succession. Regina watches on silently. Watches slender fingers work with the calm grace the girl so often lacks from her projected demeanour, as soft curls fall down between them to graze against her newly exposed flesh in teasing freshets of gold. Looking up to find fiery green as the silk wings of her shirt are slowly pushed aside, she holds the blonde's gaze steadily as the latter runs her fingers lightly down flawless skin to find the barrier of her waistband, where they then creep lazily towards the silver catch centred between slim hips.

"You too."

Regina purrs as Emma drags down the neatly hidden zipper of her dress pants at a cruelly slow pace
to reveal purple silk.

"Later. I owe you."

The blonde grins, and she motions that the brunette should lift her hips in order to relinquish her of her remaining garments.

"You do. So do as I say."

The Mayor smirks, and Emma opens her mouth in an expression of mock incredulity before adopting a shit-eating grin.

"Oh, I can't argue with you when you're naked."

She chuckles, leaning in to brush her lips against the darker woman's as she unhooks violet lace to bring delectable truth to her words.

"You can't argue with me in any form, Miss Swan. Not any argument you might hope to win, anyway."

"I'm pretty sure I've talked you into- and out of- plenty!"

"... Perhaps I was merely letting you think so."

Regina smirks, sipping from her wine before placing it back beside Emma's on the nightstand; completely comfortable reclined for the blonde's intimate study as the latter kneels on the rather spongey mattress with her ass rested on her heels and her palms on the sheets. This somewhat childish position allows the Mayor a good view down the front of the girl's top, and she raises a brow with theatrical impatience as she waits for Emma to strip off.

"I still got what I wanted."

The blonde points out in response to the darker woman's arrogant quip, and the latter nods- dark coals flickering up to find impish green- and answers in a lower tone

"We both did."

Catching the sudden change in the brunette's voice, Emma desists with her smug grinning and adopts a small smile in return.

"You owe me, Miss Swan, and I want to see you. All of you..."

Used to this request by now, the younger woman pushes herself from the bed and moves her hands to the button of her jeans. Looking up when Regina slips suddenly from downy sheets to stand in front of her, she regards the brunette quizzically; the darker woman catching her wrists with a peculiar expression.

"No, wait. Please... I want to do it."

Regina confides quietly, and Emma raises a brow but drops her hands obediently; not at all opposed to this suggestion until it crosses her mind that it might serve as a recipe for disaster. After all, she had studied herself in the mirror this morning after her rather disastrous experience in the brunette's bedroom, and she'd taken in the livid bruises left by the crop with a sinking feeling of confusion. Of uncertainty.

And that had been bad enough.
But, she imagines that if Regina sees them now in the unforgiving light of the overheads, they'll both feel a whole lot worse.

"Wait. Turn the lights out."

She whispers, and the Mayor regards her levelly with her fingers wrapped loosely around skinny wrists.

"Why?"

"The crop. It... It marked a little bit, and I don't want you to-"

"-I want to see. I did it, so I should see."

Regina interrupts sternly, and Emma opens her mouth to argue, before catching the hard shimmer in the brunette's eyes and understanding that to do so would be pointless.

"It's okay..."

She offers a little lamely as the darker woman fingers the hem of her top and inches it up slowly to reveal pale skin. The blonde speaks these words as the first of the bruises dappling her svelte frames is revealed- a deep indigo shard of thunder standing out vibrantly against the curve of her pelvic bone.

"Nothing about that is okay."

Regina shakes her head, but she continues to edge up soft cotton until she has the girl stood in just her bra with her long hair feathered out over her ribs. Here and there, damning blossoms of cruel flowers colour alabaster flesh and the brunette swallows before murmuring that the blonde should turn around. The look that Emma gives her in return suggests that she would rather not, but she eventually complies after a moment's silent hesitation.

"Does it hurt?"

Regina asks, thinking of the rough way she'd touched the girl in the moonlight; not so much ignorant of the truth, but shielded from it by a cloak of the stars and shadows.

"No."

"Emma..."

"... Here and there, if I press down a little. But it's okay. They'll fade."

Nodding in solemn agreement, the brunette touches her finger to a small, moth shaped mark between delicate shoulder blades and watches as the girl shivers.

"It does hurt."

She laments unhappily, and Emma shakes her head; speaking to the wall as she remains carefully still to allow the Mayor an unobstructed view as she has been asked.

"No. It's not that. You doing that just now... I liked it. It felt good. I know you don't like that I think that, but-"

"-In some ways I do. In some ways, I find it fascinating. I find the idea delicious... I don't mind what it is that you like, Emma. I enjoy all of those curious quirks and fancies about you. What I don't like
is seeing you scared. I think that's what I regret most-

'-Regina, come on, don't.'

"-You were scared of me. Of what I was doing. Of what I might do... I hate seeing these marks on you, but I understand that you and I place a different amount of weight on them. That, in turn, hurts me slightly. It pains me to look at you like this, but then I have never understood the appeal of being hurt. Never. What I have understood was the appeal of hurting... That appeal came from a place of anger. Of distress. Of hate. It was a black lust. A sick love... All opposite to the way I feel about you. You enjoy the smart and the sting, and I do enjoy watching your pleasure. I enjoy facilitating and nurturing your pleasure. To a point... But these marks aren't the result of pleasure. They're only the result of being hurt.

I don't like seeing you hurt. I love you too much to want to see that."

"... What?"

The blonde chokes, breath catching in her chest as she tries to figure out if she's misheard the Mayor's words. She pulls into herself slightly- spine rippling beneath pale skin- as she feels as though she's been punched in the stomach. As though she can't breathe.

Stepping closer so that she stands flush behind the girl, the darker woman slips her hands around the former's waist as she works open the button of her jeans with her breasts pressed against the narrow band of lace hooked beneath butterfly blades.

"I love you, Emma."

Regina repeats into thick curls as she pushes down rough denim and presses her heat against the flimsy cotton of the blonde's underwear.

"Y-you do?"

Emma whispers uncertainly, and full lips carrying only a memory of deep crimson smile into tangled gold as the Mayor nods.

"Don't sound so surprised, dear."

She chuckles, before continuing softly

"Don't tell me you hadn't figured that much out for yourself. That you didn't know..."

"I... I..."

Shaking her head, Regina pulls at the girl gently; turning her so that they face one another and cupping her cheeks in warm palms. She strokes soft flesh with her thumbs as she kisses the blonde deeply, humming in approval against parted lips as the younger woman's own hands find her waist to bring her flush.

Sighing when the blonde's attention wanders down the vulnerable expanse of her throat, the Mayor's eyes widen in surprise when the girl drops to her knees in front of her. Swallowing as Emma keeps a soft hold of her hips, her breath catches in her throat when wicked velvet tastes her slowly, and she threads trembling fingers into messy curls.

"Emma..."
Breath quickening as the younger woman's sweet ministrations bring her close to her release, she lets out a choked moan before pulling the blonde up clumsily and crashing her lips against glistening petals; tasting herself on the girl's tongue. Pulling her frantically onto the bed, she growls at Emma to strip off her underwear, snatching at the tricky little hooks of the blonde's bra as she speaks while the younger woman complies hastily. Tossing satin cups onto the floor without any attempt at aim, Regina pulls the girl onto her roughly and closes her eyes while throwing her head back when the latter straddles her purposefully to buck against her slick heat; the cotton scrap of her underwear still caught around her ankle.

Allowing Emma to take her almost to the point of no return- her nails digging desperate crescents into skinny hips while the blonde gets to work deepening the indigo mark made previously at her throat- she pushes the younger woman up hurriedly and flips them over with a growl of relish at the surprised yelp this act rewards her with against her shoulder, before baring down on the girl- her dark gaze locked with cool green- as she moves her hips with the unsteady jerks of imminent pleasure and goes over with a cry, never once taking her eyes off the blonde.

"fuck, that's hot."

Emma confides huskily, and the brunette smiles down at her breathlessly before dipping in for a kiss. Choking in surprise as the younger woman rolls them over with her fingers slipping down to brush against spent heat, Regina shudders as her thighs spasm at even this light contact. Watching on dazedly as the blonde travels down the bed and pushes at her legs gently apart, she swallows audibly when the girl cleans her up with slow care; her hands fisting at the sheets as sly velvet occasionally causes her to twitch.

"My god, I taught you well..."

The brunette muses throatily, before the unwelcome thought breaks through her euphoria that this will now be something for another to enjoy after tonight. Salt blurring her lashes as a deep and terrible wave of jealousy constricts her chest, she yanks the blonde up none too gently and pulls her flush; gripping her tightly as the latter moulds against her and smiles into her hair.

"Well, you're an inspiring teacher!"

Emma chuckles, before furrowing her brow as wetness seeps through her curls to dampen her cheek, and pushing herself up worriedly.

"Regina?"

She asks with a deep frown of concern, brushing away an escaped tear from the older woman's jaw.

"What's wrong?!!"

"Nothing."

The brunette chokes, shaking her head and forcing a smile. Swallowing her sadness and blinking away any further sorrow, she tucks long hair behind the younger woman's ear affectionately as her other hand rests comfortably in the shallow dip of the small of the girl's back.

"It's okay, dear. I just got a little overwhelmed, that's all. A lot has come to pass between us, and I suppose my emotions are rather unpredictable at the moment. I was just thinking about how much I'd miss having you around."

"Well, you don't need to worry about that, you idiot. I'm not going anywhere."
Emma smiles, and Regina closes her eyes with a shuddering sigh, before adopting a more normal tone.

"...How about you top us up, Miss Swan."

She suggests pleasantly, and the blonde grins and does as she's told; moving over to perch on the side of the bed with her legs crossed childishly as she uncaps the bottle and tops their cups up to the brim. The Mayor opens her eyes to study this act pensively- drinking in bare skin with deep affection- before accepting the wine Emma hands her with a purr of thanks as she pulls the girl gently against her so that they lie propped up against the headboard.

Sipping at her cup silently, the blonde relaxes against hot flesh, enjoying the deep tang of the wine as gentle fingers play through her hair. Her stomach aches in an entirely pleasurable way as she feels deliciously aroused following their recent activities. She considers letting the brunette in on this fact, but in the end, remains contently quiet as warm breath flutters softly against her shoulder.

"You're making swift work of that, dear..."

Regina murmurs as she watches the younger woman's wine deplete steadily, and she takes care to keep any hint of encouragement from her tone. Slim limbs tighten against her own in a predictable wave of wariness, and she smiles as she turns her head to press her lips to the blonde's cheek and offers quietly.

"I only mention it because if you wanted something else a little more to your taste, then you should go ahead."

She explains, nudging her jaw towards the mini fridge

"This is, as I said, my treat."

She reminds the blonde, with a coy scuttle of fingers skimming the girl's hip to tease her wickedly.

"Really?"

Emma asks as she shifts slightly to allow the brunette's wandering hand easier access.

"Yes. Really. Go on."

Regina smiles, discovering the blonde's excitement with a low chuckle and removing her fingers evilly. She watches as the girl pushes herself from the bed to stalk over to the fridge in a promise of milk and honey. Touching the tip of her tongue to her lip as Emma bends down to assess her options, the brunette quells the mild feeling of irresponsibility that creeps up on her as she observes her ward choosing her poison. In the end, it is easy for her to do so for reasons she doesn't approve of; dark eyes flickering over the constellation of bruises smattering pale flesh to remind her that she has already treated the blonde carelessly as it is.

Adopting a more favourable expression when Emma turns back to face her, she pats the bed invitingly with a smirk.

"And? What have you gone for?"

"Tequila."

The blonde grins, tossing one of the two small bottles in her hands to land next to the brunette.
"Hmm, with wine? Are you sure that's wise?"

Regina laughs, privately feeling a guilty pang of hope that only intensifies when Emma shrugs and climbs back onto the bed with the declaration

"No idea, never tried it."

"Well... Good luck."

The Mayor smirks, and she raises a brow when the girl cracks the seal on her bottle and holds it up expectantly.

"Do yours, too. Toast with me."

"Well, I don't-"

"-Come on. Please?"

Emma grins hopefully, and despite her better judgement, the brunette ends up opening up her own bottle and clinking the glass gently against the younger woman's; joining her as she tips the lethal liquid back in one, fluid motion.

"Ahh!"

The blonde shudders, sticking out her tongue with her eyes squeezed shut, and Regina laughs quietly as she studies tousled curls and pretty, naked flesh. Moving in to nip at the girl's extended tongue evilly, she feels the liquor burning in her throat and fuelling her passion; never having thought she'd give in and accompany the younger woman in her poor choices this evening, but finding that she's enjoying the experience immensely.

"Damn, that's fucking dangerous!"

Emma confides, before trailing off into a low groan as skilled fingers curl up to tease her wickedly and Regina pushes her down onto the bed. Slowing down her movements as the blonde pushes against her wantonly, the brunette sits up so that she can watch the effect she has on the girl and savour it.

Drinks in restlessly moving limbs.

The glint of sharp teeth exposed by parted lips.

The soft flutter of delicate ribs as ragged breath accompanies her teasing.

"Whatever it is you like, dear... Don't you ever allow anyone to treat you in a way that doesn't make you feel this good. Regardless of what you will allow to let them do so."

"I'll let you do whatever you want. Always."

Emma pants distractedly, not really paying attention to the words falling from her lips as talented fingers work deeper and a soft palm strokes slow circles low over her stomach.

"I know. That's why I have to do this."

Regina whispers as she lowers herself down to taste the blonde, and any thoughts the girl might have had to question the heavi ness of the brunette's tone are lost as she bites her lip and keens quietly as firm hands hold her hips in place while the Mayor's wicked tongue takes over from her fingers.
"Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

Emma chokes as her thighs twitch tellingly together and she moves a shaking hand down to protect herself from the smirking brunette, before chuckling breathlessly

"That was... Yeah..."

"Good, was it, dear?"

The Mayor laughs, pressing her lips to the inside of a skinny thigh and thinking to herself how it will be when she next sees the blonde. Wonders how the slender frame she has come to know so intimately well will change. Develop. Alter.

*When I next see her, she'll be all grown up...*

The notion baffles her when she thinks about it, and so she pushes such thoughts aside before the less *desirable* question of why she should assume she will *ever* see the girl in the way she does *now* again can creep to the forefront of her mind.

"Fuck."

Emma repeats blissfully, and the brunette gives her knee a sharp slap in reprimand for her language which causes the girl to laugh huskily as the darker woman moves up the bed to lie beside her.

"I love you."

Emma smiles with exhausted colour high in her cheeks, and Regina nods as she watches the blonde reach for her wine and drink deeply. Plucking the bottle from beside the bed and topping up the girl's cup once again, the Mayor sighs, keeping the remains casually to hand.

"I know... Thank you."

Watching the gentle rise and fall of the blonde's chest, Regina slips downy covers carefully from underneath her and tucks her in. One of the empty bottles of tequila rolls from the soft fabric onto the floor as she does so with a quiet *plink!* against the carpet.

Emma doesn't move.

Convinced that the girl is well and truly out for the count- having spent the last couple of hours pretending to sleep *herself* while trying to make sure- the brunette slips from the bed silently and pads over to her bag after checking the clock on the nightstand. 4.45 am. Unzipping the duffle fully, she pulls out a thick, manila envelope and a couple of other bits and pieces. Glancing back at the blonde, she is met with nothing more but slow, peaceful breathing. Swallowing, she pads over to the fridge in the corner, opening it up and taking out as many of the little bottles hosted within as she is able to carry.

"I'm sorry."

She whispers as she creeps past the younger woman's huddled form beneath cheap covers, and she shuts herself in the small, walk-in bathroom with care to keep the door from making too much noise. Regarding herself solemnly in the mirror, she gathers herself together and starts unscrewing the small bottles one by one; pouring their potent contents out into the sink. Letting the water run for a moment to wash away the strong smell of mixed liquor, she takes the empty vessels back into the room and allows them to drop from her hands in a series of muted, light thuds.
Emma doesn't move.

Walking over to the blonde's jacket slung in the corner, she turns out the pockets with a brief wave of fear when all she discovers is a couple of loose coins and a pack of gum. Checking the girl's jeans with mounting alarm, she breathes a sigh of relief when she finds the younger woman's cell in the back pocket. Studying the phone for a second, she presses a button at random to light up the screen and sees the blinking icon of a text message next to the name Ruby L.

"I'm afraid whatever you want is going to have to wait a while, Miss Lucas."

Regina murmurs, as she drops the cell into her bag and pulls out a similar model purchased earlier today. She'd bought the phone using cash, and had put an amount of fifty dollars on it to spend; a ludicrously large amount that had caused the idiot dwarf behind the counter to look at her as though she might have gone mad.

Slipping the cell into the girl's jeans, she discards tight denim once more onto the floor.

Picking up the envelope thick with bills, she hesitates, before taking it over to the dresser and placing the vibrant swatch of the blonde's jacket beside it to be sure it will catch her eye. Fingering crisp manila with a sigh, she stalks back to her bag and pulls out a neatly folded piece of paper. She is glad she'd decided to write down any words she could trust herself with before coming here; knowing she'd not have been able to manage anything now.

Placing the letter gently on the envelope of bills, she returns to her bag and pulls out a small, crystal vial wrapped up in a silk handkerchief to keep it safe. Letting delicate crimson flutter back on top of her clothes, she shoots a glance over at the blonde as her fingers tremble.

Emma doesn't move.

Plucking the paper cup from the younger woman's nightstand- a few beads of wine coating the inside- she takes it through into the bathroom and washes it out. Closing her eyes and sending twin droplets of salt spilling down her cheeks, she unplugs the vial and pours the clear concoction within into the cup. Topping it off with ordinary tap water, she pads back into the bedroom and places it next to the blonde beside an empty wine bottle before silently donning her clothes.

Getting gingerly back into bed, she slips her hand around the girl's waist and brings it up to rest between her breasts; the steady beating of the younger woman's heart thrumming against her palm.

"Regina?"

Emma mumbles groggily as she curls up tighter and pushes her backside against the comforting barrier the brunette provides, and the Mayor shushes her quietly, playing her hand through soft curls as she murmurs into the delicate shell of her ear

"Shh. Go back to sleep. I just needed the bathroom. There's water for you on the table."

"Thanks."

The girl sighs as her lashes flutter sleepily- never opening- and she feels herself drifting off easily while gentle fingers play with her hair.

"That's right, dear."

Regina encourages, and she presses her cheek against the warm skin of the blonde's shoulder as the latter's breathing becomes deep and even; smelling lightly of liquor.
The brunette makes it eight-fifteen when the blonde finally moves in her arms, and she supposes she would have to be a fool if she’d thought it would happen at any other time.

Reaching a hand out clumsily, Emma knocks over the empty wine bottle on the nightstand with a sleepy grunt—causing the Mayor a brief moment’s blind panic—before she is finally successful in locating her cup. Taking a few big gulps with a tipsy yawn, she places it back on the very edge of the stand—her eyes closed and only half awake; oblivious to its precarious position—and rolls over while pulling the covers up over her head.

All the while, Regina remains frozen, her heart hammering sickeningly in her throat. Sensing no further movement, she lets out a shuddered breath and pushes herself carefully from the bed. Standing with her arms wrapped tightly around herself, she looks down on heaped covers and a few escaped tumbles of cornsilk, and she blinks in disbelief.

*Can this really be it? That's all? It's done?*

It doesn't feel real, but then she supposes there's no way she could ever have made this make sense in her heart. No way she could have prepared herself and been ready—actually ready—to let go.

Sniffing quietly, she slips on her jacket before bending down for her bag. Chancing one, final look back, she nods as though in acceptance and turns for the door.

Down in the lobby, the friendly receptionist from the previous evening has been replaced by a weak-chinned gentleman in his late fifties. He offers the Mayor a good morning and asks her if she might be feeling alright; the attractive brunette's eyes an unhappy shade of pink and her complexion slightly ashen.

"I'm fine. Just ill-rested."

She only half lies, and the receptionist expresses his apologies and asks how he might be of any help.

"I want to check out, please."

"Certainly. Do you have your key and room number?"

"Eighty-Four. I don't have the key... I actually have a favour to ask of you."

Explanation what she wants, she bids the gentleman farewell with a tip of ten dollars and leaves him watching her go with a puzzled expression.

Stalking down the street in the morning sun, she heads over to an old building at the end of the block. Checking the opening times just to be certain, she silently scolds herself for being paranoid as the small plaque beside the door reads 7 a.m. just as she knew it would, and lets herself in.

"Ah, Ms Mills."

A petite blonde greets her from behind the counter, and she smiles wanly and makes her way over while pulling a couple of bills from her purse.

"Good morning. How was she?"

"Good as gold."

The woman smiles, and she confirms the price owed before disappearing into the back.
"Are you sure you don't need a carrier or anything? We have some very reasonably priced-"

"-It's fine. I'll take her."

Regina interrupts, and she holds out her hands to accept mottled fur and hugs the old cat close to her.

"Thank you."

"No problem. I'll guess it was business in town that brought you this way? Not an awful lot to do here after all, and as you only wanted to board her the one night-"

"-It was business of sorts. Everything's taken care of now, though."

"Well, that's good. You take care of yourself now. You too, Caskett."

The blonde smiles, raising her hand as she watches the impeccably dressed brunette slip out into the sun.

---

Rolling over onto her back with a groan, the blonde frowns as she studies the ceiling blearily; trying to figure out what seems off to her. Her tongue feels dry with liquor, and she curses herself beneath her breath as she imagines this means she's probably done something idiotic to get to this point.

Pushing herself up and squinting against the hazy rays of sun that pierce through a gap in the curtains, her brow furrows deeper as she takes in her surroundings with mounting confusion.

She swiftly puts together enough pieces of evidence to conclude that she's woken up in a motel room, but as for how in the hell she got here, she has no clue!

The clock on the nightstand reads 10.30 a.m. and a small card bearing internal service numbers and local hot spots lets her know- to her complete bemusement- that she's woken up in an entirely different fucking state to the one she remembers falling asleep in.

"Do you remember falling asleep?"

She asks herself, and she shakes her head slowly in response.

Still, from the looks of the empties littering the carpet, this should hardly take her by surprise. It's funny though, because while she feels a little delicate and hungover, she doesn't feel anywhere near as shitty as the evidence cluttering up the carpet suggests she should.

Any relief at this confusing fact dissipates swiftly when it occurs to her that the prestigious establishment she's woken up in might want some form of payment for the liquor clearly pilfered from the mini fridge.

"Fuck..."

Yes. She just hopes she hadn't been idiotic enough to give any correct personal information over at the front desk.

Still, not having done so is a fair enough assumption, as it dawns on her a little belatedly that she sits staring around the strange room completely naked. Closing her eyes with a hissed expletive, she calls out uncertainly

"Hello?"
Nothing. And she slips from the bed to go and check the bathroom. Finding no sign of anyone else, she rubs at her eyes wearily and goes about cleaning herself up.

It's only once she's splashed a great deal of frigid water into her face and woken herself up a bit that she notices the series of cruel marks colouring her skin when she looks back in the mirror.

"Mother fucker..."

She seethes, but not without an element of disquiet, as while she hasn't the faintest clue how in the hell she's wound up sporting a vibrant rainbow of bruises, the one that she does remember receiving beneath her eye is, well... Gone.

And not only that.

Leaning over the sink and studying herself with wide eyes, she feels her chest begin tightening with the insane impossibility of what she sees as she drinks in the lines and peaks of her body and is sure that they seem-

"-Nope!"

She barks and turns swiftly away from the mirror.

*It's a trick of the light.*

*It has to be.*

Bruises she can't explain is one thing, and certainly not a first.

But to have suddenly gained weight overnight? To have filled out?

That isn't just curious; it's impossible.

"Never drinking again..."

She reprimands herself through gritted teeth as she stalks back into the bedroom in the search of clothes.

And she finds them... But,

"What the hell?"

She breathes as she holds up stonewashed jeans with a frown. They *look* to be her style, and size... And she supposes that procuring new pants without any memory of doing so *is* just about as weird as waking up in goddamn Maine with no explanation...

*Oh, you are in for a whirlwind of fractured memories...*

She laments, and she slips on tight denim and the simple, white top crumpled in the same heap with a feeling of disconcertion. Locating her sneakers-*these* she recognises at least!- she wanders over to a bright heap of crimson resting on the room's nondescript dresser. She shakes out red leather to find it to belong to a fitted jacket and raises an eyebrow appreciatively. Looking once more around the room, she supposes that whether or not the vibrant leather belongs to her or not really isn't her concern as the rule of finders keepers can be applied here, and she slips the jacket on comfortably before stilling as she spies a folded piece of paper bearing her name.

*Emma.*
Opening it up curiously, she reads the typed message inside with widening eyes.

You're better than this. Take the money in the envelope and use it wisely. If you don't feel right in doing so, then just know that you have earned it. You've made me see things differently, and for that, I am eternally grateful. You're a good person, Emma, and the time of living in regret over things you've done needs to end now.

YOU DID NOT DO A BAD THING.

Take the money, and don't end up in this position again.

Ever.

Thank you. For everything.

Looking up and scanning the room for any signs at all of her mystery companion, the blonde comes up empty. Picking up the envelope beneath the note and weighing it uncertainly in her palm, she chances one last glance around the room before slipping her finger beneath the flap and opening it up with a caution that suggests she believes there might be something inside that means to bite her.

"Holy shit..."

The words leave her lips in a disbelieving whisper, as neat, green bills peek out from crisp manila. Swallowing shakily, she hastily shoves the envelope into the pocket of her jacket and stalks stiffly from the room.

"Yes, Miss?"

The receptionist asks politely as a rather peaky looking blonde sidles over to the desk with her eyes flickering distractedly around the room. The front of her hideous leather jacket bulges on one side suspiciously, and the ageing gentleman slips his hand beneath the counter to rest beside the emergency call button warily.

"C-can you help me? I need to know who booked the room I stayed in. Room eighty-four."

"I'm afraid I can't-"

"-Look. Here's the key, okay? I'm not asking anything you'd get into trouble for telling me... I'm not sure, but I think I've been drugged or roofied or something, okay? I just need to know."

She explains as her gaze flickers restlessly, and the receptionist relaxes a little as he decides that while she might be decidedly odd, he doesn't believe the girl to be dangerous.

"Well, if that's the case, you should call the cops. If you want, I can-"

"-No. Please. Just... I don't remember how I got here. Can you just tell me the name it was booked under? Please."

"... I'll see what I can do."

The man agrees eventually, and he taps at the keys of his computer at a slow pace that puts the blonde's teeth on edge.

"It was booked in the name of Emma Swan."
"But-"

"-And paid for this morning, I remember now. Your friend also covered the mini bar charges in full. Must have been quite a night!"

He smiles in amusement, and Emma's brow furrows as she shakes her head.

"I didn't pay, though..."

"No, I know."

"I'm Emma Swan."

"Oh... Well. Your friend covered everything. They also told me to inform you that you might want to go check your car."

"My car?"

"Yes, ma'am."

He agrees; not understanding what about this could be confusing the girl.

"Okay... Yeah. Okay. I'll check my car. Sorry. That's fine... I guess I just want to check out then."

"Certainly."

The receptionist smiles thinly, and the blonde frowns as she isn't sure just what in the hell seems to be happening, but she understands enough to know that portraying her confusion is likely to start raising more problems than it solves. Fingering the heavy wad of bills hidden in her coat, her breath catches in her throat as an idea suddenly hits her.

"My friend... Uh... I know this might sound weird, but could you tell me what he looked like? Was he-"

"-She, Ms Swan."

He interrupts her with a politely curious expression.

"She?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"But I don't know any- never mind. Thanks. Uh, have a good day."

She mutters; suddenly needing to get out. Needing air. Needing to try and grasp the implausible insanity cocooning her in with the hopes of making sense of something.

Walking out into the lot, she spies the bug easily. Nearing the old rust-bucket she sighs as she notes that the keys have been left in the ignition, and-

"-Caskett?!"

She croaks with her hand frozen halfway towards the door.

The tabby suns herself lazily in the back seat; the passenger side window cranked open an inch to allow the morning breeze to keep the bug cool.
A thoughtful move.

Planned.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Emma cries as she yanks open the door and falls into the driver's seat; her graceless entrance earning her a bemused yellow stare.

Never mind that... What the hell am I doing here?!

Twisting around to look at Cass and extending a trembling hand, she allows the old feline to nuzzle her affectionately before turning back towards the wheel and taking a few, deep breaths. Pulling the wad of bills from her pocket and staring down at it in disbelief, she sits that way for a long time, before, eventually, a small smile finds her lips.

Her head hurts.

She's thirsty.

She feels the lingering dregs of whatever idiotic concoction she'd consumed last night dancing faintly around in her stomach.

None of this makes even a lick of sense...

But, she's woken up confused and lost before. Several times. Woken up cold, or hurting, or simply despising herself for getting into the mess she's found herself in.

It's always sucked.

Always.

She's woken up with some of her few possessions missing. Woken up screwed over.

But never before has she woken up to find herself better off.

She fingers the note still crumpled in her pocket curiously, but the smile never leaves her lips.

Because there's plenty of time yet to figure out just what in the actual hell happened last night.

What the flying fuck took place between sitting out on her windowsill and watching the idiots down below crank their necks to look at something that had seemed to catch their attention, and waking up in naked in a goddamn motel room in Maine.

Plenty of time for all of that.

But right now...?

Hell, right now she's thirsty and could do with something to eat.

And for once, she doesn't have to fret about whether or not she's in a position to be able to have something so simple.

Turning the key in the ignition, she starts the car and backs out of the lot, wondering briefly if she should check which way she should be turning onto the main road to get back to Boston before a strange and beautiful thought crosses her mind.
Why do you need to go back there?

She begins to laugh.

And, when she reaches an intersection that will take her out onto the interstate, she's still laughing.

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EPILOGUE

Pushing open the door to her apartment with a defeated sigh, the blonde kicks off her heels to land in a careless heap in the hallway. Her feet groan gratefully as she pads over to the kitchenette and chucks the small box in her hand onto the centre island. She inwardly berates herself for putting up with such a stupid tradition as she glares down at colourful cardboard, but supposes it's no good changing her mind now.

And besides.

With the night she's had, she damn well deserves to treat herself.

Rubbing absently at the drying wine stain painting what had been a perfectly good dress, she stretches up onto her toes to root around in the cupboard above the toaster; wondering for a moment if perhaps she won't have what she needs to complete her sorry little ritual after all, before finding a small packet of candles beside a forgotten pack of emergency cigarettes from her brief courtship with Lucky Strikes.

Shaking her head with self-deprecation, she opens up the small box on the counter and deposits the single cupcake inside onto a simple, china plate. Pushing a candle into the slightly stale yellow frosting, she licks the flaked sugar from her fingers as she goes on a hunt for matches. The icing is a little hard due to the cake having been left sitting out all day, but she supposes beggars can't be choosers, and she's lucky she's not sticking a candle into an old bagel or something given she'd swung by the store long past 11 p.m.

As always, Mark the check out guy had commented on her outfit. As always, she'd fixed him with a cool stare until the asshole had remembered he was being paid to do his fucking job and not gaze down the front of her dress. In some ways, the sleazy little shit reminds her of a long ago acquaintance from when she'd lived in Boston before. Over on the other side. The side she refuses to accept work in nowadays... Because of the heat. The smell. The sounds...

Reminds me of Denny. He-

-But, thinking about that time long gone brings her back to what had happened afterwards. The shadowed time. Her lost time. And she pushes those thoughts away warily.

Finding an old book of matches beside the fruit bowl, she strikes one up with a roll of her eyes at her own pathetic tradition, before holding it to the wick of the candle and waiting for it to catch. Leaning over with her elbows resting on the counter and a deep and familiar feeling of apathy sitting heavily-but not entirely uncomfortably- in her gut, she murmurs another part of her ritual with a weighty sigh of sarcasm.

"Another banner year."

Before blowing out the candle.

Jerking as the extinguishing of the flame is met by a low knock on the door, she pushes herself up with a frown. Padding slowly down the hall- not one to receive many visitors, especially at this time
of night—she opens up the door cautiously after tugging self-consciously at the hem of her dress.

"Can I help you?"

She asks curiously, regarding her visitor with a raised brow.

"... Are you Emma Swan?"

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